

UMKC Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Narrative – Example
<http://www.umkc.edu/english/programs/graduate.htm>

I propose to enter the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program to study 19th century British literature and British history. After a thorough grounding in both, I expect to write a dissertation on the literary works of Thomas Hardy. Much has been written on Hardy, but a search of existing publications failed to turn up an examination of my main interest: the portrayal of agriculture in 19th century Dorset. The literary critical approaches which best relate to these contexts include New Historicist, Feminist and Marxist. Hardy can be considered a realist writer, but the verisimilitude which seems to dominate so much of Hardy's works seems to have gaps in terms of his portrayal of agriculture.

Agriculture in Dorset features strongly in Hardy's works. He writes extensively about the middle and lower classes, but rarely makes clear the deplorable conditions of the agricultural workers. He must have known of those conditions through his family background, as well as through the widely publicized agitation of Dorset agricultural laborers in the 1800s. He would have heard of two local events that happened not long before he was born: the Captain Swing riots in 1830 and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, who in 1834 tried to organize local agricultural workers and were transported for their trouble. But to read Hardy, one would think most of the workers were at least comfortable, and maybe even happy.

Hardy's most obvious novel showing happy workers is Far From the Madding Crowd. However, less well-known novels such as Under the Greenwood Tree also show the laborers in almost idyllic conditions. A number of Hardy's 900 poems deal with this subject as well and are worth further study.

I would like to research their actual conditions and find out why Hardy glorified them. Is it that middle-class Victorian readers did not wish to read about squalor? Or perhaps Hardy's approach relates to the strong influence of the Romantics. Perhaps it is part of his attempt to downplay his modest origins. Or would a frank expose of laborers' conditions have diluted Hardy's love stories too much? A deeper study of realism and how it relates to Hardy's fiction will help me formulate an approach to this issue.

To help clarify a direction for my Ph.D. study of Hardy, I spent three weeks in a Hardy study program in Dorset in the summer of 1999. I studied his works, visited locations where his works take place, met Hardy scholars and investigated possible research areas. I met with a woman in Dorchester who is cataloging Hardy's 6,000 letters in the Dorset County Museum. I feel that these letters will reveal some insights, as well as the notebooks he kept during most of his life.

I also worked in the library of the Dorset County Museum, which houses many Hardy manuscripts, to see what was available there about agricultural workers. I visited the Dorset County Records office and the Reference Library and found that I can do further research in both. I went to Tolpuddle and looked up information about the Tolpuddle Martyrs; more is available at the Trades Union

Congress' office in London. I purchased out-of-print books on 19th century Dorset agriculture.

Two UMKC faculty have expertise related to my intended course of study. Dr. Jennifer Phegley of the English Department has research interests in 19th century British literature. In the History Department, Dr. Linda Payne's area of scholarship involves British history. Both have indicated willingness to help direct my Ph.D. studies. I will be able to take graduate courses and seminars on British literature and history. Possibly some of the literature focusing on Hardy would be covered as directed readings. I have read all of Hardy's 14 novels, and am working through the 900 poems. I continue to read criticism of Hardy and history of England. I also am reading many other 18th and 19th century British writers.

For the past six years, I have taught English at William Jewell College. Details are included in my resume, attached. During the first four of those years, I did 11 new preparations. These occupied most of my attention. Teaching research skills and argumentation has helped me hone my own skills writing argumentative papers. Teaching literature courses, including some in an interdisciplinary format, improved my understanding of critical approaches and literary scholarship. In 2000 I did a research project on a writer for a new reference book being published by Greenwood Press. All these experiences will help me study, research and write more effectively in the Ph.D. program.

Because of the chance to cross disciplinary lines, this Ph.D. program seems perfect for me. I want to study writers in the context of their history and culture because that is how I most enjoy learning. I was admitted to the program for fall of 2000 but did not enroll. I am ready now to go into this program fulltime and with full effort, to be a serious scholar and a better teacher. My strong motivation and initiative will, I think, insure my success.