As the name of the genre suggests, the role of short fiction is to deal briefly with its subjects—to focus attention on the moment as it passes, to bump across its characters, as one might bump across an acquaintance entering a restaurant as one is leaving—and not to trouble itself with the long sweep of history behind or before the matter at hand. Throughout the history of the genre, short stories have ranged in subject matter from the fantastical (e.g. Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury) to the everyday (e.g. John Updike or Raymond Carver.) In pursuing my thesis work, it is specifically with this latter group that my interests lie.

Updike and Carver, along with Ann Beattie and others, are contemporary or near-contemporary writers who deal specifically with the ordinary lives of ordinary people. These three have written beautifully about the troubles and anxieties of contemporary relationships, but of course each approaches his or her work with a unique mind. Carver uses a sparse realism in his stories reminiscent of Hemingway or Chekhov. By limiting his point of view to that of an observer with no particular interest in the matter at hand, and by creating his characters through their dialogue and actions rather than through the imposition of the narrator, Carver creates a feeling of tense unpredictability for his readers. Updike, on the other hand, uses almost the opposite technique. In what might be an attempt to thumb his nose at bare bones post-modernism, Updike uses supple and
intricate language. And far from accepting the literary nihilism of many contemporary writers, he layers his stories with hints at meaning. His characters, men at or approaching middle-aged who are struggling to find purpose or truth in a world that tells them they need none, capture perfectly this discord of the post-modern man. Ann Beattie tells nearly the same story, except from the perspective of a woman. Her stories tell of the last grasps at order in a world that is quickly and quietly disassembling. And each of these three writers has chosen to focus his or her attentions on one area each human can understand—relationships.

And it is the area of relationships in which I plan to focus my own writing for this thesis. It seems to me that certain knowledge is hardwired into human experience—the knowledge of silences and turnings away, the knowledge of embraces and their opposites—and that nothing is so common to the human mind as the desire for life either to be different than it is or for it to remain the same as we notice it drifting into the unfamiliar.

As an apprentice writer, I cannot easily speak of patterns in my own writing, or of “typical” characteristics that I bring to a piece. I am too much a novice to have developed many idiosyncrasies. However, I can speak of those pieces of life to which I am drawn constantly, those portraits I would draw, were I an artist, the notes I would write, were I a composer—and those pieces exist at the intersection of one life with another, or the intersection of one’s life with the world. The purpose of this thesis is not so much to contribute to a greater body of knowledge, as would be the case with a critical work, as it is to contribute to and develop my own insight into these moments, and into the craft of describing them.
This is not to say, however, that I am entirely inexperienced at writing. I have been writing short fiction for two years and working on my writing with Kent Meyers both in the formal classroom setting and through independent study for the past year and a half. Professor Meyers and others have expressed confidence in my writing ability, to the point that on their advice I have begun to send out work to be considered for publication. Further, all of the excellent instruction I have received in the humanities the past year and a half has helped to enrich both my writing and my understanding of the world about which I am writing. And from the outset, my parents and my general temperament provided me with a broad vocabulary and a desire to find insight into the human character. Armed with this instruction and my own desire to pursue writing, I feel that I am prepared to do the sort of intensive work required of an honors thesis.

The work I have set out for myself in this thesis project is specifically this: first, that I will read ten works of fiction (either novels or collections of short stories) and prepare craft responses to each, and second, that I will write two finished stories of roughly thirty pages total. With regards to the first requirement of my thesis, I should explain the role of the “craft response.” The purpose of reading fiction while I am doing this project is to help me with my own writing. In order to learn as much as I can from what I have read, after I finish each work, I will prepare a short essay (roughly two pages) describing in detail one particular technique used by the author and how it produces its desired effect. For instance, as I mentioned above, Raymond Carver has a tendency to neglect any form of description beyond pure reportage (“He said,” “She said”). He does this to make the actions of his characters unpredictable and thus more
interesting for the reader. It is a technique designed to heighten tension. Certainly, I will
do well to remember that lesson while I am writing—that the reader does not want to be
led by the hand, but would rather be surprised by the story as it develops.

The second requirement of the thesis is pretty much self-explanatory. However, I
would like to explain the reason why I have stipulated the particular length requirement
of two pieces and why it is necessary that the work be “finished,” and not merely in the
process of revision. First, I am requiring two finished pieces because, in my independent
study this past semester I was able to finish one piece, and I understand that the thesis
work should cover the work of two classes. Secondly, there is the matter of revision.
When writing a critical piece, I have found the most difficult part to be the first—
assembling research and quotations, spending long hours poring over historical
documents—and that revision, assuming the first draft was not a horrible failure, is
merely tinkering with structure and details. With creative work, the process is reversed. If
I did not require that the work be finished, I could easily churn out seventy, eighty,
perhaps one hundred pages of first-draft work for my thesis. But, with creative writing,
the work is in the revision. In order to consider a work finished, I probably have seen the
story through four or five drafts.

I haven’t defined a clear “process” at this point that describes how I revise, but an
example would be as follows: while sitting at a table at Common Grounds or sucking on
a pen at my desk in the Writing Center, I come upon an idea. This idea is usually a
compelling sentence or an image. One of my first stories occurred to me with the line,
“Outside the window, it had begun to snow.” This sentence turned out to be the last of the
story, not the first, but from that one sentence, with time, I drew an entire world. Once I
have the compulsion, I begin to write. After two or three weeks, I have followed the idea through twelve to twenty-five pages that could be called a story. Most of that story is likely discarded in the second draft, which is pretty much a shell of the first. In the third draft, the story swells to the length it will likely keep. This is when I allow my readers to critique the piece. The fourth draft emerges when I either reject or accept the advice my readers have given. Depending on their suggestions, and whether or not I agree, I proceed to tinker with sentence structure, grammar, and general clarity. At this point the story may or may not be finished. Thus, since revision is the meat of the process, it is necessary that I produce less work in order to produce better work.

I plan to do the bulk of my thesis work over this summer (2008), although I will probably begin as soon as the proposal is accepted, and I plan to present my finished product during the 2008/2009 school year. Kent Meyers has agreed to advise me in my work and will function as my primary reader. Deaver Traywick has agreed to be my second reader. My hope, in this thesis project, is that I will produce the sort of work that merits my standing as an honors student and also that I will begin to acclimate myself to a rigorous schedule of writing, which I will need in order to excel in graduate work and as a professional writer.