

American Literature

Fall 2017

Essay One

Write a fully developed 2.5-3 page essay in support of a clearly stated argumentative thesis. You must support your thesis with evidence from the primary text, including direct quotations in your essay where necessary and appropriate. These must be cited correctly using MLA format for parenthetical page citation. You will need to provide a Works Cited page, again according to MLA format, for the end of the essay.

Topic Options/Guidelines:

1. In *The Stories We Live By*, Dan McAdams defines personal myths as involving “an imaginative reconstruction of the past in light of an envisioned future.” They are subjective creations, illusions in a sense, whether they be positive or negative, “[showing] a personal predilection for viewing the world” and the self within that world (53). Hence, he says, “A personal myth delineates an identity, illuminating the values of an individual life. The personal myth is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies a personal truth” and reflects “patterns of desire” not always conscious to the writer (34, 36). What type of personal mythology does Franklin fashion in *The Autobiography* (think, in other words, of what “story” Franklin tells about his self)? What personal truth or truths, or “patterns of desire,” does his narrative embody? Where do we see evidence of these borne out in the text? What types of recurring images, motives, or tropes does Franklin draw upon to animate his persona myth? You may even want to consider why, finally, his personal myth has become so “common” to our cultural and national sensibility. What does his story say about us (who we think we are, who we *want* to be)?
2. Choose one text that we have read and discussed, and develop a specific argument that relates the text to one of the themes we’ve covered thus far (from section one: Making, Interrogating, and Renegotiating National Identity). You might consider the significance of nature, notions of nationhood, food, law, gender, race, or class in the text. Alternatively, you might discover a sign or pattern within the text that you wish to investigate the multiple significances of in its particular cultural and historical moment, making connections to the text’s relevance to a course theme and/or its relationship to and influence on our contemporary understanding of self and/or America.
3. Consider Whitman’s or Dickinson’s relationship to or commentary on or construction of American identity in their particular cultural and historical moment. Craft an argument that identifies and analyzes that relationship or commentary or construction. Support your argument with textual evidence and compelling analysis of that evidence.

Assessment: There are a number of different ways to approach this writing task; however, it is very important that your essay establishes and develops in support of a specific thesis (an argument or idea about the work). In other words, your essay must do more than simply summarize or paraphrase a work. Your thesis should do more (substantially more) than simply state whether or not you like or dislike, agree or disagree with what the author says. Use specific

references to and/or examples (quotations) from the work to support your thesis. I will assess your essay based on the following: 1) the qualitative strength of your thesis; 2) your ability to convincingly support your thesis with specific textual and cultural references; 3) the organization of your paper; and 4) college-level expectations for grammar, editing, and style.

Note: This is not a research paper, so you do NOT need to consult or include secondary sources.

Format: Your response essay must conform to MLA documentation style. This includes the format of the first page as well as the format of all quotations and citations of all primary sources (the literary work you are analyzing).

As you think these ideas through, feel free to discuss any of your thoughts, opinions, and questions with me.