

American Literature

Fall 2017

Essay Two

Write a fully developed essay of 2.5-3 pages 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 in-text citations). You will need to provide a Works Cited page, again according to MLA format, for the end of the essay.

Topic Options/Guidelines:

1. Select any text from the media, perhaps an advertisement in a magazine, a commercial, or even a song, for the purpose of analyzing and explicating how it converses with one of our course texts, drawing on transcendental ideals, for example, or grappling with the paradox of the American dream (egalitarian AND individualistic). Keep in mind that this topic calls for a close reading of the text. Consider 1) *how* the text promotes an Emersonian view of the individual OR how it engages the paradox mentioned earlier (whether through its lyrics, the words, the people, colors, and images associated with the ad or picture, etc.); this will require you to describe and explicate about the ad or image), and 2) *to what effect* (this is the “so what” question that your thesis should address: why, specifically, does the text promote, extol, or imbibe Emersonian themes, ideals, arguments, rhetoric? OR why, specifically, might the text call into question the paradox of the American Dream). In order to address this question, you will have to consider the text’s argument, theme or purpose, as well as its intended audience.

This assignment asks that you take an intertextual approach, which sees any text as infused with echoes, repetitions, language, and transformations of other texts. The assumption behind your paper is that Emerson’s ideas—his romantic celebration of selfhood and nature as the sanctum of non-artificiality, his rugged philosophy of individualism and anti-institutionalism—still impact and influence our thinking today. OR how the paradox of the American dream—the philanthropic desire juxtaposed with the desire to stand out and above—still impacts and troubles the American consciousness. Throughout your paper, consider *why* these ideals still influence us; what about these ideas attract audiences today? And why might marketers draw upon these seductive ideals to sell a product?

2. Formulate an argument about a theme or motif from Sean Penn’s film *Into the Wild* How does the work communicate its underlying arguments, themes, tropes, messages? What does the work suggest about the story we want—perhaps *need*—to live by?

For example, a recurrent motif in the film is the dream of renewal and regeneration. Both in its imagery and in its characterizations, the story speaks to the basic human desire to

reinvent oneself and make oneself anew. McCandless changes his name and destroys identifying markers that tie him to the institution he feels defines him. The motif of transformation is a prominent story in American literature, rooted in such early texts as Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography* (in which he practically invented and publicized the concept of the self-made man) and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. In these texts, westward expansion epitomizes the dream of renewal—the physical landscape of the west is synonymous with the idea of creating one's own code and living by it (consider, for examples, figures like John Wayne and the Marlboro Man—they appeal to us precisely *because* they epitomize unfettered masculine autonomy, radical independence). McCandless seems determined to embody the untethered mystique of “the wanderer” (even though his persona is fraught with tensions and underlying contradictions); at times he epitomizes one who lives in the wild to recapture the essence of manhood and ultimate freedom. What does Penn/Krakauer suggest, however, about the dream of renewal? Is it really possible? What argument(s) does his documentary assert about the romantic possibility of locating a physical utopia where one can claim freedom, where one can become “one” with nature?

However you approach this writing assignment, your task is to analyze the film *closely*, with particular attention to the ways in which meaning is constructed vis-a-vis language and technical / literary elements: lighting, *mise-en-scene*, camera shots, editing techniques, imagery, metaphors, etc. Your thesis must posit an argument. Remember to move beyond observing the “what” of the text; you will use elements of plot and observation to illustrate your points, but always follow through by offering interpretations of meaning and drawing meaningful conclusions (the “so what”).

3. Choose one text that we have read and discussed (after Ginsberg), and develop a specific argument that relates the text to one of the themes we've covered thus far (sections two-through three.) You might consider how nature, notions of nationhood, food, law, gender, race, or class inform(s) the text's connection(s) to the theme.

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.

4. In “Boats Against the Current: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*, Jeffrey Steinbrink suggests Fitzgerald's novel is about “the myth of regeneration”; each character is drawn in two different directions, he says: “toward the naïve hope that the best of life is yet to come, and toward the realization that such circumstances as give life meaning lie buried in irrecoverable past.” In your own analysis, consider the implications and relevance of Steinbrink's thesis. How are the motifs of renewal and regeneration played out in the text (some examples: in the characters and their pursuits,

the significance of setting, symbolism (i.e., the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, the clock motif, etc.)? In what ways do the characters attempt to retrieve a lost past, and how does this search for meaning and lost significance affect them? What does the lost past embody to these characters? To America? What does Fitzgerald suggest is "unattainable," and why?

5. The emphasis on individuality in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* manifests in the specific desires of three of the main characters: Walter, Lena, and Beneatha. From Walter's desire to open a liquor store to Lena's choice to live in a white neighborhood despite the dangers to Beneatha's insistence on going to medical school regardless of the financial strain, the text emphasizes these characters' personal ideas about how to better themselves. However, while Walter and Lena seem more interested in a similar outcome—a settled, stable family life—Beneatha's quest appears to be more about her own needs than the family's. So, consider why Beneatha's objectives seem so self-focused. What are the multiple significances of her insistence on establishing an identity separate from her family's? What does Beneatha represent in the text, in terms of understanding how her character views oppression and how to overcome oppression?

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.