**American Literature**

**Spring 2016**

**Essay One**

Write a fully developed essay of 3-4 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 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 “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 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?
2. Develop an analysis of a character or characters in *The Great Gatsby.* Consider these questions: What values do these characters embody? What is the narrator’s attitude toward the character(s), or, how is/are the character(s) portrayed (as tragic, victim, antagonist, sympathetic)? Is there a larger critique aimed at the American society that is embodied in the character (for example, several characters arguably embody aspects of the Franklinian dream; is Fitzgerald harsh in his depiction of them, and *why)*?
3. 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)?
4. 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 (section one: Making, Interrogating, and Renegotiating National Identity; section two: Constructing and or Re-Constructing the Self). 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.
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 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.\*\*