

Engl 291/AmStud 261, “American Novel Since 1945”
Hungerford

Spring, 2008

Essay #2 Topics

Essays should be 5 to 8 pages, double-spaced, one-inch margins, Times Roman font; please number your pages.

Cite the novels parenthetically with page numbers from our class’s edition; in this case, no footnotes or bibliography is necessary. If you have a different edition, please speak to your TF about how they would like you to cite.

In crafting an argument to answer the question, please choose between two and four specific passages to mine for evidence. You may refer to other parts of the novel, of course, but be sure to have two to four main passages whose form and content (how they are written, and what they are about) serve to support your claims.

Most of these topics can be described as thematic—they ask questions about a feature of what the novels says. That does not mean that you should write only about *what* the novel says; indeed, it is crucial to discuss *how* the novel says whatever it says, no matter what topic you choose. This would include analysis of diction, the use of metaphor or simile or other figurative language, the juxtaposition of scenes, the form of the narrative, what the author chooses as beginning and ending, and where the narrative is divided, or has a pause, the point of view chosen—just to name a few of the literary techniques that writers use to shape their narratives.

If you see a topic that you talked about extensively in section, please do not choose that as the topic for your essay. If a brief section discussion of one of these topics sparked an interest you’d like to explore further in the paper, check with your TF before starting to make sure that she or he thinks you are going enough beyond what was covered in class. Likewise, your argument should not reproduce points made in lecture. This is your chance to advance your own interpretation of a novel.

Long papers will not necessarily earn higher grades than short ones. A five-page argument presented in eight pages will lose points for verbosity. That said, you can mount a nifty and complicated argument using eight pages; if you have such an argument to make, go ahead and make it. Otherwise a snappy five will do it.

Papers are due to the English dept. drop box, marked with your TF’s name, by **noon on Friday, April 18**. (If your TF wishes you to deliver them differently—for example, by email—she or he will let you know.) In the absence of a Dean’s excuse, late papers will be docked one grade increment per day (A to A-, A- to B+, and so on).

Questions

1. All of the books that we've read in the second half of the course—*The Woman Warrior*, *Housekeeping*, *Blood Meridian*, *The Human Stain*, *The Known World*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*—foreground the problems of telling historical truth. Choose two passages from the same novel, or different novels, where the relationship between source text, or historical document, and crafted fiction is particularly at issue. What kinds of implicit claims is the author making about the role of the novel in the representation of history? Are there ways that fiction is claimed to be better equipped to relate certain historical truths? When does the copying, invention, or accuracy of source texts become a problem? Be sure to base your arguments in detailed close readings.
2. We discussed the role of secrecy in the *Human Stain* in lecture, but several of our other novels also feature the question of hidden knowledge. Discuss the role of lies or secrecy in *Blood Meridian*, *Housekeeping*, *The Bluest Eye* or *The Known World* or *Everything is Illuminated*. (You may not write this paper on *The Human Stain*.)
3. *The Bluest Eye*, *The Human Stain*, *The Known World* and *Everything is Illuminated* are all novels that feature sex, to varying degrees as an elemental and powerful force. What is the relationship of sexuality to identity in one of these novels? How is the act of sex represented and how are the relationships between characters staged, or framed, through either sexual encounters or intimate relationships with the body? Be sure to analyze the representations of sex, both at the level of form and structure, but also at the level of metaphor—search for the meaning of sex in the novel but also for the constructions of sexuality more generally.
4. *The Bluest Eye*, *Blood Meridian*, *The Human Stain*, *The Known World* and *Everything is Illuminated* all contain graphic scatological depictions or images of body-horror that are excessive, crude, or even nauseating (such as the idiot's cage in *Blood Meridian* or the toilet scene in *HS* [p.181ff]). Analyze and interpret one example or recurrent pattern of extreme bodily experience in one of these novels. How is your example or pattern of examples narrated—what is included, what is left out? What do choices of syntax, diction, figurative language, and point of view allow the writer to show or conceal? (Does shit, for instance, have a particular symbolic function?) What is the role of gender, class, or race at such moments? *Caution*: avoid evaluative judgments. Restrict yourself to giving the fullest account of what the extreme bodily experience is in the novel, how it is presented, and how it functions.
5. In *The Human Stain* or at least his character Fania Farley, seems to draw a distinction between the world of nature—of the crows—and that of humanity, with its “stain.” Choosing either Roth's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, *Blood Meridian*, *Housekeeping*, *The Known World*, or *Everything is Illuminated*, analyze the intersections of the human and the natural (or simply non-human) worlds. Is there a difference between them? Is one valued higher than the other? How do they affect or interpenetrate each other? Be sure to choose specific instances, and analyze how the writer produces these distinctions with figurate language, choice of detail, shifts in diction, and other formal features.
6. *The Bluest Eye*, *Housekeeping*, and *Blood Meridian* and *The Known World* contain characters or situations where cleanliness, or the lack thereof, feature prominently. In *The Bluest Eye* Soaphead Church and Mrs. Breedlove are obsessed with order, in *Housekeeping* Sylvie allows dirt to accumulate but also occasionally purges the house of its clutter; in *Blood Meridian*

characters are constantly bathed in filth and dirt; in *The Known World* norms of cleanliness often mark the activities of the dignified. Choosing one of these novels, analyze the role that cleanliness plays—how does it connect to the larger thematic or formal issues of the novel?

7. Many of the novels in the second half of the course end on notes of extreme ambiguity, with conclusive endings rejected. Do a close reading of one of these endings—the last paragraphs of *HS*, the last two pages of *Housekeeping*, the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, the final scene of Celeste wondering about Moses in *The Known World*. How do these moments comment on the rest of the novel? How are they fitting or not fitting conclusions?

8. Rewriting is a common concern in many our novels. Toni Morrison rewrites the Dick and Jane narrative. Maxine Hong Kingston rewrites stories told to her by her family. Edward P. Jones gives us rewritings of fictionalized census reports. The two narrators of *Everything is Illuminated* give each other writing advice that they do and don't follow. How are the consequences of these rewritings imagined within the novel? How do they relate to larger issues—both formal and thematic—in the work?

9. *The Bluest Eye* is obsessed with colors. Its opening sentences, for instance, are suffused with references to color. “Here is a house,” Morrison writes. “It is green and white. It has a red door.” (3) Throughout the novel, the reference to green recurs. Explore, then, the aesthetics and politics of color (beyond black and white and other colors—like blue—that can be said to stand for these) in the novel.

10. Many of the novels from the second half of this semester contain vivid physical descriptions of particular geographic regions. How does the writer's creation of landscape in *Housekeeping*, *Blood Meridian*, *The Human Stain*, *Everything is Illuminated* help him or her develop a sense of person or plot in the novel? Is the landscape, or some feature within the landscape, symbolic of any particular aspect of the novel's message or its characters? Or are there instances in any of these novels where the landscape or backdrop of a particular scene seems at odds with that scene's overall meaning or purpose?

11. *The Known World* and *Blood Meridian* each begin their chapters with brief hints at the plot ahead. Make an argument about the text through an analysis of the headings in one of the books. Do they adopt the same tone as the writing elsewhere? Do they comment on the content? Do they seem to omit anything significant? Do they advance the plot in any way beyond the body text? Remember, do not just answer any of these questions, make an argument about why these headings function as they do, how it shapes the narrative and the reader's experience of the narrative.

12. What do we make of the boundaries within a book concerned with boundaries? Analyze the linkages from one chapter to the next in *Housekeeping*. Are there thematic links between chapters? Do the patterns of division within the novel seem to accord with or work against Sylvie's or, more generally, the narrative's philosophy regarding divisions? Since the book is also concerned with observers from within and without, you may wish to examine the beginning and ending of the book, and where they situate the reader. (You may adapt this topic to another novel from the second half of the term.)

13. *Blood Meridian* makes repeated reference to shadows: one Jackson acts as though the other passing through his shadow is in “violation of his person” (81); other shadows seem “capable of violating their covenant with the flesh that authored them” (139). How do shadows function in

this novel? Not all shadows are of people. On 161, “the tall shapes of the horses skated over the chaparral on spider legs.” It is common to discuss the leveling of all material elements in the novel—are the shadows of inhuman elements treated the same as those of humans? Why or why not?

14. Choose a novel from the second half of the semester that features a repetition – either of one word, or a phrase, or a particular grammatical construction. Specify and analyze it as a way of exploring why some broader theme or stylistic element in the book as a whole.

15. Choose one example of a representation of a child's—or a childlike—consciousness or understanding of the world and analyze it in detail. How does the author represent the immature perspective and differentiate it from adult points of view? Is the child's perspective marked in vocabulary, syntax, imagery, chronology, tone? Are the limits of childhood understanding significant—or not? What is the structural and thematic significance of the child's perspective? Where does it appear, and why? (Since the *Bildungsroman* quality of *Blood Meridian* and *The Bluest Eye* was treated extensively in lecture, please do not write this paper about those novels.)

16. Consider the role played by a culture marked as foreign to America (including that of Native Americans!) in one of these novels. Is linguistic difference important—another language, or non-native English—or not? How do experiences and histories outside the borders of the United States enter into and inflect the narrative? Good examples of possible topics here might include: the various ways Chinese (both written Chinese and spoken Cantonese) enters one of the stories in *The Woman Warrior*; the effects and significance of Spanish-language dialogue in a scene in *Blood Meridian* (either with Mexicans or with Indians); the encounter with the Anasazi ruins in *Blood Meridian*; the narrative of Delphine Roux's past in *The Human Stain*; Alex's translations and butchered English in *Everything is Illuminated*. Handy tip: Avoid generalizations; do not attempt formulations about the nature of the immigrant or Jewish or Chinese or Mexican or American Indian “mind” or “experience.”

17. Minor characters: Interpret the role of a character who occupies little narrative space, or a related set of such characters. What do we learn about the character? How does that character function in the larger narrative, in terms of structural placement, themes, characterization? Are we made to reflect on the marginal status of the character within the narrative, and if so, how and why? In what ways does the depiction of the minor character differ from that of major ones? You might, for example, consider Black Jackson in *Blood Meridian*, Ruth's grandfather in *Housekeeping*, or one of the prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*.