

American Romanticism
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PAPER TOPICS

The topics below are intended to provoke and initiate your own brainstorming and ideas. Do not think of these as topics/questions that you “answer.”

I’ll add to these topics (this document/link) up to about a week before the paper is due (I apologize for the vagueness, but ideally the topics are at least somewhat responsive to what we discover/discuss in class—I’m reluctant to prepackage overly much!).

If you have a particular reason for wanting to write on one of the authors/texts we’re reading later in the semester (Walt Whitman, for instance), let me know and we can discuss possibilities.

Emerson

--Writing on any one particular Emerson essay is tricky. Examining the issue of how he treats slavery (or racial identity), in his essays and journal entries, however, is a possibility. If you are interested in this topic, I’ll recommend several alternative mini-collections of his Journal entries.

Melville: Bartleby

--In class we didn’t have time to consider Melville’s tale as an indictment of work-place labor and economics. Consider writing an economic-political interpretation of the story. Or, in a more “meta” fashion, select several scholarly economic-political interpretations of the story (I’ll help you find the more significant ones) and critique not the story itself but the adequacy of the interpretations. I.e., write a critical review of the criticism on the issue of “labor” in “Bartleby.”

--As said in class, one trick to interpreting stories is to see how an ending, otherwise “odd,” actually can be seen as making sense in the overall logic of the narrative. Consider the ending of “Bartleby” and how it might be the “key” to the puzzle of the story.

Irving: “Rip”

--See above on “Bartleby,” but here show how the legend at the end of “Rip” is integral to the narrative. Likewise, if you are into literary criticism, you could analyze/critique different scholarly interpretations of the story—perhaps narrowing to “Freudian/Jungian” interpretations or “Deconstructive” interpretations and so on.

Dickinson

--Take a cluster of Dickinson poems (4-10) that illuminate a particular theme (desire, death, life epiphany, large space/world & smaller self, etc). Your analysis may show how all the poems deal with the theme (perhaps moving in your analysis from simple to complex) or concentrate on one very

complex poem with the others providing, as it were, context.

--Give a full interpretation of a poem we did not analyze in class. I can provide possibilities.

--Using the Dickinson grid-10-page "Tip" sheet, write on the "Fly" poem. But move considerably beyond the scaffolding there or in other directions.

Poe

--Poe gets tricky the more you read him. At first the issues seem to be straightforward—madness, violence, gothic horror, crime and punishment. But recurrent patterns and obsessions suggest there are layers beneath these "surface" themes: maybe two separate characters are really projections of an internal (unstated) conflict (example: do you soil or protect the woman's honor in "Purloined"? Minister D. and Dupin are perhaps doubles of the split desire to protect/"ravage" feminine/womanly honor). Put on your Freudian hat (or any other psychological hat) and analyse one Poe story in depth, using other stories as lead-in context. I especially recommend "Fall of the House of Usher."

Douglass

--Douglass wrote three different versions of his narrative. Selectively comparing the first and second versions is a great topic (but of course requires you reading/browsing the second much longer version). After you've read the 1845 version, read the 1855 excerpt (required in the syllabus): does the difference intrigue you? If so, write on the difference!

--Douglass's narrative can be seen as either a paradigmatic/representative story of how a "slave" became a "man," or a story of Douglass's particular trajectory from bondage to liberty. What role do the secondary characters play in Douglass's narrative rhetoric?

Melville: "Benito Cereno"

--There is a dramatic revelation towards the end of the narrative that obliges you to re-interpret everything you thought was happening in the story. How does your reading change on the second reading? This is an especially good topic for those interested in creative writing/plot construction/etc.

--Interpret Babo as fully as you can.

--Interpret Captain Delano as fully as you can.

--Does the story condone or condemn violence?

Comparative topics on slavery issues

--Usually, I don't encourage comparative topics. But here are two, working with our recent cluster of readings; you may use my titles if you wish:

--White Ventriloquy in Douglass, Turner, and Melville's "Benito Cereno" (i.e. whites speaking for blacks)

--Voyeurism in Douglass, Turner, and Melville's "Benito Cereno" (i.e. each work deals with the threat or proper justice of black violence/insurrection; you couldn't get more materially/viscerally historical than that!; and yet each work also "stages" violence in interesting/complex ways for the audience who is seeing the "drama" of violence.