

Engl 291/AmStud 261, "American Novel Since 1945"
Hungerford
Spring, 2008

Essay #1 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.

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, February 29**. (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. Humbert discusses how enraged Lo is over the way Humbert deprives her "not of a specific satisfaction but of a general right ... the conventional program, the stock pastimes, the 'things that are done' (186). Sal is disgusted with those who act with nothing "but with the idea of what one should do" (244): "This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do" (68). Using one of these novels, or another, discuss the impact of convention, of the entanglements that arise when characters try to act as they "think they're supposed to." Ambitious essays should attempt to relate the idea of social convention to literary convention.

2. In *The Rise of the Novel*, a study of the genre's flowering in the eighteenth century, the literary critic Ian Watt demonstrates how this new form required names suggesting "that the character is to be regarded as though he were a particular person and not a type" (20). Choosing *Wise Blood*, *Lolita*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, or *Lost in the Funhouse* discuss the effects of the ways their authors name their characters. Do the names undercut verisimilitude? If so, to what end? Are the names deceptive? How do they situate the reader? Consider, for example, Aubrey McFate, Dr. Hilarius, Lolita, Oedipa Maas and Manny DiPresso.

3. In one way or another, the protagonists of *Wise Blood*, *Lolita*, *On the Road*, *Franny and Zooey*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* all have their sanity called into question, and various abnormal mental states (religious enthusiasm, drug hallucinations, and so forth) potentially compromise their rational faculties. Discuss the theme of madness in one of these novels. How are madness and sanity defined and represented? Is madness a wholly undesirable state? Madness is often connected to a protagonist or seems to be a source of authority. What does it mean to have an authorial voice claim madness?

4. All of the novels we have read thus far have male protagonists. Choosing any one of the novels we have read (*Black Boy*, *On the Road*, *Lolita*, *Wise Blood*, *Franny and Zooey*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, *The Crying of Lot 49*), consider role of gender in the novel. How is gender portrayed, and how is that connected to sexuality? What role do women play? How do or don't they contribute to major themes in the work? How is masculinity imagined? Are female characters simply present as foils for a main, male, character, or do they serve some other function? How do the conventions of gender relate to other kinds of conventions, social or literary? (Focus your paper on one of these issues, not all of them.)

5. What role does racial difference play in *Wise Blood*, *Lolita*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Franny and Zooey*? (I do not include the obvious ones for the reason that they are obvious.) Remember that "race" is not only at issue when characters of color are mentioned; whiteness (for example, the WASPY characters in *Franny and Zooey*) is susceptible to analysis as race, too. If you choose this question, please be sure not to reiterate points made in lecture or section.

6. Many of the novels we've read deal with the theme of travel. Richard travels from South to North in *Black Boy/American Hunger*, Humbert and Lolita spend the latter half of the novel traveling the US, Kerouac's *On the Road* is entirely structured around travel, *Wise Blood* begins and ends with travel and movement, travel is essential to the Odyssean tale around which Barth's "Menelaiad" is structured, and Oedipa must travel in order to unravel Pierce Inverarity's will in *Lot 49*. Choose one of these novels and construct a paper in response to the following questions: How do these works thematize travel and what function does it serve in the novel? What is the relationship between travel and experiencing or coming to an understanding of a concept of "America" or some other

geographical entity? In what way does travel connect to, or function independently from, the narrative structures of the novel you choose?

7. In the preface to *Slow Learner*, a collection of his early short stories, Thomas Pynchon remarks somewhat disparagingly of his work, “The next story I wrote was *The Crying of Lot 49*, which was marketed as a ‘novel,’ and in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I learned up until then.” Discuss the genre of *The Crying of Lot 49*. What kind of work is it? Is there a more appropriate generic designation for it than *novel*. What features does it exhibit in common with works of other literary genres? How do the reader’s expectations for its generic form shape his or her reading of particular episodes? How does the book confront the reader’s assumptions or prejudices about what kind of work it will turn out to be? NB: please attempt this question only if you have a strong sense of what other genres are, and look like.

8. *The Crying of Lot 49*, like all of Pynchon’s novels, displays a highly detailed knowledge of various avenues of popular culture, high culture, eclectic hobbies, and specialized sciences. Oedipa Maas is consistently forced to rely on the expertise of others to interpret the clues she attempts to follow. What is the function of specialized knowledge in the narrative? Does *The Crying of Lot 49* imagine an ideal reader, a reader ideally informed? What is the effect of including references to highly specialized principles of thermodynamics placed at a disadvantage? How does the book deal with the ordinarily superior prestige accorded works of “high art” relative to objects of pop culture?

9. The title of *On the Road* is clearly taken from an expression encountered in everyday speech. But it also recalls the format of certain philosophical and scientific treatises – for example Aristotle’s *De anima* (*On the Soul*) or William Harvey’s *De circulatione sanguinis* (*On the Circulation of the Blood*). In what respect might one read *On the Road* as a philosophical work? How might *the road* represent an object of philosophical contemplation or meditation? In what ways are characters like Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, Carlo Marx presented as philosophers? Does the book display particular philosophical principles or concepts? How?

10. 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 Rita or Valechka in *Lolita*, or the porter on the train in the opening of *Wise Blood*. (You may choose any one of our novels as your subject for this question.)

11. The strangeness and chaos of postwar urban experience has been a frequent theme in our reading. Analyze the depiction of one city in one of the novels we've read: how is the

city described? What routes does the narrative take through it? Who inhabits the city? How is city experience distinct from other kinds of experience? What is the relation of urban scenes or urban descriptions to larger patterns or themes in the novel? You might, for example, think about the Denver or the "Frisco" of *On the Road*--what does the traveler through the city see, and what remains hidden? Why?

12. *Lolita*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Franny and Zooey* make significant use of (fictional) plays or scripts. Choose one of those plays for analysis. How and why does the novel turn to theatre? What similarities and differences between narrative and drama are important to the theme and form of the novel? Consider especially questions of timespan, character, artifice, collective vs. singular experience, old-fashioned vs. modern art form, and the relation of the classic theatrical genres, comedy and tragedy, to the novels that frame them. How is the play narrated? How do plays affect their audiences--and does this suggest anything about our own readerly response? If you write about *The Courier's Tragedy*, you should think carefully about the interplay between description of the play and quotation.

13. In *Wise Blood* Enoch Emery goes to a movie theater; in *Lolita* Humbert constantly invokes film; in *On the Road* Sal routinely describes his acquaintances by referring to characters from film, usually Groucho Marx or W.C. Fields; in "Zooey," the narrator describes the story as akin to a home movie. Analyze the role of film in one of these books: what part does it play in the text? How is the representation of film different from the ways other media--television, radio, writing, etc--are presented?

14. *Lolita*, *On the Road*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Wise Blood* all are set in the shadow of WWII, the Korean, or the Vietnam war, with the central characters either transplanted exiles or returning veterans. Choosing one novel, consider the following questions: What role do references to the war play in structure of the novel? In the construction of the characters? What does its presence or absence indicate about the goals of the author?

15. "When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I," Humbert Humbert admits, "surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past" (13). Using this statement as a point of entry, explore the relationship between visuality and memory in *Lolita*. Alternatively, explore the imagery of memory in *The Crying of Lot 49* (we leave the point of entry here up to you).

16. For Humbert Humbert, *Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male* is a form of self-defense. He, in fact, has written the text while in legal captivity. *Lolita*, *On the Road*, *Wise Blood*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* are replete with references to law and its agents--the police, lawyers, social workers, among others. Discuss the representation of law in the text. In what ways do law and literature intersect in the text? To what end?

17. Analyze a portion of the murder scene at the end of *Lolita*. How are our expectations of murder fulfilled or denied by this part of the book? What does this scene have to do with Charlotte Haze's death (if anything)? Should we compare this murder to the unconsummated murders of Taxovich and Charlotte nearer the novel's beginning? Is there any other kind of "murder" that takes place in the book?

18. All of the novels we've read so far—*Black Boy*, *Wise Blood*, *Lolita*, and *On the Road*—feature scenes in which a protagonist learns something important about the relationship between words and the world. Think about the kitten-hanging scene in *Black Boy* discussed in lecture, in which the narrator learns to use words as weapons by taking his father's words literally, as opposed to how they were intended. Choose one or two such scenes from one of our novels and present a close analysis of their significance. How are we supposed to regard the characters' theories and discoveries about language? Are they similar to the authors'? What indications does the text give us for making such distinctions?