

Suggest Paper Topics for American Novel to 1900 – Fall 2011 -- Paper #1

The essay should be five to seven pages in length. You may develop a topic on your own or modify one of these to suit your interests. If you choose to develop a topic on your own, please run it by me before you get started. Please use two academic articles (not web sites or web sources) to develop your discussion (use the MLA documentation format). The easiest way to find articles is to use resources available through our library web site -- <http://libweb.uml.edu/databases/literature.html> ; you will find lots of articles by using the MLA Bibliography, or J-Store, or Project Muse. We will use part of class on Wednesday, **October 5, for peer review of your draft**. The final version of the paper is **due on Wednesday, October 12**.

1. Edith Wharton often uses satire and irony in her narratives as a means of highlighting the foibles and failings of her characters and as a means of critiquing the social world that defines them. Consider how she uses irony and satire in *House of Mirth*, **either** as a means of revealing more about a central character **or** to offer commentary on the social world in which her characters exist.
2. In their novels, both Edith Wharton and Susanna Rowson offer critical views of what we might call the failures of women's education. What are those failures? How do they affect the lives and choices of Lily Bart and Charlotte Temple?
3. As her publication of *The Decoration of Houses* indicates, Edith Wharton was interested in decor and what it reveals about individuals, their tastes and values. She frequently draws on elements of decor/the furnishings in rooms as a means of identifying class status or ambitions. Discuss how interiors, both rooms and their appointments, convey tastes and values in one or more scenes in *House of Mirth*.
4. Wharton, Rowson, and Hawthorne explore aspects of moral choice and present characters in situations that force them to choose between right and expediency. Sometimes the character's dilemma centers on the conflict between passion and duty, other times between self-satisfaction and self-sacrifice or between public image and personal conscience. Explore this dilemma and how it is resolved in one or more of the novels we have discussed.
5. In *Charlotte Temple*, Henry Temple emerges as the ideal man. What characteristics define him? How does he reflect the qualities associated with sentiment as this term was used in the 18th century? How do the other male characters in the novel measure up to him?
6. Analyze the character of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*. What is her purpose in the novel? What is she seeking? Why is she so unsettling to Dimmesdale?
7. Wharton uses a number of minor characters in *House of Mirth* who can be seen as foils to Lily Bart. Choose at least two of these characters and offer analysis of them and the ways that Wharton uses them to highlight aspects of Lily's character or qualities of character that Lily lacks.