

Essay 1: Comparing Texts of the Same Era / Exploring Literary Periods & Styles

This assignment asks you to practice a key skill taught in the surveys, using historical knowledge to analyze literary texts. You will practice this skill by comparing two texts from the same era, or by articulating the connection between a literary text and a literary style. **Choose one** of the options below.

Option One. Write a critical paper that compares either Alcott's *Little Women* or Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to some other text on our 1865-1914 reading schedule. The paper should show how the selected text (Twain's or Alcott's) relates via its similarities and/or differences to some other text from this same era. You may focus on themes, ideas, style, purpose, form, or any other significant point of comparison. Make sure your readers know why your selected points of comparison are important.

Some Questions to Get You Started on This Option. These two texts are classic "American" literary texts? How do they relate to other American texts of the same era? What are the points of similarity? In what ways are they different? As you compare, consider what is important, interesting, or significant about these similarities and difference. Do they tell us something about historical changes or the historical moment? Do they tell us something interesting about society, culture, gender, race, social status, or language? Do they reveal something remarkable about each text or about literature of this era in general? Does the comparison change the way *we* might see American literature or American history of this period?

What-I'm-Looking-For. When I'm reading option one papers, I'll be asking myself these questions:

- Does the paper compare either Alcott's *Little Women* or Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to one other text on our 1865-1914 reading schedule?
- Does it focus on significant points of comparison?
- Does it make a specific and interesting claim (or claims) about the two texts examined?
- Does it explain in a clear and persuasive manner its interpretation of those texts?
- Does it support that interpretation with well-chosen direct references to the text?
- Is it organized clearly enough so that anyone in this class could read the paper and follow the argument?

Option Two. Choose any text on our 1865-1914 reading schedule and explain its relationship to one of the literary-historical styles of the period. The styles associated with the texts written in this era include realism, naturalism, local color, and nonfiction realism.

Some Advice to Get You Started on This Option. You need not simply explain how Chopin illustrates local color or how Jack London exemplifies naturalism. Your topic could be more complex: to explain, for example, how *Little Women* is both a good and a bad example of realism. Or it could be more surprising: to demonstrate the ways in which Du Bois departs from the nonfiction realism of his era. Regardless of how you approach this topic, you'll want to have a smart, useful, workable *definition* of the style you select before attempting to write. For help in formulating this definition, you may want to take a look at a good dictionary of literary terms (check out the books in the PN40 to PN41 area of the 2nd Floor Humanities Reference in Hale Library), the introduction to our anthology, and/or the Norton website. If you use an outside source to help establish your definition, give that source proper credit.

What-I'm-Looking-For. When I'm reading option two papers, I'll be asking myself these questions:

- Does the paper explain the relationship between a text from our reading schedule and a literary-historical style of the period?
- Does it define that style clearly and accurately?
- Does it make a specific and interesting claim (or claims) about the text and style examined?
- Does it explain in a clear and persuasive manner its interpretation of the selected text?
- Does it support that interpretation with well-chosen direct references to the text?
- Is it organized clearly enough so that anyone in this class could read the paper and follow the argument?

Important Information.

Editing, Documentation, and Outside Research. I care about editing (spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.) and MLA format.

At the end of your paper, on a separate sheet, please provide a works cited page to acknowledge precisely and completely all of your sources. I would like you to use the format suggested by the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th edition, by Joseph Gibaldi. You can find this book at the K-State Union or the library; Hale library also provides a single sheet handout that explains the MLA format for citation.

To support your views, you need to refer directly to the texts you are examining. When you cite your source in the text of your paper, refer to the author and page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation or sentence:

African American spirituals have been described as "the sole American music" and as the way "the slave spoke to the world" (Du Bois 894, 896).

If it's obvious whom you are citing, simply refer to the page number when quoting from the text:

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois describes African American spirituals as "the sole American music" (894) but also as the way "the slave spoke to the world" (896).

Paper Conferences. Each of you will meet with me individually for a fifteen-minute paper conference sometime between September 15 and 26. I will send around a sign-up sheet on September 11. Please bring a rough draft or detailed outline of your paper to the conference. During your conference, I will ask you to commit to option one or two.

Due Date. Friday, **September 29.**

Length. **4-6 pages**, typed, double-spaced.

Revisions. After I return your papers (on October 6 probably), please read my comments. If at that point, you would like to revise your paper, please do so. Revisions will be due one week after papers have been returned (October 13). You will also have the opportunity to revise your second major essay. A revision does not automatically receive a better grade. The revision must be substantially improved. It must demonstrate significant change in ideas and focus, arrangement and organization, or evidence and development. Simply correcting typos or making editing corrections will not change the grade.

To submit a revision, you need to:

1. Write a summary explaining why and how you revised—for example, how and why you decided to change the focus and organization; why you deleted or added a certain part; why and how you rearranged information; and so on.
2. Hand-in your revision, your original paper, and my original comments along with your summary explaining the changes.

Revisions that don't meet these criteria (arriving by the deadline, offering substantial change, providing a summary of changes, and enclosing the original version) will be returned.

Let's Talk. If you have questions or concerns about your paper or you just want someone to bounce some ideas off of, drop by the office to talk with me. I'll be in my office during my office hours (MWF 11:30-12:30, M 3:30-4:30). If those times don't fit with your schedule, I would be happy to set up some other time to meet with you.