

American Literature
November 2002

PART A:

Choose **two** of the following questions. Each question directs you to discuss three writers for a total of six writers discussed in Part A. Note the following restrictions:

Of the six, at least two must have written before 1900 and at least two must have written after 1900. In addition, at least two must be poets and at least two must be writers of prose.

1. Escape has been singled out by critics as particularly significant theme in American literature. Write an essay about escape in American literature, focussing on the difference that race, class, and/or gender make/s with respect to the ways in which this theme is developed.
2. Toni Morrison disputes the assumption that "traditional canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans" (from *Playing in the Dark*). Write an essay about the influence of at least two non-Anglo peoples upon the development of American literature.
3. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins argues that "familiar categories for evaluating fiction" must be set aside when analyzing sentimental fiction. Discuss how and why the work of three writers requires the critic to set aside "familiar categories for evaluating fiction" in order *not* to misunderstand it.
4. "Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business." Thoreau writes as if in every moment we confront a choice between the sham of culture and the "hard bottom" of Nature. American literature has a long tradition of holding up "nature" as antidote to culture. Discuss.
5. "I prefer not to." Bartleby's refusal stands in for a host of refusals in American literature. With reference to the works of three writers, discuss "the refusal" and its ideological implications.
6. In "The Gift Outright" Robert Frost claimed "The land was ours before we were the land's." Discuss the concept of "manifest destiny" as it has been manifested in American literature.

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PART B: African American Autobiography and American Autobiography

Choose **one** of the following. Your answer must discuss at least three writers from your list.

1. "Autobiography," writes William L. Andrews, "holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America." Why does this genre figure so prominently in African-American literary history?
2. Explain how and why American autobiographers have experimented with the genre's dominant conventions (e.g. thematic, ideological, formal, structural, discursive, etc.)
3. Discuss the idea that the only autobiography worth reading or writing contains a traumatic narrative kernel.
4. The title of Eakin's *Fictions in Autobiography* is suggestive of the similarities between autobiography and its fictional cousin, the novel. Discuss how and why American autobiographers fictionalize.