ENGL 235  
Possible paper topics, generated by your classmates  
My comments are in italics

below is an evaluation of all the topics submitted to me; if I ruled out your favorite, find a way to address its shortcomings before choosing it for your paper. You’re not limited by these either – if something else occurs to you, suggest it.

**Good bets:**  
These topics are meaty, controversial and yet specific.

Ezra Pound saw Walt Whitman as wood and himself as wood-carver. To what extent do you see similar and/or different attitudes towards poetry and/or Whitman in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg?

What significance(s) does "passing" have in Nella Larsen's novel?

How would you define “race” by the notions of it found in Nella Larson's Passing?

Analyze the role of nature versus nature in Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson. In the end, which wins out? Or, is novel ultimately progressive or racist?

Using any of the novels or other pieces read, analyze the role of the individual and their significance in the larger society. How does this individual impact the society and how does the society impact the individual. What is the greater force at work? *Obviously would need specifics to be a full-fledged topic, but a good start.*

In Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, how does Hester Prynne compare to her daughter Pearl? Are there images of Hester in Pearl? *Any paper with this question would need a specific answer to this question that is more complicated than, “Hester and Pearl’s relationship is important.”*

The journey from enslavement to freedom in Rowlandson, Douglass, and Thoreau. What characterizes their enslavement? Is it mental, physical, or both? How do they go about attaining their freedom? Can they ever achieve it completely? *I’d examine two texts at the very most, three is too much.*

Discuss Mary Rowlandson's role during her captivity. In what ways is this consistent with the traditional female role? In what ways was religion important? *Terrific question, might actually be two questions in one, though. Possibilities: 1) role of gender 2) role of religion 3) relationship of gender to religion*

Explore the imagery used by Fredrick Douglass in his narrative. What, if anything, do you think Douglass was trying to do? Was he effective? *A bit vague in its current form, a good thesis would answer this question very specifically.*

What is the significance of water in Eliot's "The Waste Land"?

What is the role of nature and of punishment in Hawthorne? Are they connected?

Compare/contrast the character of Hester Prynne from the Scarlet Letter with the character of Daisy from Daisy Miller. *Just be careful the paper doesn’t simply list similarities and differences, that you have a thesis about why comparing them is important.*

Analyze the “prose” of Stein's "Tender Buttons". In what ways does the author favor form over function in her language?

Do you think that William Bradford was the narrator in Plymouth Plantation? What role if any does his personality/person play in his allegedly “objective” third-person narrative?
What are some similarities and differences between the works of the modernist expatriate authors T.S. Eliot, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein? Be sure you’re comfortable discussing modernism, and examine two writers at the very most.

How is women's sexuality portrayed in the Romantic works The Scarlet Letter, Song of Myself, and the poems of Emily Dickinson? Again, two texts at the most here.

How is the issue of race dealt with by American authors like Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, and Crevecouer? Ditto.

Why would Mary Rowlandson want to "play" on the motherhood issue in Narrative of the Captivity? Cite examples in the text where she uses the idea of being a mother to her advantage.

How do Franklin and Thoreau's ideas of living the "good life" agree? How do they differ? This is an interesting one, but the "so what?" question begs itself.

Describe the role of nature in The Scarlet Letter. How does this symbolism help to elaborate on the ideas that are presented in the novel?

Discuss the role of the narrator in Henry James' "Daisy Miller." How does Winterbourne's point of view positively/negatively shape the audience's perspective of other characters? Is he a trustworthy narrator?

Examine Frederick Douglass' definition of freedom in his Narrative. What role do Douglass' depictions of masculinity and femininity play in his conception of freedom?

Does T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland" definitively depict a world of detachment and disunity, or does the poet ultimately convey a sense of hope in the possibility of humanity's redemption?

How does Franklin's telling of his life in Autobiography reflect the lessons expressed in Poor Richard's Almanac?

Is Mark Twain's "The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson " a tragedy or a farce, or both? Careful this one – defining your terms might be a problem.

Compare and contrast the way Rowlandson and Wheatley use religion to deal with matters of race.

How are African-Americans represented in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof? What might this have to do with the overall themes and goals of the play as a whole?

These won’t work (headings suggest why):

Trouble with definitions:
These are provocative questions, but will get you in trouble when you try and come up with a standard definition of a key term.

In what ways do Benjamin Franklin's writings reflect "American values"?

Should the works of an expatriate like Henry James or Gertrude Stein be considered American Literature?

Do you think that Gertrude Stein was successful in bringing her text “Tender Buttons” into the now? In what ways is her writing similar to cubist paintings? Unless you're very comfortable discussing modernist art, this will be difficult, and defining “success” will be very subjective.

How optimistic/pessimistic is crevecoeur in his "letters from an american farmer"?

Which character undergoes the most change in The Scarlet Letter, and why?
Requires research you shouldn't have to do:
Does TS Eliot's The Waste Land parallel the sentiment of post-WWI Europe?

How is Thoreau's "Walden Pond" applicable to modern society?

Have the women poets we have read demonstrated any argument for social or political change, surrounding their condition, and what dose that say about the times they lived in?

How can the Scarlet Letter be read as a commentary on that era of American history? How does his portrayal enter into this commentary?

How does Henry James' "Daisy Miller" represent the European view of Americans? Does the fact that James is an expatriate writer make this an accurate representation? This "accuracy" thing will get you in trouble.

Was the Scarlet Letter more of a historical romance or a historical account for events before the Civil War? Why?

Is there really more than one answer to this question?
How does Walt Whitman view the poet? An interesting question, but how would this go beyond describing what's in the Preface?

Great question, too huge to cover in 5-7 pages.
What kind of poet is Emily Dickinson? How does she view the poet?

Ezra Pound urged writers to "make it new." Using T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" or Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons," explore whether or not they have made their writings different from others of the time. Were they successful? Agree or disagree, and state your reasons.

Based on what we have read in class how has the works of female writers changed over time? How has their purpose of writing changed?

How would you argue this?
What could have made the Cherokee Memorials more effective? Compare the effectiveness of the three that we read in class.

A matter of opinion, not argument.
Compare and contrast the characters of Clare and Irene in Nella Larsen's Passing. Which of the characters has a better grasp of her identity? Does this contribute to their ultimate fate? If so how? A provocative question for class discussion, but might get you into trouble as you had to judge both women and their choices.

Compare and contrast Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter. Which character suffered the greater punishment and why? Ditto with above comment – how will you prove “greater suffering”? Show why "Tender Button" is 'right' literature, instead of a piece of crap. the opposite is fine, too. questions of quality will get you in trouble.

Is Daisy Miller manipulative or just an innocent girl?

Too vague.
What ways does Puddn'head Wilson pose a search for identity? A bit more focused this might be interesting, but for now where it would go is unclear.

Discuss the importance of symbolism in The Scarlet Letter.

What role does religion play in Jefferson's ideals?
Compare "The Scarlet Letter" and "Passing"; what the differences between these two, in diction, style, anything, and what element might cause each of these differences?

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