

Essay 3: The Cultural Analysis of Nineteenth-Century America



This assignment asks you to write a critical essay that includes the cultural analysis of a text or texts. This assignment is built on the premise that understanding a particular cultural context will help us to better appreciate and comprehend a culture's literary productions, just as a careful reading of a literary text may lead us to better understand the culture from which it emerged.

For the purposes of this assignment, the definition of "cultural analysis" is large and open-ended. It means making *connections* between the texts we have read and the cultural contexts in which those texts emerged; it means making connections between texts and the cultural contexts in which those texts circulate. It does not exclude the formal or internal analysis of a text (indeed some of the very best cultural criticism uses formal analysis of literary texts); but cultural analysis moves beyond the boundaries of the text itself to establish links among texts, values, institutions, groups, practices, and people.

Here are some examples of the questions (some of them borrowed from Stephen Greenblatt) that a critic developing a cultural analysis might ask:

- What kinds of behavior does this text seem to enforce?
- What are the social purposes or functions of this text?
- Why might readers at different times and different places find this text compelling?
- Are there differences between my values and the values implicit in the text I am reading?
- Upon what social understanding does the text depend?
- How might this text affect the freedom or movement of a person?
- How is this text connected to larger social structures?

These are just examples. The specific questions, form, and content of your paper should be tailored to your own talents and interests. In other words, you will develop your own topic for this paper. It also means that some of these papers may be deeply informed by cultural theory; others may not. Some will want to develop a very precise idea of what "cultural analysis" means; others will not. Some will use a great deal of historical research; others only a little. Some papers will use mostly primary documents to construct an understanding of an early American cultural context; others will rely on secondary sources; and others may use a mix of both. All these papers, however, must use documents and sources beyond the literary text itself.

What-I'm-Really-Looking-For. Just so you know, when I'm reading these papers, I'll be asking myself the following questions:

- Does the paper move beyond a formal analysis of a text in isolation?
- Does it focus on the literature *and* culture of America between 1800 and 1900?
- Does it make connections between texts **and** values, institutions, groups, practices, or people?
- Does the paper make specific and interesting claims about the text(s) and culture(s) being examined?
- Does it explain in a clear and persuasive manner its interpretation of those texts and contexts?
- Does it support that interpretation with judiciously chosen evidence?
- Is it organized in a way that makes clear (rather than detracts from) the argument's major claims and emphases?
- Does it acknowledge its primary and secondary sources using a bibliography and a clear and consistent style of documentation? (I would prefer that use MLA.)

Proposals On Thursday, **April 3rd**, you will hand in a written, one-page paper proposal. The proposal should be clear and specific, though I realize that some papers will change their exact approach or focus between the time of the proposal and the day the final paper is due

Due Date. Thursday, **April 17th**

Length. 10-12 typed, double-spaced pages

Revisions. After I return your papers, please read my comments. If you would like to revise your paper, please do so. Revisions will be due on before May 8th. A revision must be substantially improved to merit a grade change. To submit a revision, please write a one-paragraph summary explaining why and how you revised and hand it in with both the revised version and the old version with my comments.

Let's Talk. If you have questions about your paper or want to talk about some of your ideas, please drop by the office. I enjoy talking with students about their work, so please don't hesitate to meet with me. I'll be in my office during my office hours (Mon 2:00-3:00, Tue 1:30-2:30, Wed 2:30-3:30). If those times don't fit with your schedule, I would be happy to set up some other time to meet.



Illustrations: Anna Julia Cooper (front page), Williams James (back page)