Writing Options for Volume B

| Two 5-page papers due Nov. 6 and Nov. 29 (extensions for papers on Melville and Dickinson). | OR |
| One 8 – 10 page paper due Nov. 29 (extensions for papers on Melville and Dickinson). |

**Required for all papers:**

1. Significant engagement with one or more primary texts. Practice tying general ideas to specific evidence.

2. MLA format. MLA documentation, especially for secondary sources.

**Suggested Topics**

1. Research the critical reception of a particular work or of a particular author’s body of work. Write a paper that includes a survey of the criticism available through our library’s databases as well as your own response. (Remember that the word “criticism” applies to all scholarly responses to a work, whether they be analytical, interpretive, or evaluative.)

2. Discuss changes in the concept of the American self in the early nineteenth century. Locate your discussion within specific works by at least two authors, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville.

3. Cite one or two key differences between early-nineteenth-century writers and their eighteenth-century predecessors.

4. Focus on the concept of self-invention and, in specific literary works, discuss the early-nineteenth-century evolution of this concept.

5. Consider literary portraits of women engaged in heroic struggle or of escaping slaves portrayed as heroic fugitives. Compare any of the portraits by Stowe, Jacobs, or Douglass with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

6. It may be possible to sort major writers of this period into two groups: those who advance particular doctrines and systems of thought, and those who question or critique those doctrines or who suspect any systematic or totalizing view of the world. Write a paper that examines examples of these two types (for example Emerson’s essays and Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”).

7. What kind of relationship does Irving suggest between himself and the stories that he tells? Look at the end of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and write an essay about how Irving offers his story to the American public. Why do you think Irving takes the stance that he does?

8. In the Leatherstocking Tales (of which *The Pioneers* is one novel) Cooper is often said to be doing the traditional cultural work of an epic writer: helping a new culture to lay claim to an ancient or dying tradition. Where do you see this underway in these excerpts?
9) Compare an Emerson paragraph with an Edwards paragraph. What are the differences in structure? In argumentation? Does Emerson play by the rules that you were taught in composition classes? If not, then how does Emerson make his own strategy work?

10) Discuss the way Emerson uses analogies. Choose several analogies he creates in *Nature* and explain their significance.

11) Compare the rhetorical strategies of Petalesharo, Boudinot, and the Memorials. Why might these strategies be especially effective in addressing their respective audiences?

12) Given your earlier study of Puritan literature, trace elements of Puritanism in Hawthorne’s stories or *The Scarlet Letter* and discuss the extent to which Hawthorne himself embraces or critiques Puritan ideology. (Compare actual Puritans you have studied with Hawthorne’s fictional characters: Anne Bradstreet with Hester Prynne; Edward Taylor with Arthur Dimmesdale; Jonathan Edwards with various ministers in Hawthorne, or with the narrator himself.)

13) Summarize Poe’s theory of aesthetics as he expresses it in “The Philosophy of Composition” and discuss his application of that philosophy in “The Raven.” Given Poe’s delight in wit and practical jokes, do you think that he means everything that he says in “The Philosophy of Composition”? Are there elements of self-parody in “The Raven”?

14) Write an essay comparing Fuller’s expository style to Emerson’s or Thoreau’s. Where does she draw on Transcendental modes of discourse? Where does she break radically from those modes, and why?

15) Write an essay about Tom, whose fame has changed dramatically from the middle of the nineteenth century to now. Why might Tom have been an appropriate “hero” for the historical moment in which Stowe created him? Are the other African American characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* constructed in similar ways, for similar purposes? How do you account for variations?

16) Write an essay about the white characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Why would this particular array of characters serve Stowe’s purposes?

17) Compare Linda Brent with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. See especially the following quotation from *Incidents*, which equates unwed motherhood with stigma: “My unconscious babe was the ever-present witness of my shame.”

18) Jacobs ends her narrative “with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage.” Comment on the implication here that freedom matters more to Linda Brent than marriage. To what extent does *Incidents* suggest that the “life story” is different for enslaved women than for free (white) women?

19) Cite several points of philosophical and stylistic connection and divergence between Emerson’s *Nature* and Thoreau’s *Walden*. 
20) Explain specific ways in which *Walden* may be considered a “practice” of Emerson’s theory. Emerson, whose philosophy influenced Thoreau, wrote that “words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.” Write an essay on *Walden* in which you demonstrate Thoreau’s insistence on the truth of this statement or apply the same quotation from Emerson to “Resistance to Civil Government,” paying particular attention to the relationship between self-expression and personal conscience.

21) Explore any of the following central concepts in Thoreau: the spiritual vision of unity with nature, the significance of language in achieving such a vision, the theme of self-reliance, the use of analogy as meditation (perhaps contrasting Thoreau with Edward Taylor), and the significance of self-expression.

22) Write an essay in which you describe the place and effect of “Facing West from California’s Shores” within the context of *Leaves of Grass [Song of Myself]*.

23) Compare Emerson’s “The Poet” with “Preface to *Leaves of Grass.*” In what ways does Whitman claim to embody Emerson’s idea of the American poet?


25) Writing about “Benito Cereno,” literary critic Newton Arvin noted that “the story is an artistic miscarriage, with moments of undeniable power.” Evaluate the fairness of this statement given your own reading of the story.

26) How well is “Bartleby, the Scrivener” grounded in the actualities of modern-style work? Is the narrator himself a victim of the same misery that may have undone Bartleby? Write an essay about this story not as about “ah, humanity!” but as about the frustrations and balked emotions of the modern urban workplace.

27) Part of what fascinates the reader (and possibly Melville himself) about Bartleby is his inscrutability—and possible banality. Describe various “walls” that Bartleby may be trapped behind and explore ways in which the story’s structure or design reinforces the reader’s inability to penetrate those walls.

28) Read carefully a group of Dickinson poems with related themes—the natural world, love, death, traveling, private experience, art and its value—then write an interpretation of one of the poems that includes your expanded understanding of the way Dickinson uses the theme in other poems in the group.

29) Several of Dickinson’s poems contain references to birds. Discuss how they are observed in each poem and variations in the thematic role that they play. If you like, you can do a similar essay centering on Dickinson’s thinking about insects—bees, flies, butterflies.

30) Many Dickinson poems illustrate change in the consciousness of the poet or speaker. Choose a poem in which this happens and trace the process by which the poem reflects and creates the change.