

AMERICAN CLASSICS: Suggestions on Paper Topics. Spring 2006.

The final obligation in this subject is the preparation of a final paper, about 10 pages in length, “on a notable historical work that was not assigned as required reading,” as the syllabus puts it. The paper can, however, take a work that was assigned as required reading and examine it in a different way, using sources beyond those assigned. For example, Frederick Douglass wrote three autobiographies, of which we read only the first. Students could look at the other two and compare them, or perhaps compare those parts of them that addressed the same or similar topics.

We did not read The Federalist Papers, which surely are an “American Classic.” Often it is treated as an official manual on the Constitution. In fact, the Federalist Papers were originally newspaper essays written to defend the Constitution against its critics during the ratification controversy. The Constitution’s critics also wrote notable essays, and sometimes they’re more fun. Bernard Bailyn collected some of the more notable speeches, articles, and letters of the ratification controversy in The Debate over the Constitution (Library of America; New York, 1993). Several other collections are available, too.

Remember the story of Washington and the cherry tree? It comes from Mason Weems’s Life of Washington, first published around 1800 and reprinted, with an introduction by Marcus Cunliffe, by the Harvard University Press. Weems’s book was overtop: it repeated anecdotes more to teach readers moral or political “lessons” than to recover Washington’s life, and it made Washington a figure like Moses or Christ (depending on which passages you consider). But this is where the adoration of the founders started. And parts made their way into the schoolbook McGuthrie’s Reader---another good topic for a paper.

This year some of Lincoln speeches beyond the Lincoln-Douglas debates were listed on the syllabus, but we had little time to discuss them. So I think students could write on Lincoln---his oratory, and the development of his message, for example, in the course of the Civil War. Someone wrote an entire book on the Second Inaugural. And how much has been written on the Gettysburg Address? Surely there’s a paper in there.

Skipping to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jane Addams, Forty Years at Hull House (orig. 1910) on her experiences in a settlement house (which offered services to immigrants), or Jacob Riis, How the Other Half Lives (1890) on the lives of the poor in American cities. Riis was himself an immigrant, but from Denmark, not southern or eastern Europe, which produced the mass of immigrants of the time. He was also a photographer. Or Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (1888), which predicted what the United States would look like in 2000! Similarly, a Populist named Ignatius Donnelly published Caesar’s Column in 1890 that purported to describe New York city in 1988 with its oppressive conspicuous wealth, its insurgent workers.... But then you might prefer to write on L. Frank Baum’s The Wizard of Oz (1900)---no, not the movie, though you could do both. Baum’s book is available on the internet:

<http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/People/rgs/wizoz10.html>

Have a look at the introduction. Some say it was a contemporary political allegory, not just the “modernized fairy tale” Baum said he was producing.

The spring 2006 rendition of AMERICAN CLASSICS is a bit light on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You can make up for that with your paper. There are more possibilities than I can begin to list. You might, for example, like Helen Keller’s The Story of My Life (orig. 1903). You could examine and write on the Depression era photographs of Dorothea Lange (or, earlier, Mathew Brady’s Civil War photographs), though we have confined ourselves largely to works in words. You could write on Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936)---and/or the movie of three years later, although both are gargantuan. Have you ever wanted to read Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962)? A 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition was published in 2002. The 1960s also produced a rash of landmark books by black Americans. Another of an earlier time, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) by James Weldon Johnson, is in Three Negro Classics.

The possibilities are almost endless. The examples mentioned here are to get you thinking. A good topic for a paper must be 1) a work that has attracted considerable attention or had a notable impact and 2) provides an interesting vantage point on the time it was produced or perhaps on the author, if he or she is independently interesting. Most appropriate topics are works of nonfiction: novels are studied intensively in other subjects. That’s not to say The Great Gatsby isn’t worth reading historically, but you’ve probably read it already. The same is true of Huckleberry Finn. Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a novel, but I don’t think you’ll find it in many American literature courses; its interest is largely historical. The same is true of Gone with the Wind. In short, find a work that interests you, that has historical interest, and that you haven’t already read. And, assuming the topic isn’t on this list, check it out with the instructor.