

# English 346: Contemporary American Fiction

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## POSITION PAPERS

Your position papers should be approximately 500 words (they should be **no more** than two typed pages), so you'll have to think carefully about what you want to say and make every word count. The point of these papers is to test out your ideas and respond to the books you've read. So don't be afraid to be polemical—say what you really think! The papers will be graded mostly on thoughtfulness and depth. I'll be looking to see that you've read the entire work, engaged with it in a thoughtful manner, and that you refer to specifics from the book to support your points. While you're free to write about anything in the book that interests you, these are some topics to get you started thinking. You're required to turn in 5 position papers over the course of the semester (hard copies), so you can skip 3. Remember that late position papers are not accepted.

**Note:** You may not write one of your position papers on the book that you're writing your research paper on. This will be one you skip.

### ***Slaughterhouse-Five* (Due Date: Wednesday, September 5)**

#### Possible Topics:

- Do you believe this is an anti-war book or not? Vonnegut concedes in the opening chapter that trying to stop wars is like trying to stop glaciers. Is he a fatalist, as some critics have charged, or does he think change is possible?
- Comment on the book's style. How would you characterize it? What makes it unique, interesting? Does the style seem to underscore the content? Or does it detract from the content?
- What are we supposed to think about the Tralfamadorians and their world-view? Does Vonnegut believe (and want us to believe) that the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life is more sane and reasonable than that of earthlings? Or do you believe that Vonnegut satirizes the Tralfamadorian view—that he presents it ironically?

### ***White Noise* (Due Date: Monday, September 24)**

#### Possible Topics:

- What do you think the "white noise" of the title refers to? Where in the book itself do we see this white noise manifested? What does the white noise suggest about contemporary American culture?
- Do you think DeLillo critiques or appreciates our media-obsessed, consumerist society? Or does his vision involve a more complicated mixture of the two? Cite particular scenes, instances in the book to support your view.
- Choose a particular supporting character (Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, Wilder, Murray Jay Siskind, Babette, Orest Mercator, etc.) and discuss what role this character seems to play in the book.

- Look one of these particular scenes in the book and provide a close reading of what you think's going on here:
  - The scene beginning in Chapter 39 when Jack confronts Willie Mink.
  - The scene at the hospital with the German nuns.
  - The scene at the very beginning of Chapter 40, in which Wilder rides his tricycle across the highway.

### ***The Things They Carried* (Due Date: Wednesday, October 3)**

#### Possible Topics:

- Discuss the book's form—did it make you feel uncomfortable? Were you frustrated about the difficulty of sorting out truth from fiction? Speculate about what you think O'Brien gains by the way he plays with audience expectations in the book.
- How do you think O'Brien defines courage in the novel?
- Discuss the theme of storytelling as O'Brien explores it. Why all the metafictional commentary about telling stories?
- Why do you think O'Brien chooses to end the novel with the story about Linda set mostly in his childhood?

### ***Song of Solomon* (Due Date: Monday, October 15)**

#### Possible Topics:

- Look at either Macon Dead II, Ruth, or Pilate and talk about this character's function in the novel.
- Examine a particularly memorable image or recurring motif in the novel (Ruth's watermark, eggs, gold/ginger, the rose petals sewn by Lena and Corinthians, the peacock, etc.) What function does this symbol seem to serve?
- Discuss the emphasis on names and naming in the novel. Perhaps examine individual character's names? Talk about the relationship between names and history?
- What are we supposed to think about Guitar Baines and The Seven Days? Is Guitar an appealing character or a appalling character? Explain.
- Provide a close reading of the very end of the novel. How are we supposed to read and interpret what happens here?

### ***Tracks* (Due Date: Monday, October 29)**

#### Possible Topics:

- What do the "tracks" of the title refer to? Are there literal "tracks" in the novel? How do tracks work as a metaphor? Why do you think Erdrich chose this title?
- Discuss the structure of the novel. Why does Erdrich choose two alternating narrators? How does this form relate to the novel's content?
- What are we to think of Pauline Puyat? Is she simply crazy? Are we to feel any sympathy/admiration for her at all? What does her function in the novel seem to be?
- Look at Erdrich's prose style. Is it lyrically beautiful, as many readers believe? Or is it overwrought, too writing-schoolish as some critics have charged? How does Erdrich's style affect you? Do you think it works or not?
- Why doesn't Fleur tell her own story? What are we to think of Fleur? Why does she hasten her own destruction at the end?

### ***A Thousand Acres* (Due Date: Monday, November 12)**

#### Possible Topics:

- Consider the novel's epigraph from Meridel Le Seur. How does this quote shape and inform the book?
- Is Ginny Cook an entirely reliable narrator? Can we completely trust her perception of events? Why do you think Smiley chose Ginny to narrate the story? How would the book have been different with a different narrator?
- If you're familiar with *King Lear*, talk about Lear parallels in the novel. How well do you think these work?
- Some reviewers argued that Smiley went too far in her depiction of Larry Cook and what he does to his daughters—that she robs the Lear character of his majesty, making him unambiguously bad. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment?
- What are we supposed to think about Jess Clark? Is he a villain or a victim?
- How do you read the ending of the novel? Is it entirely tragic? Does Smiley leave us with any hope for the future?

### ***Maus* (Due Date: Monday, November 19)**

#### Possible Topics:

- What do you think about Spiegelman's controversial decision to use animal figures to represent human beings? What about his choice to use specific species to characterize entire religious or national groups? Do these choices work well in the book?
- Why do you think Art chooses to include his own present-day writing of the book as one of the plotlines in the work? What does this add? How does this decision compare to what we've seen other writers in the course do?
- Using at least one or two specific examples from the books, discuss how the illustrations work with the narrative to convey Vladek's story. What do they add?
- Examine the comic book-within-a-comic book, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" that Spiegelman includes in *Maus I*. What's stylistically/visually different about this section? Why do you think Spiegelman chose to include it?

### ***Fun Home* (Due Date: Wednesday, November 28)**

#### Possible Topics:

- Why do you think Bechdel engages with so many literary texts in the memoir? Perhaps choose a single text, such as *Ulysses* or *The Great Gatsby*, and talk about why this particular text is significant to the memoir.
- Discuss the importance of place in the book. You might, for instance, focus on the small-town Pennsylvania setting (for which Bechdel includes a map) versus trips to New York. Or you might look at more specific places such as the funeral home itself or the Bechdel house that Alison's father works to restore so lovingly.
- Choose a particular panel or page to analyze closely, especially in light of how the drawings and text work together.
- Finally, do you think Bechdel judges her father or resists judging him in the book? Where do you specifically see this struggle illustrated?