ESSAY ONE - INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE (see pp.77, 78)

In everyone’s early life, there are crucial and sudden moments (epiphanies) of psychological insight, self-knowledge, and heightened awareness. At these moments of realization, we may be able to distinguish between false images of ourselves and an emerging sense of our true selves. Often, this is a painful process, filled with uncertainty, disillusionment, and self-doubt. We may view our new selves in opposition to the values of the families or societies in which we were raised. However, these turning points are the events that allow us to explore the boundary between fantasy and reality, and to develop a clear identity, moving from childhood innocence into an adult understanding of our place in the world. If successful, these transitions provide the gateway to establishing a strong sense of independence of individuality. Write an essay analyzing how individuals are forced to confront and re-evaluate their own immature assumptions about themselves and others, and whether they are successful or not in their growth to mature understanding. Make sure to include frequent and specific references to the text of the readings on this theme.

ESSAY TWO - (Option 1) LIFE AND DEATH (see pp. 761-763)

Though we cannot know with certainty what death is, men and women have continually attempted to characterize death and to cultivate strong convictions about it from the earliest times. Concepts of immortality, eternity, fate, and destiny do not eliminate the sadness of the end of life, and may seem speculative at best. For many people, the religious tradition, whether Judeo-Christian, or other, does not provide a satisfying answer to man’s fear and confusion about this strange and terrifying phenomenon. Nor does the scientific perspective of Darwinian Creationism fulfill the need for peaceful resolve. In the context of Western intellectual tradition, such beliefs may serve only to mock our limited rational minds, and we must seek other sources for consolation. Despite the impact of intellectual history, death remains invested with a special and frightening mystery - perhaps because it is the great mediator and unifier of man, who cannot escape its throes.

The view that establishes death as the great leveler, bringing ordinary citizens and emperors to the same dust, leads to the conclusion that life itself is absurd, as Shakespeare capture through the mournful voice of Macbeth: “a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing.” It is metaphorically a thief in the night, the grim reaper, who overthrows human survival, despite our denials and struggles. Thus, much fine fiction finds a perfect imaginative form for exploration of the ways in which we cope with this inescapable reality.

In a well-constructed essay, investigate man’s desperate search for truth about death, his attempts to control, avoid, or accept his fate in his quest to find the higher meaning of his existence. Analyze the literary devices used by the writers of the works covered in class on this theme.
ESSAY TWO - (Option 2) CULTURE AND IDENTITY (see pp. 417, 418)

The shared understanding of any discussion of Culture and Identity centers on the forces that bind together a group of people – family, geography, behavioral standards, common traditions, religion, art. These cultural forces that mold one’s identity have shifted over centuries and decades by modern developments in transportation and communication. Such innovations have allowed people to emerge from the relative isolation of their group into the larger mainstream, facilitating the sharing of ideas and values over time and distance. No longer are people restricted to adopting and carrying forth the distinctive traits and values of their predecessors. With greater exposure and mobility, people can move away from stereotypes to create original identities from a blended understanding of the choices available to them.

However, though societal progress has succeeded in making the globe seem smaller, ending the isolation of various cultures, these advances have also diminished the powerful cultural distinctions that mark tradition. In fact, progress often disturbingly brings cultures into conflict, creating devastating consequences in the tension among competing interests.

In a well-constructed essay, investigate man’s desperate search for the truth about his identity. Analyze the ways in which culture and tradition mold the formation of character, but often inhibit or distort one’s quest for strong self-image. For example, how does race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, social class, either cultivate or impede the process of self-discovery? Does the rubber-stamp of one’s heritage, marked on them at birth, undermine or limit their choices and potential? Can people step outside the bonds of their entrenched culture to create a self that is more complex and diverse than their origins dictate? How are people either confined by or forced to confront the internal and external conflicts generated by the dominant culture that has hampered their individual imperatives?

Use the class readings to illustrate the profound ways in which culture shapes identity. Analyze the literary devices used by the writers of the works covered in your textbook on this theme. Make sure to include frequent and specific references to your supporting sources.

ESSAY THREE - CONFORMITY AND REBELLION (see pp. 233, 234)

“Estrangement” is the condition of not belonging, of being caught between two cultures or generations whose customs and rituals do not coincide with one’s sense of morality or means of communication. Often the potential for conflict grows from within, from psychological forces that create feelings of rejection and misunderstanding. Write an essay in which you describe the plight of characters who have become exiled or isolated from their culture because of the intolerance of others or because of their own inability to conform to the conventional standards of the dominant culture. Make sure to include specific and frequent references to the class readings on this theme.
RESEARCH PAPER  -  LOVE AND HATE (see pp. 557-558)

Love and hate, it is often noted, are two of the most prevalent themes in literature. The rosy conception of love presented in many popular and sentimental stories does not prepare us for the complicated reality we face in trying to forge deep connections with others. We know that the course of love never runs smooth, but in those popular stories, the obstacles that hinder the characters are simplified and superficial. However, love in real life is rarely that simple. The external obstacles may be immeasurable, or the conflicts may lie deep within the personality. The major impediment may well be an individual’s difficult and painful effort to understand that he or she has been deceived by his own immature or sentimental conception of love.

The common belief is that love and hate are closely related, and much evidence supports this proposition. But why should love and hate, seeming opposites, lie so close together in the emotional lives of men and women? We are all egos, separate from each other. And as separate individuals, we develop elaborate behavior mechanisms that defend us from each other. But the love relationship, whether romantic, familial, or platonic, differs from other relationships in that it may be defined as a rejection of separateness. The common metaphor speaks of a spiritual bond in which two individuals as merge into one. That surrender of the “me” to join in an “us” leaves people uniquely vulnerable to psychic injury. In short, the defenses are down, and the self-esteem of each depends importantly on the behavior of the other. If the lover, family member, or friend is betrayed by the other, the emotional consequences are uniquely disastrous - hence the peculiarly close relationship between passionate hatred and intense love. Love is an act of faith springing from our deep-seated need to join with other human beings in emotional and spiritual harmony, while hatred is a denial of that faith and a sad retreat into loneliness and isolation. Write a full-scale research paper in which you explore the contention that love and hate are closely related emotions, as revealed in the characters portrayed in the class readings. Consider the forces, institutions, beliefs, and values that create the obstacles to perfect love and breed the conditions for bitter hatred. You must consult your “Literary Analysis Research Paper” packet for specific requirements.