

**English 350**  
**Fall 2012**  
**Portfolio essay prompts**

**PORTFOLIO ONE**

\*\*Friday, Aug. 24. Essay #1: Choose one of the two following options.

- 1) Read “Beat! Beat! Drums!” in isolation, then read it set within the full page of the newspaper in which it was first published. What effect does seeing it set within its original context have on a reading of the poem versus looking at it as a stand-alone work of art, hung on the gallery wall, as it were? You might take a look at the poem as it was published in Whiteman’s *Drum-taps* book (included in the Archive website) for another presentation.
  
- 2) Read “The Dresser” several times—out loud, too. Mark places where the meter seems to change. If you know terms of prosody well, use them to analyze elements of the poem to make meaning. If you don’t know the formal terms, think about describing and analyzing the poem in terms of pacing, rhythm changes, etc.

Wednesday, August 29. Essay #2: Compare and contrast ideas of life, death, and mortality in the “realist” poems of Longfellow (that is, the poems drawn directly from what could have been his own experiences) and those of his historical or mythical poems. Remember, stay focused! Choose just one set of paired concepts, lines, metaphors, or even words to analyze. Bonus points if you connect the form of these poems to your analysis of their larger themes.

Essay #2.2 (EXTRA CREDIT) for generations schoolchildren and adults alike memorized Longfellow’s poems. Choose 30 (or more) lines of Longfellow’s verse and recite perfectly before the class by the time of the midterm. Upon recitation, hand in a 1-page reflection on why you chose these particular lines to recite.

Friday, September 7. Essay #3: (choose one prompt, and NOTE exercise for Monday as part of prompt 1)

1. For Monday, read “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and write a brief paragraph (due Friday with the essay), describing your initial reaction to the poem. Have you read this poem before? What is its tone/emotion? How/why would a slave woman write this poem? Then, after reading Wheatley’s other works, analyze your initial reaction—accurate still? Have you changed your perspective and why?
  
2. Looking closely at Wheatley’s Washington poem, consider how she understands her

place, role, or identity as a part (or not) of the new experiment in state building that will become the U.S. How do you react to a slave woman's praise of the "Founding Father" Washington in poetic form? Draw from the other writings by Wheatley for evidence to support your point of view.

Friday, September 14. Portfolio essay #4: The preface to the Bay Psalm Book claims that "God's altar needs not our polishing," which we can take to mean human art is either not the main point of the psalms translation or may even hinder the faithful in trying to hear the message of the psalms. Choose a very short passage in Bradstreet's verse and analyze how she is using the aesthetics of Puritan plain style, OR choose a passage and analyze the way she uses more elaborate poetic technique. If you choose the former path, consider how the plain style succeeds (or how it fails) in her verse. If you choose the latter, speculate on whether or not that technique supports or undercuts her Puritan sensibilities.

Monday, September 17. Essay 4.2 (EXTRA CREDIT): Review Vincent Carretta's talk. Paraphrase his thesis; consider how his talk relates to what we've read so far in class; list questions you'd like to ask (or that you did ask; if as a class we come up with compelling questions, I'll forward them to him).

Monday, September 17. Essay #5: I will accept this essay any time up until the final portfolio is due. In John Winthrop's *Modell of Christian Charity*, he explores the notion that the colony of New England will be a "City upon a hill." That is, New England will be an example of (or a warning about) what God's chosen can accomplish. This phrase has been a go-to phrase for United States politicians for generations. See this site: <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3418> for a transcription of President Ronald Reagan's farewell address, which specifically mentions the Puritans. For this extra credit assignment, pay attention to our election year rhetoric. Compile a list of examples of speeches, writings, ads, etc. that in some way reference the Puritans and especially the idea of the U.S. as a "city on a hill."

Friday, September 21. Essay #6: Compare and contrast the opening sections of the preface by Per Amicum to the opening few paragraphs of Rowlandson's own narrative. How are they parallel and in what ways do they diverge? Choose one element you've identified and speculate about the work that the similarity or difference performs for the reader.

Friday, September 28. Essay #7: As far as you can judge from this brief example, and despite the differences in their ideas of the significance of nature, how does Edwards's view of nature depend on the same religious and cultural sensibilities as Rowlandson's does? You might want to refer to Winthrop's writing as a third Puritan point of view—he might help mediate the two, seemingly very different points of view on the natural world that Rowlandson and Edwards represent.

\*\*Friday, October 5. Midterm Portfolio: For this mid-semester self-evaluation, I'm interested in reading your analysis of your own work—and more about your approach to analyzing the literature than on your approach to the format of the assignments. To that end, you might treat your essays as if they belonged to another writer. Look over your essays to date and consider what they add up to. Have your thoughts about American literature changed since week one? What has been surprising or new in the readings and discussions? What questions do you have? What does the sum of the essays tell you about your own approach to these materials? Did you make any missteps that you'd like to correct given your perspective now? Where do you want to go from here?

Also, indicate which final project you have chosen and if appropriate, indicate the topic. Hand in this essay as an introduction to the rest of the collection.

## **PORTFOLIO 2**

Friday, October 12. Essay #8: Watch *The Colbert Report* from October 1 through October 8 (new shows broadcast M-Th) and compare his persona construction to that of Franklin. You might consider this passage from a July apology for the Daily Show/Colbert: “both shows do important work . . . they actually instruct [their viewers] how to watch the news — how to decode spin, read politicians’ lips, consider unstated implications, and dig beyond the front page for stories that aren’t being reported” (“Jon Stewart, Capitalist Stooge?” by Stephen Deusner. *Salon* 25 July, 2012. [http://www.salon.com/2012/07/25/jon\\_stewart\\_capitalist\\_stooge/](http://www.salon.com/2012/07/25/jon_stewart_capitalist_stooge/)). But of course, both Franklin and Colbert are trying to sell a product. Is that tension between entertainment and instruction evident?

Wednesday, October 15. Essay #9: (choose one prompt):

1. Why doesn't Charles Deighton write? In other words, what significance is there to the novel's sense of gender roles, friendship circles, “the rake,” etc., to Deighton's epistolary silence? What kind of assumptions can one draw about his character based on others' letters or based on his silence?
2. Write a letter from Charles Deighton to a character in the book. Your letter should reflect your sense of Deighton's character as well as his reader, and you should be sure to give it a number so I know where in the text it is meant to appear.

Friday, October 26. Essay #10: Choose a character from *The Contrast* and, assuming the role of director of a forthcoming production of *The Contrast*, write a character sketch for the actor who'll take on the role. Imagine a full staging of the play, which allows you to give notes on costuming, props, setting, etc., if you think they are important to your character. Be sure that

your sketch makes concrete references to specific moments in the text to support your idea of how the actor should play him or her. (Feel free to suggest specific casting!)

Friday, November 2. Essay #11: Read any of the “British” essays in *The Sketchbook* and contrast some element of its characterization of British character, landscape or culture with the “American” essays/stories that we have read.

Tuesday, November 6. Essay #12: I will accept this essay any time up until the final portfolio is due. Choose any speech by either Mitt Romney or Barak Obama in the wake of the election (in other words, their concession or acceptance speeches) and analyze it for its references to or reliance on any of the metaphors, concepts, or ideals used in or expressed by the early American literature we’ve been reading and discussing. The successful essay here will make concrete references both to the speech under consideration (and be sure to provide me with a bibliographic entry for it, either in print, audio, or video form so that I can access it) and to specific passages in texts we have read this term.

Wednesday, November 7. Essay #13: Compare Apess’s references to George Washington to that of Phillis Wheatley. What work does Apess’s reference to the first president do here? How does he write himself (or Native Americans more generally) into the United States? (Or does he?)

Wednesday, November 14. Essay #13.2 (EXTRA CREDIT). I will accept this extra credit assignment any time up until the last day of class. Take a field trip to one or more of the following local tourist sights: Historic Prophetstown; Battleground Memorial; Prophet’s Rock (see me if you need directions). Consider how the pan-Indian alliance of Prophetstown, Tecumseh, Tenskatawa, or Native peoples more generally are represented at these sights (through text, landscape, exhibits, build environment or other) and compare/contrast with our literary representation of Prophetstown, 1812, and the major Native figures. Photo illustrations are encouraged!

Friday, November 16. Essay #14: We have seen Irving and Apess reaching back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in their works. What use does Hawthorne make of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, especially Salem witchcraft history? (To unpack his historical references, see the footnotes in the assigned text; if you’re interested in Salem, see the short essay, “Prologue: What Really Happened” on our class Blackboard site. I *don’t* expect you to do lots of outside research for this prompt but rather to look at the ways Hawthorne encodes history—accurate or not—into his work.) Is the specific history of Salem important to the plot or merely atmospheric? What comment on that history does his story seem to make (whether you think his allusions are significant or trivial), and how is that a different comment than he offers his nineteenth-century readers about issues of their time and place?

Friday, November 30. Final Portfolio due with cover essay: I invite you once again to provide an introduction to the portfolio that contains the same kind of self-reflection or re-meditation as the midterm cover essay.