

*Russell Banks, the author of **Cloudsplitter**, a novel about the fanatical abolitionist John Brown, declares, "We [Americans] are, as a people, radically different, despite our common history with Europeans. The elements that makes us different are race and space."*

We can test Russell Banks assertion by looking at 3 books and a movie: **Huck Finn, The Great Gatsby, Country of the Pointed Firs, and It's a Wonderful Life**. These four works almost incontestably represent greatness in American literature and film. All have something to say about what it means to be an American.

Are race and space really the two elements that make America, and Americans, different? Are there any other common elements, or themes, that tie the three books together? Think about the three novels and the movie, and how the characters in each interact and react to issues of race and space. Do you see race and space in all four? Are there any other great unifying themes that Banks is just ignoring?

Start by gathering 3-4 quotes from each book that speak to the questions raised above. Then try to them together in an essay that takes one of two positions:

Race and Space are the two great themes in American literature, and we can see them in what we have read and watched.

-OR-

Russell Banks may have a point about Race and Space, but he is oversimplifying and missing another important theme that really ties these books together.

I'm looking for an essay of 800-1000 words, thoughtfully presented with well integrated quotes. We are fortunate to have online text versions of the works we are examining:

Huckleberry Finn: <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>

The Great Gatsby http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f_scott/gatsby/

The Country of the Pointed Firs:

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JewCoun.html>

It's a Wonderful Life

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_IR6HEdOb8&feature=related