Below are some ideas that you might use to start out as you think about the first paper. You're not limited to these; they're offered only as suggestions. But remember that you have only 6 pages here, which is not really much: in that space you can't really take on everything, so your first job will be to choose a focus, a theme, that will help you center your own writing. All the suggestions below are aimed at that, at focusing: but there are other ways to focus, and if you have a different idea, run with it. Just don't try to take on too much – that's always a temptation, but it almost always falls apart. So...

• Harold Simonson, in his introduction to Turner's “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” makes this statement: 

“The most serious charge has been directed against Turner's conception of democracy. His whole thesis rests on the assumption that in this ideology is a certain mystique, a spiritual essence by which persons can achieve their full measure of individuality and dignity. But once again serious questions arise: by democracy did Turner mean equalitarianism? Or did he mean something akin to social Darwinism whereby in unrestricted competition the strong became stronger? To what extent was individual freedom to be controlled by legislation?”

Simonson goes on, and if you want to see the rest of his questions you can borrow the book from me. But those seem central, serious and important enough. Based on your reading of the Turner thesis, how does Turner address these questions? What are his answers to them? And what do those answers imply about his larger vision of the west, the westerner, America, the American?

• Or, take the Turner thesis as your starting point, and see how it works itself out in literature. For instance, you might start with Turner's basic idea -- that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." How do you see this idea at work in Owen Wister's The Virginian? In what ways does The Virginian simply extend the Turner thesis? In what ways does it complicate or contradict Turner's idea of the frontier, or of the frontiersman? What exactly is this thing they call "American development," anyhow? And is Wister any better than Turner at getting past the contradictions inherent in the thesis?

• Here's something that could turn into a research paper, although it doesn't have to start out that way. Write a paper in which you talk about masculinity and femininity in The Virginian. What roles does Wister ascribe to women? To men? What does “manliness” mean to him? And why does it seem to mean so much to them, do you think? How is the idea of manliness connected to his larger vision of the West, and of America?

(If you're interested in this, you might be interested in this excerpt from Rough Rider in the White House (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/876071.html), or in this copy of an address Roosevelt once made on the subject of motherhood (http://www.nationalcenter.org/TRooseveltMotherhood.html). Neither is directly about
Wister, but they give you some idea of the context in which he writes. Other resources, of course, abound.

- Here’s another idea that could turn into a research paper, but doesn’t have to begin as one. Consider how race and class operate in the world of *The Virginian*. How do you interpret Wister’s Anglo-Saxonism? How is it connected to his vision of class? How does it correspond to his characters’ ability to “rise” in the world? How does he balance his democratic values against “natural aristocracy”?

- A slightly different, but related paper might focus on the role “the Indian” plays in either Turner or Wister. What is the relationship between “civilized” and “savage” in the Turner thesis? How does Turner imagine Europeans and Indians actually interacting with each other? What is the idea of the Indian he is working with? You can ask the same questions about either Turner or Wister: but in the space you have, I’d suggest only writing about one of them. Think about going deep instead of broad.


- Or, you might start with a seemingly simpler question: what is “justice” in *The Virginian*? Justice is a primary concern in most Westerns – set, as they usually are, in places that are outside the reach of the law, or too far from the law to rely on it. In *The Virginian*, this forces people to rely on “natural law,” or on some kind of “code.” So what is that code? How does Wister justify extralegal acts like, say, lynching?

OK, that’s enough to start with – but, again, I stress that there are other approaches. If there’s another way you’d like to do this, let me know: my only requirement is that you find a way to care about what you’re writing about, and that you don’t try to take on 50 pages of writing in a 6-page paper.