Early Nineteenth Century
1800–1865
Most anthologies of literature published over the last fifty years have relied on criteria derived from traditional New Critical models of literary analysis. Those models valued what was taken to be the inherent formal complexity of individual texts, a complexity seen as separate and separable from the historical and cultural circumstances of the production of the text. As a result, many pedagogical arguments over the canon have centered on whether certain texts were “complicated” enough to sustain extended classroom discussion or analysis and thus merit inclusion in an anthology or a course syllabus. The implication was that some texts were somehow self-evident in their meaning and intent, and therefore “simple,” while other, seemingly more complicated texts, demanded and therefore deserved close scrutiny; for example, what can you say about a novel as supposedly straightforward and uncomplicated as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*? But the ambiguous, self-referential *Benito Cereno* provides plenty of material for class discussion.

As many instructors will testify, however, classroom experience often tells a different story, where few if any nineteenth-century texts, no matter how supposedly “simple” or “straightforward,” are experienced as self-evident by first-time readers in the class. There are at least two other pedagogical problems stemming from an emphasis on “formal complexity” as well: the circularity of the argument—very often definitions of formal complexity were based on the same...
texts they were supposed to define—and, even more important to literary studies, such a critical model failed to account for a large number of texts considered significant by nineteenth-century readers, and thus prevented a richer understanding of cultural history.
The continued group of texts in this section of the anthology according to regional cultures, ethnic identities, and social conflicts addresses these concerns in the classroom by recognizing that literary and linguistic complexity resides not apart from but within the historical, cultural, and geographic context of a text. Such an approach emphasizes texts as rhetorical performances, performances as complex as the rhetorical demands and contingencies to which they respond: A Christian Indian appealing to a dominant culture audience responsible for both his religious faith and the subjugation of his people (Elias Boudinot); a Northern single mother writing satirical denunciations of male dominance for a popular press dominated by male editors and publishers (Fanny Fern); an ex-slave demanding both racial justice and gender equality before an audience of white women (Sojourner Truth). The title alone of Angelina Grimké’s “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” suggests the complexity of the rhetorical situation she faced (and hence makes a good starting place for class discussion), balancing issues of gender, race, religion, region, and class in arguing for the abolition of slavery.

The inclusion of “The Invention of the South” in the title of the section on race and slavery makes the point that none of these terms represent a settled or fixed concept, but like the idea of America itself, they have evolved as part of a dynamic process of cultural conflict and self-definition.

By challenging the notion of “background” material, the interrelationship of text and context in this rhetorical approach has important pedagogical implications for the question of how much historical information students need to understand any text, whether its author is Ralph Waldo Emerson or Sojourner Truth; Abraham Lincoln or Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Students can be encouraged to explore the historical context through the text by raising questions of rhetorical strategy. Beginning with the ideas and assumptions about slavery and abolition, the struggle for women’s rights, the Indian experience, or the history of the West that students bring with them, the class can then explore how a particular text confirms, resists, or otherwise complicates those ideas and assumptions. Exploring the students’ reading experiences of
The texts can lead to questions about why writers use a certain vocabulary, set of references, or set of rhetorical strategies, and these questions in turn involve thinking about who the contemporary audience(s) for that text were and what expectations and values they held. Elaine Sargent Apthorp’s teaching guide for John Greenleaf Whittier contains excellent examples of assignments designed to focus students’ attention on the complexity of Whittier’s performance as a public poet dedicated to political activism.

The Development of Narrative

The organizational logic of the Heath Anthology invites students to regard texts not as static set pieces but as complex rhetorical performances embedded in cultural debates over race, gender, political legitimacy, and economics. While this “cultural rhetoric” approach seems especially suited for the consideration of “noncanonical” material that doesn’t fit neatly into the traditional genre categories of poetry, drama, and fiction (for example, newspaper columns, personal letters, memoirs, political speeches), it represents not a special technique to use with “unusual” materials but a means of seeing all texts—and all acts of reading—as performative. Instead of regarding the textual performances in the sections on narrative and poetry as standing apart from earlier, less “literary” selections, instructors can use a cultural rhetoric approach to raise questions about the differences in motive, impact, and strategy in such works on race and slavery as Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s openly polemical novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and Herman Melville’s elusive Benito Cereno. The class might, for example, analyze Nathaniel Hawthorne’s allegorical meditations on gender, aesthetics, obsession, and domination in such stories as “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “The Birthmark” in the light of the arguments regarding the political and social status of women in the nineteenth century raised by Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Depending on the background and training of individual
instructors, the names found in “The Development of Narrative” will represent a mix of the intensely familiar with the radically new, the canonical with the noncanonical. This mix will also be true for some students; for others, however, “familiarity” may indicate little more than name recognition and carry few if any implications of “greatness” or “classic” status. For the instructor unsure of how to approach the new, and for the students to whom almost every nineteenth-century text is strange and remote, the first step may be the question of the canon itself, and specifically an expansion of the question Judith Fetterley reports her students asking in regard to Caroline Kirkland: Why haven’t we heard of these writers before? (For other writers the question would be the reverse: Why have we heard so much about them?) As the class reads through these selections, they can classify or reclassify the writers in terms of technique, subject matter, or audience appeal. Such discussions can provide the foreground for considerations of how canons have been constructed historically (it can often be illuminating to look at copies of tables of contents from anthologies from the nineteenth century to the present).

The Emergence of American Poetic Voices

If many students come into class with the assumption that “poetry” is necessarily distant and obscure, the section on “Songs and Ballads” can lead to discussions both about definitions of poetry and where these definitions come from. This in turn can involve discussions about the different kinds of cultural work poems do, from self-expression to the ritual building of a sense of communal solidarity, from self-examination to social protest. Equally important is the inclusion of song lyrics, for they remind students that not only is poetry still an active part of contemporary cultural life in general, but part of many students’ lives in particular.

If the texts in the previous sections provide cultural context for these poems, then the inclusion of poetry and fiction in the sections themselves gives students practice in
discussing issues of genre and style from different perspectives. How would we read Whitman differently, for example, if he were included in the section on abolitionist literature? If Emily Dickinson or Frances Sargent Locke Osgood were included in the section on the “Woman Question”? What other possibilities are there and what do they reveal? Again, such questions lead back to a consideration of the processes and purposes of canon formation.

Native America

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (Ojibwa) (1800–1841)

Contribution Editor: James W. Parins

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Establishing a framework for discussion helps in teaching Schoolcraft. The instructor needs to address the prehistoric nature of the original oral tales and aspects of the oral tradition itself, and, in addition, explain how the tales were enhanced stylistically and rhetorically once they were written down. The dual audiences (of the original tales and the written versions) need to be addressed as well.

As a helpful teaching strategy, draw parallels with other oral tales, for example, Njal’s Saga, Beowulf, and the Iliad. All these existed first in the oral tradition and were later written down. All included super- or preternatural elements.

Students usually have questions on the differences in social values between the American Indian and “mainstream” cultures.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal
Issues

Of particular importance are creation myths or stories that explain how things came to be.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Students can compare the author with others writing in the “standard” style of the time, Hawthorne and Irving, for example, particularly in their self-conscious use of terms like “legend.”

Original Audience

Teachers need to address the preliterate society for which the tales were originally composed as well as the non-Indian audience Schoolcraft was writing for. Points to be made include the following: The style was embellished for the non-Indian audience; students should be directed to find examples. Schoolcraft’s Romantic style differs from some other narratives, including slave narratives.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Oral texts from other traditions can be compared and contrasted. Cusick’s work is especially helpful for comparison within the American Indian context.

William Apess (Pequot) (1798–?)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

Apess was a powerful orator and the first American Indian protest writer. At a time when whites presumed Indians were dying out or being moved west of the Mississippi, Apess attacks whites’ treatment of Indians using forceful language and rhetorical skill. He contrasts the abject degradation of Indians with their natural ingenuity.

The instructor should address attitudes toward the Indians and explain problems faced by Indians in the early nineteenth century. Consider presenting historical material on what had happened to East Coast Indians. The Pequot history (Apess’s tribe) is briefly outlined in the section of the headnote on teaching strategy.

Students often ask why Indians turned to Christianity and used it as an appeal to their white audiences. See comments on the Occom selections.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. Indian-white relations—especially the impact of the Indian Removal Bill. Apess is clearly reacting to the whites’ attitudes reflected in the bill to remove Indians from east of the Mississippi River and to the stereotypes of Indians present in Indian captivity narratives.

2. Emphasis by American Indian authors and slave narrators on achieving equality through Christianity.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

1. Use of persuasive, oratorical style and appeal to emotions of audience. Note how Apess compares non-
Indians’ professed Christianity with their unchristian treatment of Indians and blacks.
2. Use of a series of rhetorical questions to his audience about what Indians have suffered.
3. Use of biblical quotations to support position.

Original Audience

1. Religious orientation of audience, which would have expected appeals to biblical authority.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare with speeches by Indians, Copway’s autobiography—sections on worth of Indian and picture of Indian family life, which buttress Apess’s arguments for treating Indians as human beings.

Compare with slave narratives, which also argue for essential humanity of people of all races.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Relationship between publication of this document and debate over passage of Indian Removal Bill. Also relationship to miscegenation bill in Massachusetts passed around this time.
2. (a) Compare/contrast the oratorical styles used by Apess and Douglass and their treatment of Indian-white relations.
   (b) Compare and contrast the oratorical style used by Apess and American Indian orators such as Logan and Seattle.
   (c) Discuss Apess’s and the slave narrators’ criticisms
of the treatment of Indians and slaves by white Christians.
(d) Discuss the influence of Christianity and its concept of the essential equality of all men under God as expressed by Apess and Copway and by slave narrators such as Douglass.

John Wannuacon Quinney (Mahican) (1797–1855)

Contribution Editor: Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr.

Classroom Issues and Strategies

By the time students get to Quinney, they should be familiar with the broad social issues of the period involving nonwhite peoples: slavery and emancipation, American imperialism in the Hispanic Southwest, and Indian removal and genocide. Quinney’s speech can be placed thematically into this broad context. It can also be presented as a text reflecting the culmination of a long historical process of genocide and cultural discontinuity, beginning with Columbus or Bradford.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes include cultural decline, assimilation, genocide, racism, Manifest Destiny, “progress,” oral versus written history, Christianity and native culture.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In most ways the speech reflects the oratorical styles of the day, but the reader might find it fruitful to analyze the ways in

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which Quinney applies his comments to his specific audience, draws on their knowledge of American history, and makes emotional appeals for justice.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The central issue in Quinney’s speech is the displacement of the Mahican people throughout American history. Texts that touch on that displacement in earlier periods—Bradford’s or Rowlandson’s and other King Philip’s War texts, for example—can provide background to show how Quinney arrived at the views of history he expressed in 1854.

To demonstrate how other Indians looked at Quinney’s themes of genocide, cultural destruction, assimilation, and removal, students can analyze the works of other Indian writers of the same period: Apess, Boudinot, and Ridge. For earlier generations, they should look at the works of Occom and Aupaumut.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

Besides the ideas suggested above, the student might choose a writer from the next or a subsequent generation—Standing Bear, for example—to reach conclusions concerning the effects of removal as a final solution to the “Indian Problem” or to determine whether the justice that Quinney appealed for was gained by Indians. In other words, to what extent do later Indian writers play on the same themes as Quinney?

If such broad questions do not appeal to student, something as specific as the way Jonathan Edwards viewed the Stockbridges (Mahicans) might be fruitful to explore.

**Elias Boudinot (Cherokee) (c. 1802–1839)**

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

Boudinot seeks to and succeeds in breaking the stereotype of the Indian established by Irving’s “Traits of Indian Character” and other writing that established the Indian as uneducated and shirtless. Two major issues that interest students are cultural discontinuity and the position of minorities in American culture.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes include the perceptions of minorities by the dominant society, the role of the government in protecting the minorities against the majority, and the social responsibilities of the majority toward minorities.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In many ways, Boudinot is using “standard” methods of persuasive discourse in use at the time. Students should examine his oratorical and rhetorical devices including diction and structure.

Original Audience

It is important to stress that Boudinot was trying to persuade his white audience to take a particular course of action.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Boudinot was writing in the oratorical mode used by mainstream writers at the time. Compare with works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Chief Seattle.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Students should explore the historical situation in which the address was written, should do comparative studies, and should examine rhetorical and oratorical devices.

Seattle (Duwamish) (1786–1866)

Contributing Editor: John Alberti

Classroom Issues and Strategies

While many of the other Native American texts included in
The Heath Anthology will be new to most students, many readers will probably be familiar with some version of Chief Seattle’s speech. This popularity is directly tied in with the vexed question of the translation and recording of Native oral performances. The headnote in The Heath Anthology details the history of the dissemination of Seattle’s speech, from Henry A. Smith’s original translation to Ted Perry’s recent revision, a text that forms the basis for the popular children’s book (which may be its most familiar form for many students) and even bumper stickers.

One place for class discussion to start, then, is the question of why this text has proven so popular, both among Native and Euro-Americans. Why would non-Native Americans be so drawn to a text that draws such a critical portrait of European Christian culture? This discussion can lead to issues of the construction of Indian identity and history within larger nationalist American histories and ideologies, ranging from the topoi of the noble but vanishing Indian so important to the novels of James Fenimore Cooper to the more recent construction of the Indian as ecological scold. Such cultural formations suggest that many Euro-American readers have looked and look to Seattle’s speech less out of curiosity about Duwamish culture and history and more out of concerns rooted in the dominant society, particularly the consequences of unlimited growth and development and the destruction of the environment, but also ambivalence and guilt about the destruction of Native peoples and cultures.

These questions can then lead back to the difficulties Native speakers face in making their perspectives heard within larger national discourses (Seattle’s text, for example, repeatedly calls attention to the fact that the U.S. government is under no compulsion to pay attention to his remarks), a rhetorical challenge faced by any speaker or writer in a position of lesser power vis-à-vis a dominant culture and discourse system. In this way Seattle’s speech can be compared to the writings of nineteenth-century African-American writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, both strong and powerful writers who nevertheless wrestled with the challenge of having their voices coopted by white
abolitionists who, though sympathetic and working in solidarity with Douglass and Jacobs, still often expressed attitudes toward slavery that had as much to do with concern over the consequences of slavery for the soul of white America as with the political oppression of the slaves themselves. While both Douglass and Jacobs were at least able to produce the written texts they offered to the national debate over slavery (although both faced skepticism over their abilities to do so and had to include prefaces from white writers vouching for their abilities), the cultural co-optation from the beginning of Seattle’s voice is marked everywhere in Smith’s text by the use of phrases (such as “the great—and I presume—good White Chief”) that clearly sound like a nineteenth-century Euro-American man of letters. As a result, the class can consider to what extent an appreciation among non-Native readers for what is thought to be Seattle’s views represents a substantive change in behavior and attitude or a means of assuaging guilt (and these need not be mutually exclusive reactions, of course). What seems positive about the popularity and popularizing of Seattle? What is disturbing or destructive?
George Copway (Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh; Ojibwa)  
(1818–1869)

Contributing Editor: A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students need information about the Ojibwas as a group. They also need to understand the relationship between Copway's autobiography, the Indian Removal Bill, and the attempts to move the Ojibwa out of Minnesota. They need as well an understanding of how Native American autobiography differs from that of non-Indians. See discussion below.

Students respond much more enthusiastically to Copway's description of traditional life than to his references to Christianity. (For Indians' attitudes toward conversion to Christianity, see the comments on Occom and Apess.)

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The Ojibwa or Chippewa are numerically the largest tribe in the United States and Canada. A member of the Algonkian language family, they are spread out around the western Northern Great Lakes region, extending from the northern shore of Lake Huron as far west as Montana, southward well into Wisconsin and Minnesota, and northward to Lake Manitoba. In early historic times, the Ojibwa lived in numerous, widely scattered, small, autonomous bands.

Families hunted individually during the winter but gathered together as groups during the summer. Thus, the term “tribe” is appropriate in terms of a common language and culture but not in terms of an overall political authority. In the seventeenth century, they were mainly located in present-day Ontario. Their hereditary enemies were the Hurons and
Iroquois on the east and the Fox and Sioux on the west.

Copway’s autobiography, his plan for a separate state for Indians, and his history of the Ojibwas were undoubtedly responses to efforts of the Lake Superior Ojibwa to resist removal from 1847 through 1849. In 1850 President Zachary Taylor authorized immediate and complete removal of the Ojibwas from the lands ceded in 1842 (Kobel 174–82).

One important issue is the fact that Copway presents himself as a “noble-but-literate and Christianized” savage, an example of what Indians can become if whites educate and Christianize, rather than eradicate, them. By describing the achievements of his father and ancestors, he emphasizes the nobility of his lineage and thus legitimizes his narrative. (Emphasizing one’s heritage was a technique also used by slave narrators.) Related to this is the issue of his difficult task of creating audience sympathy for the Ojibwa people and their beliefs while showing the necessity of Christianizing Indians.

Another issue is the techniques he uses to describe the Ojibwas and their traditions to convince readers that Indians were human. Copway emphasizes the basic humanity and generosity of the Ojibwas toward one another, values that non-Indian Christians would recognize as similar to their own. He also humanizes his people by citing examples of how his parents cared for and loved their children. These examples counteract the stereotype of the bloodthirsty Indian ever ready to violate a fair maiden or dash out the brains of an innocent baby, depictions all-too-common in the captivity narratives popular well into the 1830s.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Copway’s *Life, Letters and Speeches* is the first book-length autobiography written by an Indian who was raised in a traditional Native American family. The pattern of including oral tradition, history, and personal experience is one that characterizes most later Indian autobiographies. This mixed form, which differs from the more linear, personal confession or life history of non-Indian autobiographies, was congenial to
Indian narrators accustomed to viewing their lives within the history of their tribe or band, clan, and family.

Copway uses a romantic style designed to appeal to the popular taste of the period. His emotional appeals and oratorical style capture his audience’s attention. He also uses literary allusions to demonstrate his literacy—the reference to viewing his life “like the mariner on the wide ocean” making “his way amidst surging seas” is undoubtedly meant to remind his audiences of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. The lines of poetry, probably written by his wife, Elizabeth Howell, also add to this image of Copway as an educated and accomplished man. His romantic tone and language, like that of Robert Burns and other authors before him, allow Copway to cast himself in the image of a person of humble beginnings who has become a writer. Giving students some understanding of the backgrounds of English and American Romantic attitudes toward idealizing humbler life and using representatives of the lower class as the subject of literature, particularly in the late eighteenth century, will help students understand why Copway creates himself as he does.

**Original Audience**

Copway’s primary audience was non-Indian. A powerful platform speaker dressed in full Ojibwa regalia, he aroused considerable public enthusiasm for his lectures on traditional Indian life during his tour of the eastern United States and later during his tour of Great Britain, where the second edition of his autobiography was published.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Copway’s description of traditional Ojibwa life and mores can be compared to those incorporated into the stories by Jane Schoolcraft (Ojibwa). The selection can also be compared to Occom’s “Short Narrative of My Life.” The issues Copway raises with regard to Indian-white relations can be compared.
with those raised by Occom and Apess. Copway’s description of Ojibwa worldviews and his stress on the importance of oral traditions can be compared to those expressed in the selections of Native American oral narratives and poetry.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

An important question for both reading and writing is how Copway presents or creates himself to show the Indians’ essential humanity and their potential for being assimilated into the dominant culture. Discuss Indian worldviews and the importance of oral traditions as reflected in Copway’s autobiography and selections from Native American oral literature. An additional topic would be Copway’s use of Romantic language and tone. Students might compare his style with that of other early nineteenth-century American writers. Students might also compare Copway’s description of Native American people and their lives with captivity narratives by John Williams and Mary Rowlandson.

**Bibliography**


**John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee) (1827–1867)**

*Contributing Editor: James W. Parins*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

The question of assimilation of a minority figure into white society should be raised. The historical context needs to be firmly established and the implication of assimilation should be addressed, especially as it relates to the loss of culture. The introduction should be consulted carefully as it will help in this regard.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The major themes include Ridge’s views on progress and how it comes about, the tensions between the dominant society and minorities, and the Romantic aspects of his poetry.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In his poetry, Ridge follows many of the Romantic conventions common in American and British literature of the period. His prose reflects a vigorous editorial style that spilled over from his journalism into his other prose literary efforts.

Original Audience

Ridge was writing for a white, educated audience. His work is relevant now in terms of the majority-minority relations and is valuable in a historical context.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Any of the contemporary poets can be fruitfully compared. Contemporary prose writers include Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, and Bret Hart.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Topics include the Romantic elements in his work, the idea of progress in nineteenth-century society, and his attitudes toward the American Indians. The latter subject is interesting because
Spanish America

Tales from the Hispanic Southwest

Contribution Editor: Genaro M. Padilla

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may need to be reminded that these tales are usually performed orally. So, instructors should help students recreate the oral tradition out of which they emerge. I often read these tales aloud and try to actually reconstruct the performative features of the tale.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Again, the cultural value attached to oral tradition and collective audience should be borne in mind.

Original Audience

The best/ideal audience is youngsters who are still shaping their social and ethical beliefs.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Other folk tale types should be useful, especially those sustained by other immigrant groups—Italians, Greeks, etc.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) What are our common ideas about death? Why do we avoid discussing death?
   (b) How do stories entertain us into ethical behavior?
2. (a) Students might compare these tales with others they have heard or read.
   (b) They might consider the “usefulness” of the moral tales in a largely secular world.

Narratives from the Mexican and Early American Southwest

Teaching material for “Narratives from the Mexican and Early American Southwest” is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)
Josiah Gregg (1806–1850)

Teaching material for Josiah Gregg is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo (1808–1890)

Contributing Editor: Genaro Padilla

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students’ lack of historical knowledge about the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–48), especially events in California, can be a problem. Some historical background needs to be given; Vallejo should be read as a colonized subject. His historical personal narrative gives the Mexican version of events.

Students often wonder why Vallejo seems politically contradictory. They ask whether he wrote other material and are curious about his social position.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Vallejo’s sense of betrayal comprises an important and intriguing theme. From the selection one can surmise that he actually favored American annexation of California, but was summarily imprisoned by a group of Americans he refers to as “thieves.”

Like Seguín, Mariano Vallejo was born into a prominent family, in his case in Monterey, California. Vallejo early
decided to pursue a career in both politics and the military and by age twenty-one had been elected to the territorial legislature and had distinguished himself in various campaigns against the Indians. Again like Seguin, Vallejo supported the American presence in his region, hoping that the yanquis would bring both prosperity and stability. Accordingly, Vallejo became one of the most prominent California supporters of the American annexation of California.

The movement toward American control of California accelerated with the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846. Vallejo was inexplicably taken prisoner by the troops of John C. Frémont and held for two months, an experience that should have raised doubt in Vallejo’s mind about his pro-American sympathies. But Vallejo persisted in his allegiance and eventually served in the state’s first senate. In the early 1850s he filed for validation of his Mexican land-grants, only to lose much of his property in a ruling by the United States Supreme Court. By the 1860s his fortune and influence had declined considerably, and a wiser Vallejo sat down to compose a “true history” of his territory, free of myths and lies. After a series of mishaps and distractions, he completed his five-volume chronicle and donated it to H. H. Bancroft, the celebrated California historian. Vallejo lived quietly thereafter, tending to the 280 acres of land he had left of his once-vast empire. Like Seguin, he looked back on his support of American expansion with great bitterness.

In “Six Dollars an Ounce,” Vallejo writes of an economic revolution that changed California as decisively as San Jacinto changed the course of Texas history. He recounts how the Gold Rush of 1849 threw California into a frenzy. Previously reasonable men gave up respectable trades and careers to pursue the yellow metal. As Vallejo tells it, the Gold Rush unleashed the meanest of human qualities—distrust, avarice, and violence among them—and accelerated the destruction of traditional California culture. In the Americanization of California, Vallejo notes that he witnessed change but not progress.

(Biographical and historical information contributed by Raymund Paredes.)
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The Vallejo selection should be thought of as autobiographical historiography.

Original Audience

It was written as a revisionist version of historical events that Vallejo wished Americans would hear.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Comparison might be made with Native American orations on tribal displacement, uncertainty, subjugation.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What is the standard version of the Bear Flag Revolt in California in 1846?
2. How does the Vallejo version humanize the Mexican populace?

Bibliography


Pio Pico (1801–1894)

Teaching material for Pio Pico is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Alfred Robinson (1806–1895)

Teaching material for Alfred Robinson is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (1815–1882)

Teaching material for Richard Henry Dana, Jr., is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903)

Teaching material for Frederick Law Olmsted is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)
The Cultures of New England

Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney (1791–1865)

Contributing Editor: Sandra A. Zagarell

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Among the biggest hurdles contemporary readers face when encountering much antebellum poetry is this poetry’s appeal to a general readership and its conventionality. I’d begin by discussing the often sentimental and religious character of antebellum public poetry and its accessibility, in form and content, to a broad readership. I’d invite students to think about the cultural functions of such poetry as well as the personal effects it could have had on readers who lived in a society in which mortality rates were high, personal hardships frequent, and social inequities sharp. I’d also point out the great antebellum popularity of religious literature and stress similarities between some of Sigourney’s poetry and religious meditative essays or tracts. If students are familiar with hymns, they might compare voice, emotions, and language in some of the poems to those in hymns. Finally, I’d encourage students to recognize the social critiques embedded in much of Sigourney’s writing—of gender constraints and patriarchy (“The Suttee,” “To a Shred of Linen,” “The Father”), of the genocide of Native Americans (“The Indian’s Welcome to the Pilgrim Fathers,” “Indian Names”).

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

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Sigourney was an educator, an historian, and a devout Christian, and much of her work was, in Nina Baym’s phrase, “activist and interventionist.” She capitalized on her role as a writer for the general public, producing writing that was often moral and didactic. Her work approached public subjects like social cohesion, social responsibility, nature, and history and encouraged readers’ emotional responses to these subjects. Many of her poems, such as “The Suttee” and “The Indian’s Welcome to the Pilgrim Fathers,” cultivate her readers’ sympathy with people from other nations or cultures; often, as in these poems, they also seek to mobilize readers’ sympathies on behalf of social betterment (the condition of [all] women in “The Suttee,” the nation’s treatment of Native Americans in “The Indian’s Welcome to the Pilgrim Fathers”). Even in many of her elegies she evokes the experience of death and loss common to all of her readers: “Death of an Infant” is an excellent example.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Sigourney was a prolific and varied writer. I would draw attention to the adroitness with which her work exhibits the stylistic versatility of public verse. Among the forms her poems take are the ode, the nonsubjective lyric, elegy, and narrative and descriptive verse. She wrote in a variety of meters and verse patterns. Her poetry is situated in a sentimental tradition that contrasts with the Romantic one more familiar to, and more highly valued by, readers in the academy. The striking absence of the subjective consciousness of an organizing persona is a feature I would stress. As Annie Finch has observed, Sigourney’s poetry gives religious, moral, and emotional truths to what seems an independent or nonpersonal voice, or appears to represent nature or natural states without a mediating subjectivity.

I would also emphasize the poetry’s focus on sentiments that are communally accepted (or should be, in Sigourney’s eyes), and the ways in which it solicits readers’ sense of connection with the subjects represented. Her poems often
generalize a highly emotional situation in an objective mode that retains emotional coloration, as in “Death of an Infant,” or describes natural phenomena in profoundly felt religious terms, as in “Niagara.” She also uses the nonsubjective descriptive poem to represent the history or circumstances of members of racial or national groups different from those of her readers in order to invoke readers’ sympathies, and frequently portrays constraints within gender with great feeling. Thus, without direct authorial comment, “The Father” dramatizes the extraordinary possessiveness of the lawyer-father and the dehumanizing inability to feel, and to grieve, to which the individualistic masculinity he embraces condemns him. The tears he finally sheds convert him to a selfless ethos, and arguably a communal one, which is similar to that of many of the poems. The implicit critique of antebellum masculinity in “The Father” also compares significantly with the much more direct exposé of patriarchy in a foreign country in “The Suttee.”

I also call attention to the wit Sigourney’s poems can display: “To a Shred of Linen” elicits an earlier agrarian New England while reflecting wryly on continuing societal ambivalence about women’s creativity in a sphere other than the domestic.
Original Audience

Sigourney was antebellum America’s most popular woman poet. She wrote for a northern (and, increasingly, a western) general readership. She published her work in newspapers and religious magazines, in anthologies and annuals, and in book form. She wrote using a variety of popular forms, including educational books, histories, and advice manuals as well as poetry, sketches, and autobiography. Her work helped create a community of readers in antebellum America, and much of it can be read as a conscious contribution to the establishment of America as a cohesive, humane, and Christian nation.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Many connections suggest themselves. The egolessness of Sigourney’s highly public poetry can be contrasted interestingly with the subjectivity of Dickinson’s very private poetry, just as Sigourney’s conventionality contrasts with Dickinson’s unconventionality. Similarities between the two can also be explored—their concerns with nature, with religion, and with women’s circumstances—as can the use to which both put religious verse forms. Sigourney’s work can also be compared fruitfully with that of contemporary male public poets. For instance, the presence of a perceiving persona in the poems of Bryant and the absence of such a persona in hers illuminates the permissible stances of male and female poets, while the use to which each puts these conventions can also be discussed. Additionally, the sympathy she elicits for Native Americans contrasts interestingly with the perspective of his “The Prairies,” whereas a comparison of the relative reticence of the religious sentiment of her “Niagara” with the more consistent religious didacticism of his “To a Waterfowl” can show that gendered poetic stances did not absolutely determine the tone or approach writers took.

“Fathers” can be taught very successfully with Poe’s “Ligeia.” Both are gothic short stories, written in the first...
person, that involve a man’s possessive, and obsessive, love for a woman. Poe’s stress on psychology contrasts nicely with Sigourney’s emphasis on gender.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. How do we read these poems? What reading strategies are effective? (Such strategies might include exploring the trajectory of students’ emotional responses to particular poems, discussing the ways in which certain poems elicit connections to students’ personal experience, talking about the religious sentiment or the urge toward “humanitarian” connection, which some students may find compelling and others offensive.)

2. What is the effect of the generalized emotion, not tied to a particular speaker or persona, in many of the poems? Does it increase the poems’ accessibility? Contribute to their didacticism?

3. How does “The Father” dramatize the self-serving nature of the narrator’s fatherhood without overtly commenting on it? (Consider the effects of features such as the prominent “I,” the sentence structure, the absence of characters’ names, the kinds of analogies the narrator makes.) Why does his friends’ concern allow him to cry? What sorts of changes does this expression of grief precipitate in him?

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)

*Contributing Editor: Jean Ferguson Carr*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Given the difficulty students often have with Emerson’s style
and allusions, it seems very important to address Emerson not as the proponent of a unified philosophy or movement (e.g., Transcendentalism or Romanticism), but as a writer concerned with his audience and his peers, and constructing himself as an American scholar/poet/seer. This might lead to, for example, focusing on what specific definitions or categories Emerson faces (categories such as what is “literary” and what is “poetic,” what authorizes a scholar as “learned”). And it leads to paying attention to how Emerson characterizes his audience or reading public, how he addresses their difficulties and expectations, and how he represents his “times.” Working from Emerson’s journals can be extremely useful in this context; students can see a writer proposing and reflecting and revising his own articulations. Emerson’s vocabulary and references can be investigated not simply as a given style, but as material being tested, often being critiqued as it is being used. His method of writing can be investigated as a self-reflective experimentation, in which Emerson proposes situations or claims, explores their implications, and often returns to restate or resituate the issue.

It can be particularly useful to have students read some of Emerson’s college journals, which show his uncertainty about how to become an “American scholar” or “poet.” The journals, like “The American Scholar,” show Emerson teaching himself how to read differently from the ways advocated by past cultures and educational institutions. They show him sorting through the conflicting array of resources and texts available to a young man in his circumstances and times.

Students can also situate Emerson in a range of cultural relationships by using Kenneth W. Cameron’s fascinating source books that reprint contemporary materials, such as Emerson Among His Contemporaries (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1967), or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Reading (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1962), or Emerson the Essayist (Raleigh: Thistle Press, 1945).

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal**

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Emerson’s concern with proposing the active power of language—both spoken and written—in constructing an emergent culture that will be different from the cultures of Europe is a central interest. His attention to what it means to make something “new,” and his concern about the influence of the past, of books and monuments, mark him as an important figure in the production of a “national” literature. Emerson’s investigation of reading as creative action, his efforts to examine the authority and effects of religious and educational institutions, help frame discussions about literature and education for subsequent generations. As a member of the Boston cultural and religious elite of the early nineteenth century, Emerson reflects both the immersion in and allegiance to English culture and the struggles of that American generation to become something more than a patronized younger cousin. Emerson’s tumultuous personal life—his resignation from the ministry, the deaths of his young wife, son, and brothers, his own ill health—tested his persistence and seemingly unflappable energy and make his advocacy of “practical power” not an abstract or distanced issue.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Emerson challenges and investigates formal traditions of philosophic and religious writing, insisting on the interpenetration of the ideal and the real, of the spiritual and material. His speculations about self-reliance move between cultural critique and personal experience, as he uses his own life as a “book” in which to test his assumptions and proposals. The essays often propose countercultural positions, some of which are spoken by imaginary bards or oracles, delivered in the form of fables or extended metaphors. Emerson’s essays enact the dramatic exchanges in such arguments, suggesting the authority and limitations of what is spoken in the world as “a notion,” as what “practical men” hold, or as what a “bard” might suggest. Emerson’s journals show him rethinking the
uses of a commonplace book, examining his own past thoughts and reactions as “evidence” of cultural changes and problems. Emerson argues for a “new” mode of poetry, one that emulates the “awful thunder” of the ancient bards rather than the measured lines of cultured verse.

**Original Audience**

Many of Emerson’s essays were initially delivered as lectures, both in Boston and on his lecture tours around the country. His book *Nature*, the volumes of *Essays*, and his poems were reprinted both in Boston and in England. Several of his essays (“Love,” “Friendship,” “Illusions”) were bound in attractive small editions and marketed as “gift books.” His poems and excerpts from his essays were often reprinted in literary collections and school anthologies of the nineteenth century. Emerson represents the audiences for his work in challenging ways, often imagining them as sleeping or resistant, as needing to be awakened and encouraged. He discusses their preoccupation with business and labor, with practical politics and economy; their grief over the death of a child. He uses local and natural images familiar to the New Englanders at the same time he introduces his American audiences to names and references from a wide intellectual range (from Persian poets to sixth-century Welsh bards to Arabic medical texts to contemporary engineering reports). He has been a figure of considerable importance in modern American literary criticism and rhetoric (his discussions about language and speech, in particular), in American philosophy (influencing William James, Dewey, and more recently William Gass), and in discussions about education and literacy.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Emerson has been particularly significant as a “founding father,” a literary figure that younger writers both emulated and had to challenge, that American critics and readers have...
used to mark the formation of a national literature. He is usually aligned with the group of writers living in or near Concord, Massachusetts, and with the Boston educational and literary elite (e.g., Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau). He also is usefully connected with English writers such as Carlyle, Wordsworth, and Arnold. Whitman proclaimed a link with Emerson (and capitalized on Emerson’s letter greeting *Leaves of Grass*); Melville proclaimed an opposition to Emerson (and represented him in his satire *The Confidence-Man*). It is useful to consider Emerson’s effect on younger writers and to consider how he is used (e.g., by such writers as T. S. Eliot) to represent the authority of the literary establishment and the values of the “past.”

The following women writers make intriguing comments about Emerson in their efforts to establish their own positions: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Louisa May Alcott, Rebecca Harding Davis, Lucy Larcom (also the delightful mention of reading Emerson in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*). Many writers “quote” Emersonian positions or claims, both to suggest an alliance and to test Emerson’s authority (see, for example, Douglass’s concern about “self-reliance” in his *Narrative*, Hawthorne’s portrait of the young reformer Holgrave in *The House of Seven Gables* or of the reformers in *The Blithedale Romance*, Davis’s challenging portrait of the artist in “Life in the Iron Mills”).

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. (a) How does Emerson characterize his age? How does he characterize its relations to the past?
   (b) What does Emerson see as the realm or purpose of art? What notions of art or poetry is he critiquing?
   (c) How does Emerson represent himself as a reader? What does he claim as the values and risks of reading? What does he propose as a useful way of reading?

2. (a) Emerson’s writings are full of bold claims, of
passages that read like self-confident epigrams (“Life only avails, not the having lived”; “Power ceases in the instant of repose”; “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think”; “Travelling is a fool’s paradise”). Yet such claims are not as self-evident as they may appear when lifted out of context as quotations. Often they are asserted to be challenged, or tested, or opposed. Often they propose a position that Emerson struggled hard to maintain in his own practice, about which he had considerable doubts or resistance. Select one such claim and discuss what work Emerson had to do to examine its implications and complexities.

(b) Emerson’s essays are deliberately provocative—they push, urge, outrage, or jolt readers to react. What kinds of critiques of his age is Emerson attempting? And how? And with what sense of his audience’s resistance? How do these function as self-critiques as well?

(c) Test one of Emerson’s problematic questions or assertions against the particular practice of Emerson, or of another writer (e.g., Whitman, Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*, Rebecca Harding Davis, Frederick Douglass). Examine how the issue or claim gets questioned or challenged, how it holds up under the pressure of experience. (Some examples of passages to consider: “The world of any moment is the merest appearance”; “The poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession”; “Every mind is a new classification.”)

**Bibliography**


Levin, David, ed. *Emerson: Prophecy, Metamorphosis, and*
John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892)

Contribution Editor: Elaine Sargent Apthorp

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may be put off by various features of the poetry, such as: the regularity of meter (which can impress the twentieth-century ear as tedious)—generally we don’t ‘hear’ ballads well
anymore unless they are set to music); conventional phrasing and alliteration; place-names in “Massachusetts to Virginia”; effect of stereotyping from a clumsy effort to render black dialect in “At Port Royal.”

I think we can take clues from such responses and turn the questions around, asking why, in what context, and for what audience such poetry would be successful. Consider reasons why one might want to give his verses such regular meter, such round and musically comfortable phrasing; consider the message of the verses, the political protest the poet is making—and the mass action he is trying to stimulate through his poetry. This could lead to a discussion of topical poetry, the poetry of political agitation/protest, as a genre—and of Whittier’s work as a contribution to that tradition.

Some activities that can bring this home to the students include (1) having students commit a few stanzas to memory and give a dramatic recitation of them to the class (when one has fallen out of one’s chair shouting defiantly, “No fetters on the Bay State! No slave upon our land!” one knows in one’s own body why declamatory poetry is composed as it is), and (2) comparing samples of topical poetry and song by other authors (e.g., poetry of the Harlem Renaissance; the evolutions of “John Brown’s Body,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and “Solidarity Forever”; union ballads [“The Internationale”] and protest songs of the Great Depression [Woody Guthrie’s “Deportees,” for example], and contemporary popular songs of protest, like Bruce Springsteen’s “Forty-one Bullets,” etc.).

One can use the same general strategy in discussing other thorny elements in the students’ experience of the poetry, that is, asking why a person working from Whittier’s assumptions and toward his objectives would choose to compose as he did. What might the effect of all those place-names be on an audience of folk who came from all of those places? How do we respond to a song that mentions our home town? Which praises it for producing us? Which associates us, as representatives of our town, with other towns and their worthy representatives? Assuming that the poet did not mean to convey disrespect to the speakers of the dialect he sought to represent in “At Port Royal,” we could ask why he would try
to represent the dialect of the enslaved. (Even without recourse to evidence of Whittier’s views on African-Americans, this is easy enough to demonstrate: summon up some Paul Lawrence Dunbar or Robert Burns or Mark Twain and consider briefly the difficulties writers face in trying to represent on paper the elements of speech that are uniquely oral—inflexion, accent, etc.)

When you talk in class about these poems as instruments in abolition agitation, students may want to know how blacks responded to Whittier’s poetry (Frederick Douglass applauded Whittier as “the slave’s poet”); whether Whittier read aloud to audiences; whether readers committed the poetry to memory and passed it on to others (including nonliterate others) by recitation.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Naturally one would have to speak about the abolition movement, as these poems were written to express and to further that cause.

Specific to understanding Whittier as an abolitionist, it would be good to point out that the first abolition society was founded by Quakers (a few words about John Woolman and about the Quaker beliefs that led so many of them to labor against slavery—inward light, reverence for all souls, etc.).

Specific to understanding some of the appeals Whittier makes in “Massachusetts to Virginia,” one should remind the student of the Revolutionary and democratic heritage of Massachusetts—the state’s role in the Revolutionary War, its founding by religious dissenters, its tradition of the town meeting, and so forth.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Aside from the issue of topical poetry, it would be appropriate to talk a little bit about the “fireside poetry” that was popular throughout the century in the United States—the characteristics of poetry of sentiment, the kind of audience to which it appealed, and the expectations of that audience. In a way this was the most democratic poetry the nation has produced, in that it was both effectively popular and written expressly to appeal to and communicate with a wide audience. To speak of it as popular rather than elite culture might be useful if one is scrupulous to define these as terms indicating the work’s objectives and function rather than its aesthetic “quality” or absolute “value.” The artists worked from different assumptions about the function of poetry than those that informed the modernist and postmodern poets of the twentieth century. The audience for poetry in America was as literate as primary education in “blab” schools and drilling in
recitation from McGuffey’s readers could make it. Good poetry was something you could memorize and recite for pleasure when the book was not in hand, and it was something that stimulated your emotions in the act of reading/reciting, recalling to a harried and overworked people the things they did not see much in their day’s labor and the values and feelings an increasingly commercial and competitive society obscured.

**Original Audience**

It would also be useful to point out that the audience Whittier sought to cultivate were northern whites who had no firsthand experience of conditions in slave states, whose attitude toward blacks was typically shaped more by what they had been told than by personal encounters with black Americans, free or slave. To get such an audience to commit itself to agitation on behalf of American blacks—when that entailed conflict with southern whites, and might imperil free white labor in the North (if masses of freed blacks migrated to northern cities to compete for wage-labor)—was a task and a half. He would have to draw his audience to this banner by identifying his cause with that audience’s deepest beliefs and values (such as their Christian faith, their concern for their families and for the sanctity of the family bond, their democratic principles and reverence for the rights of man, their Revolutionary heritage, etc.).

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

These poems work well in tandem with other topical/protest poetry and song and/or with another abolition piece. One could compare the effects of Whittier’s poetry with the effects of a speech or essay by Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, Henry Highland Garnet, Theodore Weld, the Grimké sisters, William Lloyd Garrison, etc.

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Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I would alert the class in advance to the function these poems were designed to fulfill, that is, to stir northern listeners and readers—many of them white—to outrage on behalf of slaves and to action defying slave-holding states. How do you get an audience to care for people who are not related to them, not outwardly “like” them (skin color, dialect, experiences, etc.), nor a source of profit by association or alliance? How do you persuade strangers to risk life, prosperity, and the cooperation of other powerful Americans whose products they depend upon, to liberate what Southerners defined as property—perhaps violating the Constitution in doing so?

   It might be fruitful to ask that they compare Whittier’s topical/protest poetry to the work of a poet like Dickinson—asking that they bracket for the moment questions of which they prefer to read and why, in order to focus instead on the different relationship established between poet and audience. How does Dickinson seem to perceive her calling/duty as a poet? To what extent does Dickinson challenge/disrupt the expectations and the shared assumptions of her culture? For what purpose? Toward what effect? Does Whittier engage in this or not? Why (given his objectives)?

2. This is a very challenging assignment, but it really stimulates an appreciation of Whittier’s achievement and is a hands-on introduction to topical poetry—to the effort to employ the aesthetic as a tool for persuasion and political action.

   Have students compose a short poem designed (1) to awaken audience to concern for an issue or for the plight of a neglected, abused, disenfranchised, or otherwise suffering group, and (2) to stimulate assent in the broadest possible audience—agitating as many as possible while offending as few as possible. Then have the students report on the experience: What problems
did they have in composing? How did they opt to solve those problems? Why did they choose the approach and the language they chose? Compare their solutions to Whittier’s. At stake would be the quality of the students’ analyses of their own creative processes, not so much the instructor’s or class’s opinion of the poem’s effectiveness (though such reader response might form part of the “material” the students would consider as they analyzed and evaluated the task of composing this kind of poetry).

Bibliography

Instructors in search of materials on the poet may start with Karl Keller’s bibliographical essay on Whittier studies in Fifteen American Authors Before 1900 (Robert Rees, editor. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) which can direct instructors to studies that explore a variety of questions about the poet’s life and work.

Two studies I have found useful for their emphasis on Whittier as abolitionist poet/political activist are: (1) Albert Mordell’s Quaker Militant, John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933) and (2) Edward Charles Wagenknecht’s John Greenleaf Whittier: A Portrait in Paradox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). In Wagenknecht I would refer the reader to the chapters “A Side to Face the World With” and “Power and Love.”

John Pickard’s introduction to Whittier, John Greenleaf Whittier: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961) provides a good tight chapter on Whittier’s abolition activities (ch. 3).

Sarah Margaret Fuller (1810–1850)

Contributing Editor: Joel Myerson

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students have problems with Fuller’s organization of her material and with nineteenth-century prose style in general. The best exercise I have found is for them to rewrite Fuller’s work in their own words. My most successful exercises involve rewriting parts of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Students are amazed at the roles given to women in the nineteenth century and wonder how these women endured what was expected of them.

I ask students to reorganize the argument of Fuller’s work as they think best makes its points. This process forces them to grapple with her ideas as they attempt to recast them.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Transcendentalism, women’s rights, critical theory, gender roles, profession of authorship, all are important themes in Fuller’s writing.

Original Audience

I give a background lecture on the legal and social history of women during the period so students can see what existing institutions and laws Fuller was arguing against.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*: Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau’s *Walden* for the emphasis on individual thought in the face of a society that demands conformity; Lydia Maria Child’s novels for depictions of gender roles; Sarah Grimké’s
Letters on the Equality of the Sexes; Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* for the way in which another outsider speaks to a mass audience. *Summer on the Lakes*: Emerson’s “The American Scholar” for a discussion of literary and cultural nationalism.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. Compare “Self-Reliance” or *Walden* to *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as regards the responsibilities of the individual within a conformist society.
2. Discuss whether Zenobia in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* is a portrayal of Fuller, as some critics suggest.
3. Compare or contrast Fuller’s ideas on critical theory to Poe’s.
4. Compare Fuller’s solution to the assignment of gender roles to Kate Chopin’s in *The Awakening* or Theodore Dreiser’s in *Sister Carrie*.
5. Compare the ways in which Fuller and Douglass attempt to create a voice or authority for themselves in their narratives.

**Bibliography**

Read Robert N. Hudspeth’s chapter on Fuller in *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Joel Myerson (NY: MLA, 1984) and see Myerson’s bibliographies of writings by and about Fuller; also read in Hudspeth’s edition of Fuller’s letters.

**Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)**

*Contributing Editor: Wendell P. Glick*
Classroom Issues and Strategies

In my experience, an understanding of Thoreau rarely follows the initial exposure to his writings. The appreciation of the profundity and subtlety of his thought comes only after serious study, and only a few of the most committed students are willing to expend the necessary effort. Many, upon first reading him, will conclude: that he was a churlish, negative, antisocial malcontent; or that he advocated that all of us should reject society and go live in the woods; or that each person has complete license to do as he/she pleases, without consideration for the rights of others; or that he is unconscionably doctrinaire. His difficult, allusive prose, moreover, requires too much effort. All such judgments are at best simplistic and at worst, wrong.

If an instructor is to succeed with Thoreau, strategies to meet these responses will need to be devised. The best, in my opinion, is to spend the time explicating to students key sentences and paragraphs in class and responding to questions. Above all, students must be given a knowledge of the premises of Romanticism that constitute Thoreau’s worldview.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

What are Thoreau’s premises, the hypotheses from which he reasons? Even the most recalcitrant reader should be willing to acknowledge that the question of most concern to Thoreau is a fundamental one: “How, since life is short and one’s years are numbered, can one live most abundantly?” In other words, what values should one live by? “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” from Walden, was Thoreau’s personal answer, but he insists that he has no wish to prescribe for “strong natures” who have formulated their own value systems. All persons should live “deliberately,” having separated the ends of life from the means, he argued; and the instructor should aid
students to identify those ends. Accepting without examination current social norms, most persons give no thought, Thoreau charged, to the question of the values by which they live.

Thoreau’s absorption with physical nature will be apparent to all students. Stressing the linkage of all living things, he was one of the first American ecologists. But the instructor should point out that for Thoreau nature was not an end in itself but a metaphor for ethical and spiritual truth. A walk in the woods therefore was a search for spiritual enlightenment, not merely a sensory pleasure. One should look “through” nature, as Thoreau phrased it, not merely “at” her. Honest seekers would find the same truths. Belief in the existence of a Moral Law had had by Thoreau’s day a venerable history. Jefferson, for example, opened the Declaration of Independence with an appeal to the “self-evident” truths of the Moral Law. Thoreau’s political allegiance was first to the Moral Law, and second to the Constitution, which condoned black slavery.

In his letters to H. G. O. Blake, Thoreau spells out his personal philosophy.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Thoreau’s angle of vision is patently that of American Romanticism, deeply influenced by the insights of Kant and Coleridge and Carlyle. But Thoreau’s style differs markedly from that of Emerson, whose natural expression is through abstraction. Thoreau presents experience through concrete images; he “thinks in images,” as Francis Matthiessen once observed, and employs many of the resources of poetry to give strength and compressed energy to his prose. Widely read himself, he is very allusive, particularly to classical literature, and is one of America’s most inveterate punsters.

**Original Audience**

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The recognition that Thoreau was one of America’s greatest writers, like the recognition of Melville and Poe, has been a twentieth-century phenomenon. Emerson recognized Thoreau’s importance when the younger man died in 1862, detailing both the dimensions of his genius and his personal eccentricities in an extended obituary. James Russell Lowell, shortly after Thoreau’s death, accused him of having been a “skulker” who neglected his social responsibilities. But a few nineteenth-century friends like H. G. O. Blake, William Ellery Channing, and Emerson kept Thoreau’s reputation alive until Norman Foerster, F. O. Matthiessen, and an expanded group of later twentieth-century critics became convinced of the qualities of mind and art that have elevated Thoreau into the first rank of American prose writers. *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau* (Michigan, 1969) traces the vicissitudes of Thoreau’s reputation from the publication of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) to his present eminence in the literary canon.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

*Walden* is *sui generis* though there are contemporary writers, for example, Wendell Berry and E. B. White, who have clearly been influenced by this book in both style and thought. N. C. Wyeth, the American painter, confessed to being “an enthusiastic student of Thoreau.” Of major twentieth-century writers, Robert Frost has probably been most indebted to Thoreau. Martin Luther King’s philosophy of passive resistance to the state is clearly borrowed from Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government.” Some Thoreau scholars have discerned Thoreau’s influence in Yeats, Tolstoy, and Gandhi.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

Though Thoreau’s life was short, it was fully lived. Conscientiously, he recorded his thoughts in a journal that

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extends to many volumes over more than twenty years. Consequently, he has something to say about many of the issues that concerned people in his own time, and that still concern us today. I have found it profitable to ask students to write papers taking issue with him on some position he has argued, making certain that they fully understand what his position is. Thoreau is an economist, political theorist, philosopher, literary critic, poet, sociologist, naturalist, ecologist, botanist, surveyor, pencil maker, teacher, writer—even jack of manual trades, so that whatever a student’s primary interest may be, the probability is that Thoreau had something to say about it.

The issues of bigotry and racism that so concerned Thoreau will always provide topics for student papers.

Bibliography

Research now extant on Thoreau would fill a fair-sized library. Particularly useful in getting a sense of its scope and variety is The New Thoreau Handbook, ed. Walter Harding and Michael Meyer (New York, 1980). This should be supplemented with the section on Thoreau in the annually published American Literary Scholarship (Duke), and the running bibliography in the Thoreau Society Quarterly. Very useful also are the many articles on Thoreau in the annual Studies in the American Renaissance, ed. Joel Myerson. Collections of critical essays on Thoreau have been edited by Sherman Paul, John Hicks, Wendell Glick, and Joel Myerson. The standard biography is still The Days of Henry Thoreau by Walter Harding (New York, 1965).

Harriet E. Wilson (1827?–1863?)

Contributing Editor: Marilyn Richardson
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Some discussion of the reality of free blacks, both in the North and in the South, is useful, along with some background on the abolitionist movement and its literature.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

While anti-slavery writers agreed about the urgent need to abolish slavery, there was considerable difference of opinion on the role emancipated blacks might be expected/allowed to play in American society. This book points the finger at the so-called liberal North where, even during the height of the abolitionist period, profound issues of caste and class, as well as overt racism, prefigure struggles to come during Reconstruction and up to the present day.

To date, there is only one edition of Our Nig readily available. Gates, as editor, has provided an extensive discussion of these issues in his introductory essay.

Bibliography


An article by Barbara A. White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the ‘Bellmont Family’” (American Literature 65 [March 1993]):

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Race, Slavery, and the Invention of the South

David Walker (1785–1830)

Contributing Editor: Paul Lauter

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The first problem with teaching this author is the militance of Walker’s Appeal. Some students (especially whites) are troubled by the vehemence with which he attacks whites. They, after all, don’t defend slavery, so why should all whites be condemned? Some (especially students of color) prefer not to get into open discussion where their sympathies with Walker’s views will necessarily emerge. Some also don’t like his criticism of his fellow blacks. Some of the material added to this selection suggests that Walker viewed at least some whites as potential allies and was concerned not to alienate all white people, but to win them over to his view.

A second problem is the rhetoric of the Appeal. It uses techniques drawn from sermons (note especially the biblical references) and from the political platforms of the day. Most students are unfamiliar with religious or political rhetoric of our time, much less that of 150 years ago.

One way of beginning to address these problems is to ask students whether they think Georgia officials were “correct” in putting a price on Walker’s head and in trying to get his Appeal banned from the mails. This can be put in the form of “trying” the text, with arguments for prosecution and defense, etc. Is Walker guilty of sedition, of trying to foment insurrection?

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Another approach can be to use a more recent expression of black militance, for example, Stokely Carmichael on black power: “When you talk of black power, you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created.” How do students feel about that? Would Walker approve? Sometimes an effective way to begin class discussion is by reading aloud brief anonymous student responses.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

It’s critical for students to understand the difference between “colonization” schemes for ending slavery (which would gradually send blacks back to Africa) and Walker’s commitment to immediate and unconditional emancipation. If they have read earlier (eighteenth-century) expressions of black protest (e.g., Prince Hall, Gustavas Vassa), it’s important and useful to see how Walker departs from these in tone, as well as in audience and purpose.

Ultimately, the question is what does Walker want to happen? Blacks to unite, to kill or be killed, if it comes to that?

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

To some extent the rhetorical questions, the multiple exclamation points, the quoting of biblical passages, the heated terminology are features of the period. It can be useful to ask students to rewrite a paragraph using the comparable rhetorical devices of our day. Or, vice versa, to use Walker’s style to deal with a current political issue like the level of unemployment and homelessness among blacks.

**Original Audience**
This is a central issue: The *Appeal* is clearly directed to black people, Walker’s “brethren.” But since most black slaves were not literate, doesn’t that blunt the impact? Or were there ways around that problem?

Why isn’t Walker writing to whites, since they seem to have a monopoly of power? Or is he, really? Does he seem to be speaking to two differing audiences, even while seeming to address one?

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The Walker text is placed with a number of others concerned with the issue of slavery in order to facilitate such comparisons. While some share the religious rhetoric (e.g., Grimké), others the disdain of colonization (e.g., Garrison), others the appeal to black pride (e.g., Garnet), others the valorization of a black revolutionary (e.g., Higginson), all differently compose such elements. What links (values, style) and separates them?

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. How does Walker’s outlook on slavery (on whites, on blacks) differ from X (X being any one of a number of previous writers—Franklin, Jefferson, Vassa, Wheatley)?
   Why would the government of Georgia put a price on Walker’s head?

2. I like the idea of asking students to try adapting Walker’s style (and that of other writers in this section) to contemporary events. It helps get them “inside” the rhetoric.

William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879)
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students often don’t see why Garrison seemed so outrageous to his contemporaries. Of course slavery was wrong; of course it had to be abolished. There seems to be a contradiction between the intensity of his rhetoric and the self-evident rightness (to us) of his views.

He may also strike them as obnoxious—self-righteous, self-important, arrogant. That’s a useful reaction, when one gets it. Even more than Thoreau, who students “know” is important, Garrison may be seen (and be presented in history texts) as a fringy radical. He tends to focus questions of effectiveness, or historical significance, and of “radicalism” generally.

It can be useful to ask whether Garrison is an “extremist” and, if so, whether that’s good or bad. (Some may recollect Barry Goldwater on the subject of “extremism.”) Garrison was committed to nonviolence; but wasn’t his rhetoric extremely violent? Are his principles contradicted by his prose?

Particularly effective presentational strategies include asking these questions:

- Would you like to work with/for Garrison? Explain your reasons.
- What would Garrison write about X (an event expressing prejudice/discrimination on campus or in the community)?

Students often ask the following questions:

- Why was Garrison important? Was he important?
- Why was he involved in so many reforms?
- Didn’t his many commitments dilute his impact?
- Wasn’t he just a nay-sayer, opposed to everything

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conventional?
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Students are not generally familiar with the difference between colonization as an approach to ending slavery and Garrison’s doctrine of immediate and unconditional emancipation.

They are even less familiar with the implications of evangelical Christianity, as interpreted by people like Garrison. They have seldom been exposed to concepts like “perfectionism,” “nonresistance,” “millennialism.” The period introduction sketches such issues.

It can be important to link Garrison’s commitment to abolitionism with his commitments to women’s rights, temperance, pacifism. If students can see how these were connected for Garrison and others, they will have a significant hold on antebellum evangelical thinking.

The issue raised by Tolstoi (see headnote) is also significant: What human interactions are, or are not, coercive? How is political activity, like voting, coercive? What alternatives are there? Tolstoy’s comments also foreground the issue of human rationality, and they suggest the importance of Garrison’s thought and practice to nineteenth-century reformers.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Students can find it interesting to analyze a typical passage of Garrisonian rhetoric—for example, “I am aware, that many object to the severity of my language. . . . Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm.” One finds in that paragraph the whole range of his rhetorical techniques.

How does he compare with an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah?

Original Audience
Since the work included in the text is the lead editorial for the *Liberator*, the question of audience (or audiences) is crucial. In the passage noted above, Garrison is arguing against a set of unstated positions—those who claim to be “moderates,” the apathetic. Indeed, through the editorial, he addresses a whole range of people, most of whom—when one looks closely—he assumes disagree with him. In a way, the editorial can be used to construct the variety of opposed viewpoints, and if students can do that, they may also be able to discuss why Garrison takes his opponents on in just the ways he does.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The Garrison text is placed with a number of others concerned with the issue of slavery in order to facilitate such comparisons. While some share the passionate rhetoric (e.g., Walker), others the disdain of colonization, others the sense of commitment and the view that people can achieve change (e.g., Grimké), all differently compose such elements. What links (values, style) and separates them?

He is particularly interested in comparison with Grimké and Thoreau on the issue of civil disobedience, which doesn’t come to the surface in this editorial, but is implicit in it. In particular, Garrison does focus on the idea that “What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn” (to quote Thoreau). His emphasis on satisfying his own conscience is important, but is that a sufficient criterion for action? Is this editorial what Thoreau means by “clogging with your whole weight”?

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. (a) What is Garrison arguing against?
   (b) How has he changed his own position regarding the abolition of slavery?
   (c) Is it sufficient to “satisfy” one’s own conscience?
What does that mean?

2. (a) One can easily find quotations suggesting that Garrison was an ineffective windbag. How do students respond to such accusations?
(b) Do you think his approach would be effective today regarding racism in American society?
(c) Are Garrison’s objectives and his style at war with one another?

Bibliography

The four volumes edited by Garrison’s children, William Lloyd Garrison, 1805–1879: the Story of His Life Told by His Children, provide a rich source not only of Garrison’s writing but of the contexts in which he wrote. They are especially useful for any students interested in doing papers on any aspect of Garrison’s life or work.
Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880)

Contribution Editor: Jean Fagan Yellin

Classroom Issues and Strategies

To some, Child’s writings appear all too commonplace, not radically different from writings that twentieth-century readers associate with lady-like nineteenth-century writers. Yet Child is radical, although it is sometimes difficult for today’s students to understand this. They often ask about her relationship to the feminist movement.

She wrote about the most controversial issues of her time, and she published her writings in the public sphere—in the political arena which, in her generation, was restricted to men. Today’s readers need to read Child carefully to think about what she is saying, not merely to be lulled by how she is saying it. Then they need to think about the tensions between her conventional forms and her highly unconventional content.

Focus on problematic passages. What do you do with the first sentence of her Preface to the *Appeal*? It reads like the beginning of a novel—like a private, emotional appeal to readers, not like an appeal to their intellects and not like a public political appeal. Yet it is public and it is political. How does Child’s narrator present herself? How does she define her audience? What are the consequences of this strategy for today’s reader? What do you think were the consequences of this strategy for the reader in Child’s day?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes: Chattel slavery and white racism; women’s rights; life in the cities; problems of class in America; social change and “Progress.”

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Historical and personal issues: Garrisonian abolitionism; the movement for women’s rights; the development of the Transcendental critique of American society; women’s role in American journalism; the discovery of urban poverty in America; the invention of the Tragic Mulatto in American fiction.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Child characteristically uses a conventional style and appears to be writing from a posture relegated to women novelists and to commonsense male news analysts. But she is saying things that are quite different from other nineteenth-century American writers of fiction in re: attitudes about race and
gender, just as she is saying things that are quite different from other nineteenth-century American journalists in re: attitudes about class and race, and slavery and women’s rights. Look at her language and her syntax. Then try to locate the places in her text where she does not say the expected, but instead says the unexpected.

**Original Audience**

With Child, this seems easy because—as her style suggests—she appears to be appealing to the common man and the common woman; she is not writing for a “special” audience of “advanced thinkers.”

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Perhaps it would be interesting to contrast Child’s newspaper rhetoric with that of Garrison—or even to contrast her *Appeal* with Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal* and with Sarah Grimké’s *Letters* in terms of language and syntax and logic—and of course in terms of audience. Like Jacobs and the Grimkés, Child is an American woman who condemns chattel slavery and white racism and attempts to assert women’s rights. In what ways does she approach these issues differently from Jacobs and the Grimkés? And it would be interesting to read Child in relation to Emerson and Thoreau, who, like Child, were developing critiques of American capitalist culture. In what ways is Child’s critique similar to Emerson’s? To Thoreau’s? In what ways is it different? Furthermore, it would be interesting to read Child’s fiction in relation to American mythologists. Irving and Cooper presented types of Dutch America and of the West. What mythic types does Child present?
I try to stress the exceptional: Why was Child’s membership in the Boston Atheneum revoked when she published the *Appeal*? What is so terribly outrageous about this book? Why might she have omitted Letter 33 from the edition of *Letters*? How could this letter have affected the sale of the book? It is hard, today, to see Child as a threat. Why did she appear a threat in her own time? Why doesn’t she appear a threat today?
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* is filled with biblical quotations and allusions; it is written as an evangelical appeal, as the appeal of a Christian woman to other Christian women to act to end chattel slavery. Not only is the language that of evangelical abolitionism, but the logic is as tightly constructed as a Christian sermon. In short, it is difficult to read. In like manner, the language in Sarah M. Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality* is Latinate, stiff, and formal. Her language, too, makes slow going for the modern reader.

Try teaching Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* as a religious argument. The informing notion here is that slavery is sin, and that immediate abolition of slavery means immediate abolition of sin, perhaps immediate salvation. Grimké’s tactic is to legitimize—using biblical references—the unprecedented involvement of American women in the public controversy over chattel slavery. She is arguing that slavery is sin and must be ended immediately; and she is arguing that women not only can end it, but that they are duty-bound as Christians to do so.

Read Angelina Grimké’s *Letters to Catharine Beecher* as a completely different version of the same argument. Where *Appeal* was couched in religious rhetoric and theological argument, *Letters* is written from a political perspective. It is useful to compare/contrast these, to see Grimké moving, both intellectually and formally, toward a secular stance and toward a straightforward assertion of women’s political rights.

Consider the following approach with Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of*
Woman, Addressed to Mary S. Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society: Help students discover that the title suggests the letter’s central ideas, first concerning the equality of the sexes, which, Grimké argues, was created by God, and second concerning the condition of woman, which, she argues, is oppressive and which was imposed not by God but by man. The full title concludes with the phrase Addressed to Mary S. Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. This points toward Grimké’s suggestion that the way to rectify the current sinful situation is by women uniting, organizing, and acting, as in the Boston FASS under the leadership of Parker. The title spells out the argument of the Letters; it is basically a theological argument for women’s rights.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

In a letter she had impulsively written to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina Grimké had aligned herself with the abolitionists. Garrison published the letter without her consent, and she was condemned by her meeting (she had become a Quaker [Orthodox]) and even by her sister, her main emotional support. She stuck by her guns. However, although she refused to recant, she was for a time unable to decide what action she should next take. Writing the Appeal to the Christian Women of the South was the first public abolitionist document that Angelina Grimké wrote as a public document, to be printed with her name on it. Here she commits herself, as a southern woman of the slave-holding class, to abolitionism—and to an investigation of women’s activism in the anti-slavery cause.

A. E. Grimké wrote the Letters to Catharine Beecher for the weekly press during the summer of 1837, while she was traveling and lecturing as an “agent” of the American Anti-Slavery Society. She wrote them to answer Catharine Beecher’s attack on her lecturing that had been published as An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females, Addressed to A. E. Grimké.

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Beecher, a leading educator, developed the notion of the moral superiority of females and, asserting the importance of the home, argued that women should oppose slavery within the domestic circle but should not enter the public political sphere—as Angelina Grimké was doing. In her *Letters*, Angelina Grimké defends her almost unprecedented behavior by arguing for women’s political rights. The *Letters* should also be read in relation to the abolitionists’ petitions—to local, state, and national legislative bodies—to end slavery and to outlaw various racist practices. These petitions were circulated by men and, as Grimké urges here, by women as well. Historians have traced the later petition campaigns of the feminists to these anti-slavery petition campaigns.

In *Letters*, Sarah Grimké raises a whole range of feminist issues—the value of housework, wage differentials between men and women, women’s education, fashion, and the demand that women be allowed to preach. (She was bitter that she had not been permitted to do so.) Furthermore, she discusses the special oppression of black women and of women held in slavery.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Angelina Grimké’s *Letters* should be read and contrasted with her *Appeal*, then with other writings by nineteenth-century feminists, both black and white.

Similarly, Sarah Grimké’s *Letters* should be read and contrasted with pre-1848 feminists like Margaret Fuller, then with Stanton, et al. This text marks a beginning. American feminist discourse emerges from this root.

**Original Audience**

Angelina Grimké’s *Appeal*: Audience is stated as the Christian women of the South; by this Grimké means the free white women—many of them slaveholders, as she herself had

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been—who profess Christianity. It is worthwhile examining
the ways in which she defines these women, and exploring the
similarities and differences between her approach to them and
the patriarchal definition of true womanhood generally
endorsed at the time. The patriarchy was projecting “true
womanhood” as piety, purity, domesticity, and obedience.
Angelina Grimké urges her readers to break the law if the law
is immoral—to be obedient not to fathers, husbands, and
human laws, but to a Higher Law that condemns slavery. And
she urges them to act not only within the “domestic sphere”
allocated to women, but also within the “public sphere” that
was exclusively male territory.

Angelina Grimké’s Letters: Written directly to
Catharine Beecher, these were published weekly in the
abolitionist press, then compiled into a pamphlet that became
an abolitionist staple and stands as an early expression of the
notions that would inform the feminist movement in 1848.

Sarah Grimké’s Letters on the Equality, like Angelina’s
Letters to Catharine Beecher, were published in the weekly
press, then collected and published as a pamphlet.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare Angelina Grimké’s Appeal with Lydia Maria Child’s
Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans.
Compare both with African-American anti-slavery writings by
As suggested above, Angelina Grimké’s Appeal and her
Letters to Catharine Beecher present an interesting
comparison. Both might be read in connection with the
writings on women by Fuller, Child, Stanton, and Fern, as well
as in connection with the responses to chattel slavery by white
women like the southerner Chesnut and northerners like Child
and Stowe, as well as by African-American women like Truth,
Jacobs, and Harper.

Sarah Grimké’s Letters should be read in relation to the
writings of other nineteenth-century feminists like Stanton and
in relation to anti-feminist polemics, as well as in relation to
depictions of women in nineteenth-century literature by writers such as Hawthorne, Stowe, Cary, and Stoddard.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Direct students’ attention to the epigraph to Angelina Grimké’s Appeal. Why Queen Esther? In what ways do Grimké’s Letters differ from her Appeal? How is the argument different? How is the style different? What are the consequences of these differences? In what ways do Sarah Grimké’s Letters differ from her sister’s writings? Why did the later feminists designate Sarah Grimké’s Letters on the Equality an important precursor?

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)

*Contributing Editor: James A. Miller*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Readers tend to read Douglass’s Narrative sympathetically but casually. Although they readily grasp Douglass’s critiques of slavery in broad and general terms, they tend to be less attentive to how the narrative is structured, to Douglass’s choices of language and incident, and to the ideological/aesthetic underpinnings of these choices.

I find it useful to locate Douglass historically within the context of his relationship to the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement. This requires students to pay more attention to the prefatory material by Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison then they normally do. I also try to focus their attention on the rhetoric and narrative point of view that Douglass establishes in the first chapter of his Narrative.

Questions students often ask include the following:

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• How does Frederick Douglass escape?
• How does he learn to write so well?
• Is Douglass “typical” or “exceptional”?
• Why does Anna Murray appear so suddenly at the end of the narrative?
• Where is she earlier?
• What happens to Douglass after the narrative ends?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Paying careful attention to the unfolding of Douglass’s consciousness within the context of slavery draws attention to the intersection of personal and historical issues in the Narrative. The movement from slavery to “freedom” is obviously important, as is the particular means by which Douglass achieves his freedom—the role literacy plays in his struggle.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Douglass’s command of the formal principles of oratory and rhetoric should be emphasized, as well as his use of the conventions of both sentimental literature and the rhetoric and symbolism of evangelical Christianity. In short, it is important to note how Douglass appropriated the dominant literary styles of mid-nineteenth-century American life to articulate his claims on behalf of African-American humanity.

Original Audience

Through a careful examination of Douglass’s rhetorical appeals, we try to imagine and re-create Douglass’s mid-nineteenth-century audience. We try to contrast that audience to the various audiences, black and white, that constitute the
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—for a contrasting view of slavery through a woman’s eyes and experiences. Thoreau’s *Walden*—for a view from one of Douglass’s contemporaries. Franklin’s *Autobiography*—for another prototype of American autobiography.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What is the function of the prefatory material? Why does Douglass add an appendix?
2. What is the relationship of literacy to Douglass’s quest for freedom? Of violence?
3. What idea of God animates Douglass?
4. How does Douglass attempt to engage the sympathies of his audience?

Bibliography


**Henry Highland Garnet (1815–1882)**

*Contributing Editor: Allison Heisch*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Ideas that seem radical in one era often become common sense in another and thus may appear obvious to the point of being

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uninteresting. Furthermore, out of its historical context, Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves of the United States” may be hard for students to distinguish from other, more moderate abolitionist appeals.

Garnet’s diction is primarily that of a highly literate nineteenth-century black man who has had a white education in theology. Students will understand what he’s saying, but unless they can hear his voice they’ll have trouble feeling what he means.

To teach Garnet effectively, his work should be presented in the context of the wider (and, of course, two-sided) debate on abolition. Second, it’s important to pay attention to the form of this address and to its actual audience: Garnet is speaking before the National Negro Convention (1843). Is he speaking to that audience or is he trying to communicate with American slaves? The former, obviously. Ideally, some of this should be read aloud.

Despite his radicalism, Garnet fits comfortably into a tradition of “learned” nineteenth-century religious/political orators. As such, Garnet is a fine representative of the abolitionists who made the argument against slavery in part by demonstrating their intellectual equality with whites. But there is another strain of American abolitionists—perhaps best represented by Sojourner Truth—who made the same argument on personal and emotional grounds, and whose appeal belongs to another great American tradition, one that is in some sense almost anti-intellectual in its emphasis on the value of common sense and folk wisdom. Particularly since those two traditions are alive and well in contemporary America, it is useful to place them side by side.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

It may be useful to point out that Garnet’s appeal failed (by a single vote) to be adopted by the Convention. Why might this have happened? Garnet’s speech is steeped in Christianity, but he seems to advocate violence in the name of Christianity.
When is the use of force legitimate? Useful? How is his position different from those taken by contemporaries such as Frederick Douglass? Garnet’s audience is implicitly exclusively male. How can one be so opposed to slavery and yet so unconcerned about women’s rights?

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Although this speech was eventually printed (1865), it was obviously written for oral delivery. Nevertheless, Garnet’s pretext is that he is writing a letter; could his pretended audience of slaves have actually received such a letter? Certainly not. What is the rhetorical purpose of pretending to address one audience while actually addressing another? Could Garnet’s “Address” be regarded as a sermon? If so, can a sermon also be a call to arms? It is useful to approach the “Address” as a piece of argumentation, to see how Garnet makes his case, and to show how it builds itself through repetition (e.g., the repeated address to “Brethren”) and through the chronological deployment of names of famous men and famous deeds to his conclusion, which is a call for armed resistance.

**Original Audience**

The simplest way to evoke a discussion of audience is to ask a set of fairly obvious questions: What is the stated audience? What is the “real” audience? How large an audience would that have been in the 1840s?

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

First, and most obvious, Garnet can be contrasted with Martin Luther King to discuss theories of resistance and passive resistance. (Consider especially the “Letter from Birmingham..."
Jail” with its “real” and “implied” audiences.) It is also useful to have students read the “Address” against Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural (to compare form and content). Garnet may be read against David Walker (to show similarities and differences, the evolution of the radical position) and against Frederick Douglass (to discuss styles of persuasion).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Questions before reading: Who or what is Garnet’s real audience? Why does he pretend to be writing a letter?

Bibliography


George Fitzhugh (1804–1881)

*Contributing Editor: Anne Jones*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

The most pressing issue will most likely be simple incredulity on the part of students. Not only does Fitzhugh defend a system (slavery) whose evil is a modern given, but he believes abolition “will soon be considered a mad infatuation,” England will return to slave-holding, and southern thought will lead the Western world.

An interesting starting point then could be the question of tone. Is this guy serious? How can we be sure that sentences like “This, of itself, would put the South at the lead of modern civilization” or “How fortunate for the South that she has this inferior race” are not dripping with sarcasm? Is irony contextual? In what context do these seem ironic statements?

Of course, they are perfectly “straight” in the context of Fitzhugh’s essay and audience, which raises the more profound question for the class to deliberate: How can we understand (if, indeed, we should try to understand) and not criticize people who supported slavery and who adhered to the notion of black racial inferiority? Fitzhugh’s essay from *Southern Thought* may help students discover that their opposition to slavery and racism has never really been understood.

Start with Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s words from *Southern Honor*: “It is hard for us to believe that Southerners ever meant what they said of themselves. How could they so glibly reconcile slaveholding with pretensions to virtue? . . . [Yet] apart from a few lonely dissenters, Southern whites believed (as *most people do* [emphasis added]) that they conducted their lives by the highest ethical standards” (3). What standards does Fitzhugh invoke? Which do you accept? Which do you reject, and why?
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The vexed relation to socialism evident in Fitzhugh’s text might come as a surprise. A connection between socialism and southern thought is evident again in the modern period (see Volume 2), when the Southern Agrarians find themselves sympathetic, like Fitzhugh, to this “other” critique of industrial capitalism and bourgeois individualism. How does Fitzhugh separate his views from those of socialists?

Fitzhugh clearly has an ideological project in mind here; he even locates the most practical venues for indoctrinating the South (and next, the world!) in “Southern Thought.” What do students think about such a project? How different is it from contemporary advertising and marketing strategies? More advanced students might compare it to Gramsci’s notions of counter-hegemonic discourse to be developed by organic intellectuals.

Fitzhugh’s racism, which he separates so carefully from his defense of slavery as an institution, is of course egregious. It should, however, be understood (which is not to say condoned) in the context of widespread contemporary beliefs in scientific racism. See, for instance, “Race” by Kwame Appiah in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., Critical Terms for Literary Study (1990). Can we separate his argument for enslavement of blacks from his argument for black difference? What are some modern arguments for black difference and separation? How do they differ from Fitzhugh’s? Are they legitimate? Why or why not?

Such questions may be unsettling to students who come to pro-slavery writing with moral certainties in place. As noted in the previous section, reading pro-slavery arguments together with abolitionist arguments, however, can help them clarify their own positions not only on slavery but also on how to think about the problems of poverty and racism that, unlike slavery, remain unresolved today. I have found students to be very responsive to the early chapters in Lillian Smith’s Killers
of the Dream (1962), where she eloquently dramatizes the complexity and personal pain of ideological conflict for children and young people, in this case white southern girls who are torn between family and personal values. Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” can be read in similar ways.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Fitzhugh’s allusions (e.g., to abolitionists by name and to European history) may be obscure. Try assigning one name/reference to each student for a collective information pool.

**Original Audience**

Try asking students who they think the intended audience is. They will probably guess other literate white Southerners, and they will be right (like much pro-slavery argument, it appeared in a southern publication). But how did they know this? This will take them back to the experience of reading the text to see how the words worked on them. How might Fitzhugh have addressed another audience—the British middle class, free/enslaved southern blacks, for instance? Are there audiences he would not address? If not, why not? Try asking students to rewrite this for a contemporary audience, or to debate the issue of slavery orally (pro and con). If they resist, ask them to discuss their resistance. If they do not resist, ask them to discuss their lack of resistance.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

First, compare Fitzhugh’s very male-focused defense with Caroline Hentz’s defense of slavery. Is hers markedly “womanly”? From comparing these texts, what can we learn about the nineteenth-century cultural gender differences that each author assumes and exploits? Is Fitzhugh turning for support to nineteenth-century women’s culture when he argues
(1914) for the superiority of “domestic” slavery over slavery to capital? Next, compare these writers’ arguments with abolitionists’ arguments. A particularly interesting comparison would be with Angelina Grimké, who in “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” wrote to a similar audience and thus constructed her rhetoric based on presumably similar understandings of what might work with Southerners. How do abolitionists deal with southern claims about “slavery to capital”?

Caroline Lee Hentz (1800–1856)

Contributing Editor: Anne Jones

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Most students will find it easy to dismiss the arguments, the rhetoric, and the writing in this tendentious chapter. What can make things initially more interesting is a careful analysis of the tactics Hentz is so obviously—or maybe not so obviously—using on her readers. What’s the point of the setting, in a small village, on a Saturday night? What is she appealing to with her description of the landlord as an “Indian” looking man? What about those “delineators of the sable character” (1904)? The dying young woman’s function can’t be missed; but what about the Northern gentleman who accompanies Moreland as he carries her bundle?

Analysis of certain passages invites at least some debate, opening the issues beyond the question of slavery and encouraging students to make argumentative distinctions. What about Grimby’s self-contradictory claims (a free country where all must conform, a loss of distinction that means loss of difference); does Hentz have a viable point here? And what about the domestic care versus public welfare point? Are these issues necessarily tied to a defense of slavery?
It could be useful, too, to have students rewrite the story from the point of view of another character. Is Albert having private thoughts of a different sort? Could a sentence like “I wish I may find everybody as well off as I am” (1905) be interpreted as double-voiced discourse? What is motivating the landlord? How does the young woman feel about the men’s charity? What do such imaginative efforts show us when we look again at Hentz’s point of view strategies?

These discussions raise the question of how we can understand—instead of demonize—people who actively supported slavery, who unashamedly proclaimed black racial inferiority, and who believed, like Moreland, in a clearly hierarchical, authoritarian society. Or should we try to understand such positions? Students may discover in thinking about Hentz that their opposition to slavery and racism has never really been thought through. This chapter will give them a chance to do that.

I might start with Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s words from *Southern Honor*: “It is hard for us to believe that Southerners ever meant what they said of themselves. How could they so glibly reconcile slaveholding with pretensions to virtue? . . . [Yet] apart from a few lonely dissenters, Southern whites believed (as most people do [emphasis added]) that they conducted their lives by the highest ethical standards” (3). What standards does Hentz invoke? Which do you accept? Which do you reject, and why?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

These are fairly self-evident, I think, particularly when read in the context of abolitionist writing in the anthology. The chapter may be unsettling to students who come to pro-slavery writing with moral certainties in place. Reading pro-slavery arguments together with abolitionist arguments, however, can help them clarify their own positions not only on slavery but also on how to think about the problems of poverty and racism that, unlike slavery, remain unresolved today. I have found
students to be very responsive to the early chapters in Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* (New York: 1962), where she eloquently dramatizes the complexity and personal pain of ideological conflict for children and young people, in this case white southern girls who are torn between family and personal values. Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” can be read in similar ways.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Clearly Hentz is working within conventions—clichés—of writing that she feels will work rhetorically to persuade and soften her readers. Students might find it fun to identify what they see as clichéd language, predictable plotting (what do you suppose will happen to that not-dead twenty-year-old whose memory preoccupies Moreland?). Could there be canny reasons for such lack of originality?

**Original Audience**

Try asking students who they think the intended audience is. They will probably guess white Northerners. How did they know this? This will take them back to the experience of reading the text to see how the words worked on them. Note, for instance, that Hentz carefully explains “Mars” and the relationship of insult to class (in Southern honor, one could not be insulted by—hence one did not respond to—an inferior). These details suggest she is not preaching to the choir. Are there audiences she would not address? If not, why not? Try asking students to rewrite this for a contemporary audience, with contemporary cultural issues in mind. Or ask them to debate the issue of slavery orally (pro and con). If they resist, ask them to discuss their resistance. If they do not resist, ask them to discuss their lack of resistance.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

First compare Fitzhugh’s very male-focused defense of slavery with Caroline Hentz’s. Is hers markedly “womanly”? From comparing these texts, what can we learn about the nineteenth-century cultural gender differences that each author assumes and exploits? Is Fitzhugh turning for support to nineteenth-century women’s culture when he argues for the superiority of “domestic” slavery over slavery to capital? Is Hentz doing the same when she compares the public institutions of the North to domestic ones in the South? Next compare these writers’ arguments with abolitionists’ arguments. How do abolitionists deal with Southern claims about the “hireling’s” misery and the slave’s relative comfort? About the variety of treatment slaves received? About the emotional relations with slaves? Slave narratives make an excellent comparison also; see Harriet Jacobs, in particular.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)

Contributing Editor: Elizabeth Ammons

See later entry in “Critical Visions of Postbellum America.”
Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911)

Contributing Editor: Paul Lauter

Classroom Issues and Strategies

It’s almost impossible for students to connect the apostle of Nat Turner with the “mentor” of Emily Dickinson; a Christian minister; a colonel of a black Civil War regiment; an active feminist; an important nineteenth-century editor. All these roles were filled by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, yet only the first two aspects are represented by the texts. So the real issue is whether or not he is significant. And if he is, why?

If students know Higginson at all, they will probably know him as the man who, in putting Dickinson poems into print, disgracefully smoothed them out, changing her words, her punctuation, even her meanings. Why read such a fellow? Why in the world did Dickinson write to him?

At the same time, he doesn’t smooth out Nat Turner. Yet, like any historical writer, he “constructs” Nat Turner in a particular way. The nature of that “construction” is not easy to define.

Sometimes it’s useful to begin from an example of what Higginson (and Todd) did to a Dickinson poem. Their choices say something about Dickinson, about nineteenth-century sensibilities, and—with Higginson’s and Dickinson’s letters—about their unique relationship. The revised Dickinson also raises the question of why one might want to include Higginson in this anthology.

At one point in the 1960s, students had heard about William Styron’s “Confessions” of Nat Turner. It may still be useful to bring up some of the summary accounts in magazines like Newsweek of Styron’s version and the controversy that surrounded it. Higginson’s picture is, of course, quite different, yet both can be understood, among other ways, as serving certain historical needs in their audience.

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Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Is there any unity at all to Higginson’s life as minister, military man, activist, writer, editor, mentor? More than most, Higginson’s extraordinarily varied career expresses a nineteenth-century commitment by a well-to-do white man to racial, gender, and class equality—in politics, in social relations, and in culture. His sensitivity—and his limitations—say a great deal about the power as well as the constraints upon that kind of progressive politics, and about the forms of culture it inspired. To see why Dickinson sought him out and yet would not be limited by him reveals a great deal about the cultural revolution her writing represents, as well as about the strengths of what Higginson can be taken to illustrate.

The essay on Nat Turner also is very useful in relation to the other abolitionist writers, especially Walker and Garrison. Though Nat Turner’s rebellion came after Walker’s Appeal and the beginning of The Liberator, there are ways in which it was taken, literally and symbolically (as Higginson implies), as an outgrowth of such writings.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Higginson commands a fine and varied prose style, and it can be very rewarding for students to examine certain of his paragraphs—like the initial one on the files of the Richmond newspaper, the early one on the participants in the rebellion, the one on the lives of slaves not being “individualized,” and the final one of the essay.

Original Audience

The essay and the letter can be usefully compared on this
ground. They are not very distant in time, yet quite distinctly conceived because of audience.

The essay was written before the Civil War began, yet was published only after. What does that say about the limits of “acceptable” discourse? What does the essay imply about the readership of the *Atlantic*, where it was published?

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Higginson’s construction of Nat Turner can usefully be compared with Phillips’s portrait of Toussaint, with Frederick Douglass’s self-portrait (as well as with his picture of Madison Washington), and with the black characters of Melville’s “Benito Cereno.” All these texts involve the issue of the “heroic slave”—what constitutes “heroism” in a slave. Underlying that is the issue of what constitutes “humanity,” since for many Americans, black people were not fully human.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

How does Higginson account for Nat Turner’s motivations, actions?

- Why did the essay on Nat Turner remain unpublished until after the Civil War began?
- Why, given Higginson’s letter about Emily Dickinson and her letters to him, did she wish to write to him?
- What does Higginson’s relationship to Dickinson (and the way he helped publish her poems) tell you about the kind of culture he represents?
- What are the predominant features in Higginson’s portrait of Nat Turner? What are the alternative views of Nat Turner between which he is choosing? Is Higginson’s Nat Turner a hero or a terrorist?

**Bibliography**

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Henry Irving Tragle’s *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831* and Herbert Aptheker’s *Nat Turner’s Slave Rebellion* contain useful brief materials on Nat Turner, including the text of his “confessions,” as compiled by Thomas Gray. The view of Nat Turner in that and other texts usefully contrasts with Higginson’s.

If one is interested in the problem of how writers construct historical accounts (an issue quite relevant to Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” for example), such materials provide a useful case in point.

**Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813–1897)**

*Contributing Editor: Jean Fagan Yellin*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Primary problems that arise in teaching Jacobs include:

1. The question of authorship: Could a woman who had been held in slavery have written such a literary book?
2. The question of her expressions of conflict about her sexual experiences.
3. The question of veracity: How could she have stayed hidden all those years?

To address these questions, point to Jacobs’s life: She learned to read at six years. She spent her seven years in hiding sewing and reading (doubtless reading the Bible, but also reading some newspapers, according to her account). And in 1849, at Rochester, she spent ten months working in the Anti-Slavery Reading Room, reading her way through the abolitionists’ library.

Discuss sexual roles assigned white women and black
women in nineteenth-century America: free white women were told that they must adhere to the “cult of domesticity” and were rewarded for piety, purity, domesticity, and obedience. Black slave women were (like male slaves) denied literacy and the possibility of reading the Bible; as Jacobs points out, in North Carolina after the Nat Turner rebellion, slaves were forbidden to meet together in their own churches. Their only chance at “piety” was to attend the church of their masters. They were denied “purity”—if by “purity” is meant sex only within marriage—because they were denied legal marriage. The “Notes” to the standard edition of Incidents read: “The entire system worked against the protection of slave women from sexual assault and violence, as Jacobs asserts. The rape of a slave was not a crime but a trespass upon her master’s property” (fn 2, p. 265). Denied marriage to a man who might own a home and denied the right to hold property and own her own home, the female slave was, of course, denied “domesticity.” Her “obedience,” however, was insisted upon: not obedience to her father, husband, or brother, but obedience to her owner. Slave women were excluded from patriarchal definitions of true womanhood; the white patriarchy instead formally defined them as producers and as reproducers of a new generation of slaves, and, informally, as sexual objects. Jacobs is writing her narrative within a society that insists that white women conform to one set of sexual practices and that black women conform to a completely contradictory set. Her awareness of this contradiction enables her to present a powerful critique; but it does not exclude her from being sensitive to a sexual ideology that condemns her.

Concerning the accuracy of this autobiography, refer to the exhaustive identification of people, places, and events in the standard edition. Concerning the period in hiding, point out that the date of Jacobs’s escape has been documented by her master’s “wanted” ad of June, 1835, and the date of her Philadelphia arrival has been documented by June, 1842 correspondence; both are reproduced in the standard edition. Discuss the history of Anne Frank—and of others who hid for long periods to avoid persecution (e.g., men “dodging” the draft during World War II and the Vietnam War, etc.).

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Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

**Themes:** The struggle for freedom; the centrality of the family and the attempt to achieve security for the family; the individual and communal efforts to achieve these goals; the relationships among women (among generations of black women; between black slave women and slaveholding white women, between black slave women and non-slaveholding white women); the problem of white racism; the problem of the institution of chattel slavery; the issue of woman’s appropriate response to chattel slavery and to tyranny: Should she passively accept victimization? Should she fight against it? How should she struggle—within the “domestic sphere” (where the patriarchy assigned women) or within both the domestic and the “public sphere” (which the patriarchy assigned to men)? How can a woman tell her story if she is not a “heroine” who has lived a “blameless” life? How can a woman create her own identity? What about the limits of literary genre? What about the limits imposed on women’s discussion of their sexual experiences?

**Historical Issues:** These involve both the antebellum struggle against white racism and against slavery, and the struggle against sexism. Jacobs’s story raises questions about the institution of chattel slavery; patriarchal control of free women in the antebellum period; the struggle against slavery (black abolitionists, white abolitionists, within the white community, within the free black community, within the slave community); the historic struggle against white racism (in the antebellum North); the historic effort of the anti-slavery feminists, among the Garrisonian abolitionists, who attempted to enter the public sphere and to debate issues of racism and slavery (women like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, like Amy Post, who suggested to Jacobs that she write her life story, and like Lydia Maria Child, who edited it); the Nat Turner revolt; the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law; the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; the firing on Fort Sumter.

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Personal Issues: The narrator constructs a self who narrates the book. This narrator expresses conflict over some of her history, especially her sexual history (see above). She is rejected by her grandmother, then later accepted (but perhaps not fully); near the end of her book, she wins her daughter’s full acceptance. All of this speaks to the importance of intergenerational connections among the women in this book. Near the conclusion, the narrator expresses her deep distress at having her freedom bought by her employer, a woman who is her friend: she feels that she has been robbed of her “victory,” that in being purchased she has violated the purity of her freedom struggle. Writing the book, she gains that victory by asserting control over her own life.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

*Incidents* appears to be influenced by (1) the novel of seduction and (2) the slave narrative. It presents a powerful, original transformation of the conventions of both of these genres. What is new here is that—in contrast to the type of the seduction novel—the female protagonist asserts her responsibility for her sexual behavior, instead of presenting herself as a powerless victim. This is a new kind of “fallen woman,” who problematizes the whole concept of “fallen womanhood.” In contrast to the type of the slave narrative, *Incidents* presents not a single male figure struggling for his freedom against an entire repressive society, but a female figure struggling for freedom for her children and herself with the aid of both her family and of much of a black community united in opposition to the white slavocracy. Even from within that slavocracy, some women assert their sisterhood to help. The language in *Incidents* suggests both the seduction novel and the slave narrative. The passages concerning Brent’s sexual history are written in elevated language and are full of evasions and silences; the passages concerning her struggle for freedom are written in simpler English and are direct and to the point—or they are hortatory, in the style of Garrisonian abolitionism.

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Original Audience

I have touched on this above, in discussing history. Jacobs’s Linda Brent writes that she is trying to move the women of the North to act against slavery: these, I take it, were free white women who were not (yet) committed to abolitionism and who were not (yet) engaged in debate in the “public sphere.” In class, we talk about the ways in which Jacobs’s Linda Brent addresses her audience in Chapter 10, and the ways in which, as a writer reflecting on her long-ago girlhood, she makes mature judgments about her life.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

*Incidents* can fruitfully be compared/contrasted with the classic male slave narrative, Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*. It can also be read in connection with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and with “women’s” fiction, much of which ostensibly centers on a woman’s sexual choices and possibilities, and on women’s intergenerational relationships.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

*Study questions:* Find a troubling passage. What is troubling? Why? What does this suggest? Why do you think that *Incidents* was believed the production of a white woman, not of a former slave? Why do you think that *Incidents* was thought to be a novel, not an autobiography?
Classroom Issues and Strategies

It is important to consider Mary Chesnut and her work in context. Chesnut is well known for her criticism of slavery and patriarchy. Yet she is also very much a member of the wealthy planter class in her views on race. In addition, this is a massive work—close to 900 pages. It is, therefore, difficult to find “representative” sections that capture the breadth and sweep of the work as a whole.

In teaching Chesnut consider these strategies:

1. Provide historical context with attention to the intersections of race, class, and gender in southern culture. Consider especially the relative positions of white women and African-American women in a patriarchal slave society. Students also need to understand the rise and fall of the Confederacy.

2. Require students to read and report on diverse sections of the work.

   Students often ask questions related to Chesnut’s “feminism” and her attitude toward race. For example, why does she blame African-American women for being sexual victims of white men? How implicated is she in the patriarchal order?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. This is an important social history of the Civil War era
2. At the same time, it is interesting both as a woman’s autobiography—a personal history of struggle and hardship—and as a remarkable story of the trauma experienced by both white and black women in the Civil War South.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

This autobiography is a combination of a journal written on the spot and reminiscences of the Civil War period. (See *The Private Mary Chesnut* for the former.) There is, therefore, a fascinating combination of the personal and the public in Woodward’s edition.

**Original Audience**

Hundreds of war reminiscences were published in the forty to fifty years after the Civil War. Poorly edited versions, both called *A Diary from Dixie*, were published in 1905 and 1949. Installments of the first edition were published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Readers then were more interested in the actual events of the war years so vividly portrayed by Chesnut.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

I would suggest a contrast/comparison to an African-American woman’s slave narrative, perhaps Harriet Ann Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which also decries white men’s sexual misuse of female slaves—from the point of view of the victim. (Also see *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for similar themes.)

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**
1. (a) Describe how Chesnut created this massive volume.
(b) Describe the life of an upper-class white woman in
the Old South.
(c) Describe the editorial history of this volume.
2. (a) Compare to slave narrative, abolitionist or pro-
slavery fiction, realistic or plantation fiction, or
modern woman’s autobiography.
(b) Discuss Chesnut’s relationships and attitudes
toward: black women, her own husband and father-
in-law, female friends (e.g., Varina Davis), or her
own slaves.
(c) Describe how fictional techniques bring life to the
diary format.

Bibliography


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Wendell Phillips (1811–1884)

*Contributing Editor: Allison Heisch*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Students tend not to know enough history (or, for that matter, geography) to understand the setting for *Toussaint L’Ouverture*. In addition, Phillips’s view of race and racial difference will strike some students as condescending: He sets out to “prove” that Toussaint is “okay” and seems to imply that his sterling example proves that some blacks are “okay” too. This is not the sort of argumentation that we like nowadays, for we’ve understood this as tokenism.

A quick history/geography lesson here (including Napoleon and the French Revolution) is in order. Also, review the attitudes toward race generally taken in this period. I’ve given background reading in Stephen J. Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* as a way of grounding that discussion. It is equally useful to pair Phillips with a figure such as Louis Agassiz to show what style of thought the “scientific” view of race could produce. Yet, students can and do understand that styles of argument get dated very readily, and this can be demonstrated for them with various NAACP sorts of examples.

Students often ask, “Is this a true story?” (Answer: Sort of.)

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**
Phillips’s emphasis on the dignity of the individual. The idea of the hero (and the rather self-conscious way he develops it—that is, in his emphasis on Toussaint’s “pure blood,” and his deliberate contrast of Toussaint with Napoleon). It’s useful to show Toussaint as Phillips’s version of “the noble savage” (an eighteenth-century British idea still current in nineteenth-century America).

As the headnote points out, the immediate occasion of Phillips’s speech was the issue of whether blacks should serve in the military. Since the issue of military service—that is, of women and homosexuals in the military—has been a vexed one in the recent past, it may be useful to point to this historical context for the speech and to the relationship between its rhetoric and content and its functions in its time. This may also raise the question of the symbolic significance of military prowess in general.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

This piece needs to be placed in the broader context of circuit-speaking and in the specific context of abolitionist public speaking. It should also be located in the debate over slavery.

**Original Audience**

Phillips’s assumptions about his audience are very clear: There is little doubt that he addresses an audience of white folks with the plain intent of persuading them to adopt his position, or at least to give it a fair hearing. Students may very well say that Phillips has no contemporary audience, and that is probably true. It’s useful, however, to point out that long after Phillips’s death black students memorized this piece and recited it on occasions such as school graduations. Thus, while the people who first heard this piece were certainly very much like Phillips, his second (and more enduring) audience was an
audience of black people—largely students—who probably knew and cared nothing about Phillips, but embraced Toussaint L’Ouverture as their hero. That phenomenon—the half-life of polemic—is very interesting.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

It is useful (and easy) to present Phillips with other white abolitionists (such as Garrison and Thoreau) or to read Phillips against black orators (F. Douglass, H. H. Garnet, David Walker). Another tack is to put him in a wider spectrum of white anti-slavery writing: Read him with John Greenleaf Whittier or even Harriet Beecher Stowe. One approach to take is to compare his oratorical style with that of Garnet or Douglass. Another is to show the breadth of anti-slavery writing, particularly with reference to the particular genres involved. If the students don’t notice this, it’s important to point out that this is an anti-slavery piece by implication: Phillips does not address the subject directly.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I like to have students identify the intended audience for me: How do they know to whom Phillips is speaking?
2. From Phillips’s vantage, what are the traits of this ideal black hero? (Part of the point here is to get them to understand Phillips’s emphasis on Toussaint’s appreciation for white people and to see what kinds of fears he implicitly addresses.)
3. In what ways is this effective (or ineffective) as a piece of argumentation?
4. Is this piece propaganda? And, if so, what is propaganda? What are the differences (in terms of content and specifics) between Phillips’s argument and one that might be made in a contemporary civil rights speech?
5. A good topic for getting at the heart of the matter (a very
good paper topic) is a comparison of Toussaint L’Ouverture and Uncle Tom.

Bibliography


Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Lincoln’s words are familiar to students, who have received those words, or the echo of them, by a hundred indirect sources, and who sometimes conflate the Gettysburg Address with the Pledge of Allegiance—and not by accident. (Similarly, the man himself has been rendered unreal by his status as a culture hero and icon; part of the reconstruction process entails restoring personhood to this historical figure—reconstructing his statesmanship and character by describing the context in which he grew and worked, the forces he had to contend with as a politician and as President, etc.) A problem is how to make the words live in their original context—so that by stripping them temporarily of their canonization in the store of U.S. holy scriptures, we can see why they were so appropriated—what it was about these words that moved Americans in the aftermath of the war. And what about Lincoln’s construction of these statements has made them so emblematic of cultural ideals we still cherish (however vague their application)?

To give the meanings back to the words, we need to (1) restore vividly the historical context in which these speeches were composed and to which they were addressed, and (2) read slowly and explicate together as we go. What precedents and values is he calling to his listeners’ minds? What does he ask them to focus on? What doesn’t he choose to talk about, refer to, or insinuate?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

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I’ve tried to canvass these in the headnote. It’s important that the students know, for example, that the battle of Gettysburg was in many respects the turning point in the Civil War. It was the farthest advance the Confederate forces were to make. In addition, it was the bloodiest and most costly battle (in sheer number of lives lost on both sides) in what was a devastatingly bloody war (over 600,000 battle casualties over four years, with another million and more dead from disease via infected wounds, malnutrition, inadequate medical attention).

Students should know something of how Lincoln was perceived in the North and South during his presidency, the polarized forces with which he had to contend even among the nonseceding members of the Union, his concern for maintaining the loyalty of slave-holding border states and holding out hope for reunion with the Confederate states, in tension with the pressure he felt from the radical Republicans who urged the emancipation of slaves by executive proclamation, and so forth. This kind of information helps us to interpret both of the Lincoln documents in our selection.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Again, see the headnote on style—biblical allusions and cadence, lawyer’s cutting and distinguishing, simplified syntax and diction. In a discussion of oratory as it was practiced in this period, point out ways in which Lincoln participated in and departed from the practice of oratory that was considered eloquent in that day (e.g., Edward Everett who preceded Lincoln on the podium at Gettysburg).

**Original Audience**

1. The audience could tolerate, and indeed expected, long, florid, syntactically complex speeches. They were, at the same time, both more literate and more aural than we are (we’re more visual, attending to images rather than...
2. The audience were Christians. War had bitterly divided North from South; politicians debated while many people experienced death at rebel or Yankee hands. Lincoln had to consider how to appease the vindictive rage/triumph/urge-to-plunder of the conquering Union supporters while establishing foundation for political and economic reconstruction and rebuilding. He had to rally maximum support (reminding North and South of their common faith; characterizing the war as a war for the Union’s democratic survival, not as a war to free slaves or alter the economic order of society—using Union and Constitution, obscuring states’ rights).

3. Consider our own time, and our longing for the rock of humane statesmanship that Lincoln has represented in the popular mind. Consider the motives behind his canonization after assassination, when he had been so unpopular while alive in office. Consider the uses Lincoln has been put to, by politicians, etc. Consider the evolutions in public perception of Nixon, Kennedy, etc.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

1. A bit of Everett’s speech at Gettysburg for comparison with Lincoln’s little Gettysburg Address.
2. Samples of biblical prose for comparison with Lincoln’s.
3. Elements of debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, again for comparison.
4. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “I Have a Dream,” etc., to discover the uses of Lincoln for other politically active people/groups.

**Bibliography**

Studies on Lincoln’s life and career exist in flourishing and

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The Heath Anthology of American Literature

staggering abundance, and most of them examine the language of his speeches and other public and private documents to help develop their interpretations of Lincoln’s character, attitudes, and policies as they evolved.

Steven B. Oates’s With Malice Toward None offers what is finally a sympathetic and admiring account of Lincoln, but it is tempered and qualified by a scrupulous confrontation with inconvenient evidence and careful consideration of the poles of controversy in Lincoln studies between which he means to place his own interpretation.

There are also a number of essays that explore Lincoln’s writings as works of literature, which trace one or more of the several strands of law, rural imagery, backwoods humor, Shakespeare, and the Bible, which inform Lincoln’s rhetoric. Entire books have been devoted to establishing the historical contexts in which Lincoln developed the Gettysburg Address or the Emancipation Proclamation, but for the instructors on the go nothing beats Jacques Barzun’s Lincoln the Literary Genius (Evanston, Illinois: Evanston Publishing Co., 1960). It’s short but covers much ground and offers perceptive close analysis of Lincoln’s rhetorical techniques and style—both identifying these elements and suggesting their effects and implications.

One more recent study that employs analysis of Lincoln’s speeches is Charles B. Strozier’s psychoanalytic study of Lincoln, Lincoln’s Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987; Basic Books, 1982), chapters 6–9 but especially Chapter 7, “The Domestication of Political Rhetoric.”

Literature and the “Woman Question”

Sarah Moore Grimké (1792–1873)

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See material under “Angelina Grimké (Weld)” and “Sarah Moore Grimké” earlier in this guide.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883)

*Contributing Editor: Allison Heisch*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

One reason why Sojourner Truth has not appeared in conventional American literature anthologies until now is that the texts are stenographic transcriptions of spontaneous speeches. Thus, even the orthography is “made-up.” Students may tend to dismiss this as nonliterature. Also, the interior structure of the speeches does not follow expected expository modes (i.e., there’s no “beginning,” “middle,” and “end”), so they are vulnerable to rigidly “logical” analysis.

Sojourner Truth offers a wonderful opportunity to raise large questions: What is literature? And what is American literature? Are speeches literature? Is it literature if you don’t write it down yourself? What is the purpose of literature? It is useful to set these speeches for the students in the context of anti-slavery meetings, to describe where and how they were held, and also who participated. Students may have difficulty with these texts; old-fashioned close reading in class will help.

I like to talk about “unpopular ideas”: Sojourner Truth has several of these! It is also useful to place her in the tradition of oral literature.

Responses to Truth vary widely, depending on the class. Some students may make the argument that she is hostile to men. Generally discussion goes in the direction of contemporary issues involving women.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal**
Issues

Why did racial equality take precedence over equality of the sexes? How can we explain the conflict between racial and gender equality? What is the difference between Sojourner Truth’s argument and the contemporary argument for “comparable worth”?

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Ordinarily, we are able to separate a writer from her work. In this case, we have not only oral presentation, but also a style of presentation in which the speaker presents herself as the major character in the work. In some sense, therefore, she is the subject of her work. To what literary and quasi-literary categories could you assign these speeches (fiction, autobiography, prophecy)? How do they “violate” traditional genre boundaries? Where does oratory end and drama begin? These speeches provide a splendid opportunity to demonstrate to what extent our literary categories are a construct, one that not only defines and makes rules, but one that also excludes.

Original Audience

Because Sojourner Truth’s speeches were transcribed and preserved by her admirers, it is by no means clear how her original audiences really responded. We have the laudatory side only. Just the same, it is apparent that to many of her contemporary listeners, she was a figure of mythic proportion. To get at the issue of audience, it’s useful, first, to have the students identify the issues of continuing importance that she raises. Second, it is helpful to show them a contemporary parallel (such as Barbara Jordan’s “We the People” speech) as a means of generating discussion.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Frederick Douglass ("What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?") and Henry Highland Garnet ("An Address to the Slaves of the United States") show the tendency of abolitionist literature to regard slavery as a phenomenon affecting black men and, coincidentally, to consider the abuse of black women largely as an affront to their husbands and fathers. Truth’s views can usefully be contrasted with those of some writers, black and white, who believed that women could best exercise power by influencing their husbands.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What issues does Sojourner Truth raise that you consider to be of contemporary importance?
2. Compare the positions on civil rights taken by Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth.

Bibliography


Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton) (1811–1872)

*Contributing Editor: Barbara A. White*
Classroom Issues and Strategies

I have found Fern most accessible to students when presented as primarily a humorist and satirist, rather than a “sentimentalist,” and a journalist rather than a novelist. However, I try to avoid setting her up as an exception, as Nathaniel Hawthorne did, a writer “better” than the typical “scribbling woman.” Ann Douglas Wood sets Fern apart for her refusal to disguise her literary ambition and conform to prevailing rationales for women writing, and Joyce W. Warren tries to rescue her from classification as a sentimentalist instead of a satirist; Warren includes no “sentimental” pieces in her selection from Fern’s work. One might argue, however, that Fern should be recognized as the author of “Thanksgiving Story” as well as “Critics,” and that while she was more outspoken than most of her sister authors, she also resembles them in many ways.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The rights of women and the problems and status of female authors are obvious Fern themes. I believe it is also important to emphasize Fern’s treatment of class, since she is unusual for her time in portraying domestic servants and factory workers as well as middle-class women.

Students have been responsive to approaching Fern through the issue of names and their symbolism. When I was in graduate school studying nineteenth-century American literature, female writers other than Emily Dickinson were mentioned only to be ridiculed as having three names. To use more than two names, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, or two initials, like E. D. E. N. Southworth, was to be ipso facto a poor writer, and it was just as bad to adopt an alliterative pseudonym like Grace Greenwood or Millie Mayfield. I don’t recall the professors ever referring to Grata Payson Sara Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton, “Fanny Fern.”

The “Grata Payson” was supplied by the writer’s father,
who named her after the mother of a minister he admired; the rest of the family objected to “Grata,” and in the first of a series of symbolic name changes, she became “Sara,” discarding the influence of the father and his orthodox religion. Later in life Fern explained her pen name as inspired by happy childhood memories of her mother picking sweet fern leaves. In a further repudiation of patriarchal tradition Fern, although she is often referred to in literary histories as Sara Parton, did not use that name; she preferred her pseudonym, extending it to her personal life and becoming “Fanny” even to family and friends.

Ann Douglas Wood (see headnote) views the nom de plume “Fanny Fern” as an emblem of Fern’s “artistic schizophrenia.” She points out that “Fern” is a woodsy, flowery name typical of “sentimental” writers, while “Fanny” suggests the rebel (Fern, who was given the nickname “Sal Volatile” at the Beecher school, once remarked, “I never saw a ‘Fanny’ yet that wasn’t as mischievous as Satan”). Wood, noting the two different types of sketches Fern wrote, concludes that she possessed “two selves, two voices, one strident and aggressive, the other conventional and sentimental.” Mary Kelley, in Private Woman, Public Stage (Oxford, 1984), also stresses Fern’s “dual identity” in arguing the thesis that female authors of the nineteenth century experienced a split between their private selves and public identities. (Teachers who plan to assign Ruth Hall should also see Linda Huf’s comments on this issue in her chapter on the novel in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman [Ungar, 1983].)

Although the “split personality” approach interests students and helps illuminate the cultural context in which women wrote, it can be overdone. Early in her career Fern was obviously searching for a voice, trying out the more conventional approach in pieces like “Thanksgiving Story” and expressing herself more daringly in “Soliloquy of a Housemaid.” But it could be argued that once she established herself, she successfully united the Fanny and the Fern in her writing—and in her life shed the identity given her by men and became the person she herself created. In any case, it is typical

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of Fern, who possessed the unusual ability to mock herself, to create a final irony by making fun of her pen name. She advised budding authors in search of a pseudonym to “bear in mind that nothing goes down, now-a-days, but alliteration. For instance, Delia Daisy, Fanny Foxglove, Harriet Honeysuckle, Lily Laburnum. . . .”

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Fern’s writing is especially useful for getting students to think about style and tone, and the discussion can be related both to the split personality issue raised above and the question of literary worth. Although some students have considered Fern’s style human and spontaneous, probably accounting in large measure for her popularity, others have criticized it as too loud (“noisy,” “braying”). They tend to view the italics, capital letters, and exclamation points with suspicion (“unprofessional,” “feminine,” “schoolgirl”). One student claimed that a writer who employs expressions like “Heigho!” and “H-u-m-p-h!” cannot be “taken seriously.” He could not explain why, any more than most students (or critics) have been able to explain very successfully what “sentimental” means and why it’s bad to be so.

**Original Audience**

The question of literary value can easily be related to that of audience. Fern’s “Thanksgiving Story” lends itself to discussion of these issues. The question of whether “Thanksgiving Story” is “worse” than the other selections by Fern and how so, can be used to provoke discussion of the standards by which literature is judged (and who does the judging) and of the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Fern’s work can easily be compared and contrasted with that of just about any woman of her time. She can also be paired with male writers, such as Walt Whitman (\textit{Fern Leaves} and \textit{Leaves of Grass}) and Ik Marvel (Donald Grant Mitchell), the essayist, who gained fame at about the same time as Fern. Or she can be treated along with other nineteenth-century humorists.


In a course that includes Harriet Jacobs’s \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} (1861), students will enjoy knowing that the “Mr. Bruce” for whom Jacobs works as a nursemaid was N. P. Willis, Fern’s brother; Fern satirizes her social-climbing brother in “Apollo Hyacinth.” Jacobs kept her writing of \textit{Incidents} secret from Willis, she wrote her friend Amy Post, because “Mr. W is too proslavery he would tell me that it was very wrong and that I was trying to do harm or perhaps he was sorry for me to undertake it while I was in his family” (\textit{Incidents}, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, 1987, p. 232). Harriet Jacobs and Fanny Fern were friendly; for an account of their relationship, see Joyce W. Warren, \textit{Fanny Fern} (see headnote).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I prefer to have students read her without any initial intervention.
2. For the intrepid—have students try to imitate Fern’s style. This demonstrates that it’s not “natural,” that is, easy, but you may not be forgiven for this assignment. It is also illuminating to compare the original version of “Soliloquy of a Housemaid” (in Warren) and the collected version in this anthology—so that students can see how Fern revised her seemingly slapdash work.

Bibliography


Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)

*Contributing Editor: Judith Wellman*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Stanton’s autobiography reads well, in a fresh, personal, and modern style. Students do, however, benefit from some introduction to the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments. I usually ask students to analyze the Declaration of Sentiments in two ways:

1. How is it like/unlike the Declaration of Independence? It is almost identical to the Declaration of Independence in the preamble, except for the assertion that “all men and
women are created equal.” It is also divided into three main parts, as is the Declaration of Independence. Instead of grievances against King George, however, the Declaration of Sentiments lists grievances of women against the patriarchal establishment. Supposedly, the women tried to use the same number of items in 1848 as the Second Continental Congress incorporated in 1776, but the 1848 document actually contains one or two fewer.

2. How many grievances of 1848 are still issues for feminists today?

3. Teachers might ask students to imagine they were present at the Seneca Falls convention. Would they have signed this document? Why or why not?

4. Students might also imagine they were Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1848. What was her state of mind? Does this document reflect her personal life or only her political ideals?

5. Ask students (individually or in groups) to select the one or two grievances from 1848 that they would consider important issues today and to defend their choices in writing or in class discussion. Or ask them to choose one or two contemporary issues that did not appear in the Declaration of Sentiments and to consider why they are important today but were not stated publicly then.

6. Students are often amazed that women were citizens without citizenship rights. They are also amazed at how many issues from 1848 are still unresolved. They have no trouble agreeing that “all men and women are created equal” but they do not always agree on what that means.

   They ask about how well this Declaration was received (widely reported, mixed reception), and they are curious about the relationship between Elizabeth and Henry. While Henry voted to admit women as delegates to the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, he refused to attend the Seneca Falls convention, ostensibly because he did not agree with Elizabeth’s demand for women’s right to vote.

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Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. What was the political and legal position of women in the early Republic? Were women, for example, citizens? What did citizenship mean for women?
2. What alternative vision did the women and men who signed the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments propose for women?
3. To what extend did the Declaration of Sentiments reflect issues in Stanton’s personal life, as well as in her political ideals?

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Contrast between the Declaration of Sentiments, with its attempt to reflect revolutionary writing and therefore revolutionary, egalitarian ideals, and Stanton’s own account of her life, designed to emphasize her own experiences, which results in a more direct and personal style.
Original Audience

Professors might emphasize the universal character of the Declaration of Sentiments. It was not designed to appeal to some Americans only but to all Americans.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Comparison with the Declaration of Independence is useful.

Bibliography


Ward, Geoffrey. Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, An
The Development of Narrative

HUMOR OF THE OLD SOUTHWEST

Davy Crockett (1786–1836)
Mike Fink (1770?–1823?)
Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790–1870)
George Washington Harris (1814–1869)

Contributing Editor: Anne G. Jones

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The most crucial problem is getting them read at all. These writers are typically included in anthologies but excluded in syllabi—vide the syllabi in Reconstructing American Literature. Secondly, the dialect and spelling are forbidding. And finally, this work comes with its set of literary critical stereotypes: it has been a favorite of many of the more conservative literary historians, who tend to see it mainly as grist for Twain and Faulkner mills. Finding new ways to think about the material could be a problem.

Thinking about these writings in the light of gender, race, and class makes them accessible and interesting to students. Indeed, the selections have been chosen with gender issues especially in mind. Having students prepare to read them aloud as a performance should help make the dialect more accessible. And suggesting innovative pairings—with Marietta Holley, with rap lyrics, with “Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” for example—should enliven the reading further.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal
Issues

The construction of gender on the frontier seems a major project of this writing. The texts can be analyzed closely to see how they construct both manhood and womanhood, and how those constructions differ from mainstream American engendering of the period. The strong and sexual woman in particular appears anomalous; these texts both present and demonstrate some ambivalence about such figures. Class issues are crucial too, particularly in the relation between the voices in the texts: the controlling, omniscient, standard English voice and the disruptive, “carnival” voice in the “Dedicatory” set up the most familiar opposition, one that takes various forms in the selections.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Much of this material is transcribed from or inspired by anonymous oral sources. And if students have performed selections, the question of the relation between oral and written texts can be foregrounded. The use of language in these selections is a second major stylistic concern; the vigor and power of this writing are attractive, and invite students to look closely at specific linguistic strategies—metaphors and similes, concrete versus abstract diction, etc. And the stories by Harris and Longstreet offer two ways of rendering plot, the one loose and almost episodic, and the other tightly controlled.

Original Audience

The audience for this work most likely consisted of educated white men, “gentlemen of some means with a leisurely interest in masculine pursuits,” as Cohen and Dillingham put it. They were likely, too, to be Southerners and pro-slavery Whigs. The audience’s relation to the texts, then, was at least a step removed from the primary characters; these tales and stories seem to enable identification with the “masculinity” of the Crockettts and Finks and even Suts, and at the same time allow
an “educated distance” from that identification. What happens now, when the audience has vastly changed? How many different ways can these texts be read? How does audience determine a text’s meaning?

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Washington Irving (“Legend” inspired much Southwest humor); Hannah Foster and Susanna Rowson (see Cohen and Dillingham: gender issues); Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass (struggle with voices); Marietta Holley (women’s versus men’s humor); Mark Twain and William Faulkner (do they revise the tradition? how? what do they retain?).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) Do the women in these selections surprise you? Think about how and why. To what uses is this “strong woman” put in the selections? What do you think has happened to this figure of woman? Does she survive anywhere in our literature?
   (b) What can you say about the structure of each selection?
   (c) How many voices can you hear in these selections?
   (d) What type of manhood is constructed in these pieces? How does “The Death of Mike Fink” fit in?
   (e) What does Sut want from the quilting party? Why does he do what he does?

2. (a) Consider “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting Party” in the light of Elaine Hedges’s book on quilting, _Hearts and Hands_.
   (b) Consider some implications of the various types of narration.
   (c) How do language and subject converge in the “Dedictory” and another text of your choice?
   (d) How is the “strong woman” used in these selections?
Bibliography

Cohen, Hennig and William B. Dillingham, eds. *Humor of the Old South-west*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975, xiii–xxviii. The introduction is useful for information, but also as a representative of a particular critical position on the material. The remarks on gender are particularly provocative.


Washington Irving (1783–1859)

*Contributing Editor: William Hedges*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students generally know the two short stories (“Rip” and “Sleepy Hollow”). With the selections from *History*, it is wise to avoid tipping off students in advance to Irving’s attitude toward the treatment of Native Americans by European-Americans; see if they can penetrate through the technically sophisticated irony to Irving’s scathing condemnation; some may be tempted to read the passage as approving the harsh treatment. (Note that, strictly speaking, the passage is concerned with Latin America, not America as a whole. But students can be asked whether it has relevance to North American policies relating to Indians.)

Emphasize Irving’s humor before getting too serious. Give students a chance to talk about what they find entertaining in the selections and why. Also, try comparing responses of male and female students to “Rip Van Winkle.” How sympathetic are each to Rip? Look at the story as the first
in a long line of texts by male American writers in which a male protagonist forsakes civilized community life for the wilderness (or the sea) on a quest of sorts and perhaps joins forces with a male companion(s). Consider the psychological or cultural significance of such narratives, as well as the role of and attitude toward women they portray.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

*History:* Racism, its guises and rationalizations; what it means to be truly civilized—or savage.

“Rip Van Winkle”: Loss (and discovery?) of identity; a challenge to American values, the work ethic. Does Rip himself represent anything positive? George III vs. George Washington (is the story anti-republican?); is the story sexist?

“Sleepy Hollow”: Artificiality vs. naturalness; Puritan-Yankee intellectual pretentiousness, hypocrisy, greed, and commercialism as threats to an American dream of rural abundance and simple contentedness; the uses of imagination.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

With the *History* selection, questions of burlesque irony, the reliability of the narrator: Is Irving’s persona, the peculiar Diedrich Knickerbocker, a party to the irony? Is he being deliberately ironic himself (saying just the opposite of what he believes about treatment of Native Americans), or does he seem duped by the defenses of brutal mistreatment that he offers? Does it matter which? Could it be either one—or both? Is the reader being played with?

The two stories were written ten years after the *Knickerbocker His-try. The Sketch Book*, from which the two stories come, is generally taken to be the beginning of Irving’s transformation into a romantic writer of sorts. What romantic elements can be seen in “Rip” and “Sleepy Hollow”?

These two stories are also, arguably, the beginning of a
new genre, the short story. If so, what makes these narratives short stories as opposed to earlier kinds of tales?

**Original Audience**

Relate Irving’s commercial success beginning with *The Sketch Book* to the burgeoning of American popular culture in the early nineteenth century. Discuss *The Sketch Book* as context of “Rip” and “Sleepy Hollow” and the huge vogue for “sketch” books, literary annuals, and gift books that follows.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare the selection from History with Franklin’s Swiftian satires, “The Sale of the Hessians,” “An Edict by the King of Prussia”—or Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” itself.

Compare and contrast the rural felicity of the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow with Crévecoeur’s idealization of American rural life in the American Farmer or Jefferson’s famous agrarian pronouncements in query XIX of Notes on Virginia.

What distinguishes Irving as a short story writer from Hawthorne or Poe?

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. The humor of the Knickerbocker History—have students read sections of it.
2. Political satire and opinion in the History—consider specifically the anti-Jeffersonianism of the section on Governor Kieft. Prepare a personal interpretation of one of the two stories.
3. Papers on varying or contrasting approaches to “Rip” or “Sleepy Hollow,” consulting some of the interpretations listed in the bibliography. Discuss the humor in either story.

Bibliography


Roth, Martin. Chapters on *Knickerbocker* and on the two stories, in *Comedy in America: The Lost World of Washington Irving*. Very original criticism, mythic and cultural.


James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851)

*Contributing Editor: Geoffrey Rans*
Classroom Issues and Strategies

I have found it better not to insist on Cooper’s formal powers at the outset, nor even on his obvious importance as an innovator and initiator in American fiction. Rather, it is effective to invite the students to discuss the substantive issues that arise in a reading of Cooper. Their importance and typicality in the American literary experience remain alive to students in various historical transformations, and Cooper presents them in unresolved and problematic formations.

While the passages selected in The Heath Anthology raise obvious and important issues—of empire, of political theory, of nature versus civilization, law, conservation, religion, race, family, American history—one Leather- Stocking novel should be studied in its entirety. Depending on where the instructor places most emphasis, The Pioneers, The Last of the Mohicans, and The Deerslayer are the most accessible. In any case, any study of even the selected passages requires some “story-telling” by the instructor.

The discussion of The Pioneers or other novels can become, as well, a discussion of the competing claims on the student’s attention to form and content: whether form is always possible or desirable; whether the unresolved issues in history are in any sense “resolved” in works of art; how the desire for narrative or didactic closure competes with the recognition of an incomplete and problematic history and political theory. Approach questions of empire, race, progress, civilization, family, law, and power, and lead back from them to the literary issues.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. Historical myth and ideology. How do they differ? How do they interact?
2. Nature/civilization
3. Law
4. Power and property
5. The land
6. Violence
7. Race
8. Gender and family
9. Cooper’s contradictory impulses: see Parrington (10)
10. Hope/disappointment
11. The environment

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

1. Didacticism, resolved and unresolved
2. Romance—the Scott tradition: see Orlans (10)
3. Myth
4. Romanticism
5. Conventions of description and dialogue, epic and romantic
6. Epic
7. For advanced students: the question of the order of composition, and the literary effect on the reader of anachronism

Original Audience

I stress how the issues that were urgent to Cooper and his readers (they are evident in the novels, but see also Parrington) are alive today. Some attention should be given to the demand for a national literature, and the expectations of the American Romance (see Orlans).

Indispensable reading for this period is Nina Baym’s *Novelists, Readers and Reviewers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

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Here are some pursuable issues:
1. Crèvecoeur: slavery, Indians, the agrarian ideology and its betrayal
2. Relate to other writings on the encounter of white and red—see Smith, Winthrop, Williams, Crèvecoeur, Franklin, Jefferson
3. Stowe—on race, slavery, Christianity and its betrayal, didacticism—Twain, Frederick Douglass
4. The nonfiction writers of the Revolution and the New Republic: Jefferson, the Federalists
5. Faulkner: race, history. Carolyn Porter’s chapters on Faulkner (see 10) might seem relevant to Cooper to some instructors.
6. Catharine Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Before starting Cooper, an assembly of the issues raised in the course about form, the canon, and the literature of Colonial, Revolutionary, and New Republican times should be given by the instructor.
2. I have found the following areas particularly fruitful for student essays on Cooper:
   (a) Confusion, contradiction, and resolution
   (b) Myth versus reality
   (c) Race
   (d) Law and justice
   (e) Power in all its forms: class, race, military, political, and property
   (f) Attitudes toward nature and the environment

Bibliography

The chapters on Cooper in the following books (subtitles omitted):

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Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789–1867)

*Contributing Editors: Barbara A. Bardes and Suzanne Gossett*
Classroom Issues and Strategies

There may be some difficulty in helping students compare early nineteenth-century attitudes toward Indians, who are here referred to as savages, to Sedgwick’s treatment of Native Americans, which is so different from that of her contemporaries. Be sure students know the legend of Pocahontas. The tradition of sympathy for Native American culture should be traced back to the period of Spanish arrival and to the literature of the early Puritan colonies. The selections from Cabeza de Vaca and Roger Williams are helpful in this context. It may also be useful to discuss conflicting attitudes toward the primitive: as dangerous savage and as nature’s noble soul. The capture of Faith Leslie (and her eventual marriage to Oneco) should be compared to Mary Rowlandson’s “Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration.” Mention that according to legend, one of Sedgwick’s female ancestors experienced a similar abduction.

Students need to understand Sedgwick’s complex attitude toward the early Puritan colonies, which combines patriotism with objections to Puritan oppressiveness. At this point they will need some biographical and historical background, first on Sedgwick and then on the Puritans. They may be referred to the writings of John Winthrop, who appears in the novel. It is also important to note the place of women in the early American republic as teachers of the political culture yet subordinate within the home. Emphasize that Sedgwick occupied an unusual position as an important woman writer, and discuss why she shows so much sympathy for those without power in the society. Some thought should be given to the “ventriloquization” of Native American culture as a way for Sedgwick to express questions about women’s culture.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. Sedgwick’s picture of solidarity between women (Hope and Magawisca).
2. Sedgwick’s sympathy for the Indians who are being destroyed by the English settlers. The Indian massacre repeats an English one; students can be asked to read the “Speech of Chief Seattle” and to compare its rhetoric to the speech of Mononotto in the first selection from Hope Leslie. Sedgwick’s sympathy is also shown in the discussion of the marriage of Faith Leslie to an Indian.

3. The political significance of Hope and Magawisca’s defiance of the Puritan magistrates: the way in which both Indians and women are excluded from the political system. The emphasis throughout on the political and personal need for liberty and independence. Contrast Magawisca’s defiance of the English with the historical Pocahontas’s marriage to an Englishman. Discuss the conflicting ideas of natural law and patriarchal law that underlie Magawisca’s and Winthrop’s positions.

4. The place of the family in the political order and the place of women within the family. The family is seen as the primary unit in politics and each family is represented by its male adult members. The interests of wives and children (who have no public voice in political decisions) are represented by the men.

5. “To my dying mother thou didst promise kindness to her children. In her name I demand of thee death or liberty.” If time permits, discuss the nineteenth century “cult of the mother” and its manifestations in this novel.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Sedgwick is important for her participation in the creation of a national literature. Both the extensive descriptions of nature and the subject matter of the novel are specifically American. Hope Leslie shows formal development from earlier American women’s novels, though it includes, characteristically, a heroine who is to some extent deprived of parental support and creates her own success before marriage. It avoids, however, the “seduced and abandoned” plot found in The Coquette and Charlotte Temple, as well as excessive sentiment. Sedgwick
allows her heroine to defy female norms conventional both in life and literature. She also deploys the power of public oratory within a novelistic context, and has more “public” scenes than would be expected in a “woman’s” novel.

**Original Audience**

The blend of historical fact and adventure made *Hope Leslie* acceptable reading for young women. The novel was very popular, partly because it fit into a tradition that was established by Sir Walter Scott.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The novel should be compared with *The Last of the Mohicans*, published one year earlier. Sedgwick even refers to Cooper’s novel in the text. But she countenances marriage between an Indian and a white woman, and she shows sympathy for the motives of the Indian attack on the white settlers. In addition, Sedgwick does not make women merely the means of alliance between men, but she puts them at the center of her novel, rather than on the margins.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. (a) Compare the representation of the Indian massacre in *Hope Leslie* with the massacre that occurs in *The Last of the Mohicans*.
   (b) Consider how Sedgwick equates her two heroines, Magawisca and Hope Leslie. In what ways is the scene at the mothers’ graves a defining moment in the relationship of the two women?
   (c) What is the basis for Magawisca’s refusal of Puritan authority? Is it defensible?
2. (a) Consider the political implications of the parallel
judgment scenes in *Hope Leslie*, when Everell is “tried” by the Indians and Magawisca is tried by the Puritans. Do Governor Winthrop and Mononotto operate out of the same principles?

(b) Compare Cooper’s and Sedgwick’s attitudes toward relations between the Indians and the white settlers.

(c) Compare the sympathy for the Indians’ vanishing culture in *Hope Leslie* with the narrator’s sympathy for undisturbed village life in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” What forces might motivate these two writers to come up with similar attitudes toward vanishing American cultures?

3. Consider Sedgwick’s female characters in this novel: In what ways do they fit female stereotypes of the early nineteenth century, and in what ways do they express Sedgwick’s own vision of women in the republic?

**Caroline Kirkland (1801–1864)**

*Contributing Editor: Judith Fetterley*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Most of the students I have taught love Caroline Kirkland. They find her eminently contemporary. Her prose style is accessible, she is funny, and she deals with a subject familiar to nearly all Americans—the frontier. Some students are put off by her middle-class bias and perspective; they find her attitudes toward the locals patronizing and they object to the fact that (unlike Jewett) Kirkland provides very little space for the stories of any of these people as told by themselves.

Kirkland’s letters sound like they were written yesterday to the students reading the letter. One obvious way of breaking open the text and inviting discussion is to ask students to pick...
one of her “natives” and have them write what they imagine that person would say about their new neighbor, Caroline Kirkland, if they wrote a letter to one of their friends who has moved farther west.

Students often wonder why they have never heard of Kirkland before. They want to know what else she wrote. They wonder why she is so concerned with issue of manners and ask what happened when she published her book.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Kirkland is accessible in part because she is writing about a subject that has been made central to the study of American culture—the frontier, the movement west of white settlers. Kirkland is important because she is dealing with this phenomenon from the point of view of the woman who was required, often not of her own will, to follow the man to his new home. She writes specifically of the cost to women of the male model of “upward mobility”—the pattern of constantly moving on under the guise of improving one’s position. This theory of “improvement” of course takes no account of the woman’s position, which is usually worsened as a result. Thus the most important feature of Kirkland for the survey course is the fact that she inserts the woman’s perspective into this male cultural pattern. Kirkland’s work thus provides the context for discussing the commitment of the mid-century women writers to values of home, domesticity, etc.

Kirkland is equally important as an example of a relatively early American woman writer who successfully established a voice. The instructor should be familiar with Kirkland’s essay “Literary Women,” collected in *A Book of the Home Circle* (1853), and included in the volume of Kirkland’s work from the Rutgers Press American Women Writers series. Kirkland was well aware of the prejudices against women writers and of the strictures governing what they were and were not supposed to write. Her decision to lace her text with literary references may in part have stemmed from her desire...
to define herself clearly as a literary woman and to defy the strictures and the stereotypes. In a context where there was so much harassment of women writers, her voice is remarkably clear and confident. She writes with a sense of authority and conviction that is not modulated through any other agency. She writes because she likes to write, not because she is trying to save the world or support her children. She is a rare example of an early American woman writer who wrote carefully and published only what she felt was well written.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

First, Kirkland defines herself as a realist. Since American literary history has been based, until very recently, on a study of the works of male American writers, the governing generalization insists that realism in American literature is a post–Civil War phenomenon. However, American women writers were experimenting with realism in the decades before the Civil War and Caroline Kirkland was among the first, the most explicit, and the most articulate. Clearly defining herself against the romantic views of the West provided by contemporary male writers, Kirkland claims to write the truth about Michigan, which means that she intends to include the difficulties that face women who try to put together three meals a day in the wilderness, the state of the Michigan roads with their enormous pot holes, and the general slovenliness of the “natives.” So certainly any discussion of Kirkland needs to address her conception of realism and the general contours of American literary history that emerge from including women writers in the map of the territory.

Second, Kirkland identifies herself as participating in a tradition set by women writers. She ends her preface to *A New Home* with a reference to “Miss Mitford’s charming sketches of village life” and with a “humble curtsey.” It is important to explore the degree to which Kirkland establishes throughout her text her connection to a tradition of women writers presenting a woman’s point of view. As is clear from the preface, Kirkland embraces an iconography that clearly
identifies her as a woman writer (men don’t curtsey) and she wishes to remind her readers that they are reading a work written by a woman. In the process of so doing, she is also attempting to explore the nature of a woman’s aesthetics. Implicitly, and on occasion explicitly, she is asking, what kind of book does a woman write, given the nature of woman’s experience and perspective?

One can also raise here the question of genre—to what extent is Kirkland’s voice, her authority, tied to her use of a relatively unconvention-ridden genre, namely the letter home? Is she freed to do her best because she is not trying to be a great writer but is trying only to write interesting letters to the folks back home? Students might be encouraged to look into the use of the letter as a form for published writing by both men and women in the nineteenth century.

**Original Audience**

As I have said earlier, Kirkland is useful for raising the larger question of the relation of the nineteenth-century American women writers to their audience. Nineteenth-century white middle-class American male writers had problems establishing an audience, a sense of who they were writing to. A new view could and should question these assumptions. Hawthorne’s preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, the chapter on the Custom-House, can serve perhaps as a paradigm for the male situation. Here Hawthorne reveals his fear that he is speaking to no one except himself. Kirkland, on the other hand, has a very clear sense of the “you” at the other end of her letter. One can certainly raise with students the question as to why it is that Kirkland might have such a clear sense of audience. To what degree does it have to do with the world she describes women as inhabiting—a world in which loved ones are left behind, a world in which the letter (and think of the implications of this fact—here we look forward to *The Color Purple*) was left in the hands of women, a world in which there was a clear sense of community and of someone who would want to know what was happening to their daughters who had gone west?

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It seems fairly obvious that Kirkland assumed her readers would be of the same social class as herself. Whether or not she assumed her readers would be primarily women is a more complex question. My own sense of Kirkland leads me to believe that she assumed a readership made up of men as well as women, that she was not of that group of women writers who were writing essentially to women even though they knew and hoped that men might read their books and thus overhear their conversation. But I also think Kirkland took her women readers seriously and wrote at least in part to educate them.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

I have already suggested many points of comparison. I will just reiterate them here. Kirkland can be compared with many male writers in terms of her presentation of the frontier and the experience of westward and “upward” mobility. She can also be compared with many male writers in terms of her attitudes toward and handling of the issue of class. A writer like Hawthorne is so completely class-bound that class is never even an issue in his work. In many of the classes I have taught on Kirkland, I have been able to use students’ anger at Kirkland’s classism to raise the issue of class prejudice in writers like Hawthorne. Many students have come to realize that writers like Hawthorne protect themselves, albeit unconsciously, against charges of classism by simply never raising class as an issue. Kirkland is at least aware that American society is profoundly affected by the issue of class. Kirkland can also be compared to male writers in terms of the question of audience, as discussed above.

Kirkland can be fruitfully compared with other nineteenth-century American women writers in terms of the issue of voice. Students can compare the authority with which Kirkland speaks to the less secure voice of certain other women writers. She can also be compared with other women writers in terms of her commitment to realism and in terms of her commitment to presenting the woman’s story.
Bibliography

I refer the instructor to the discussion of Kirkland in Annette Kolodny’s *The Land Before Her* and in my own *Provisions*. There is also a Twayne series book on Kirkland that is useful for an overview but does not provide much in the way of criticism and would not be of much use in the classroom.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)

*Contributing Editor: Rita K. Gollin*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Some students find Hawthorne too gloomy, too dense, and too complex. And few understand Puritan beliefs about self, sin, and America’s moral mission as they evolved into the antithetical beliefs of transcendentalism. Even fewer recognize how persistently Hawthorne involves the reader in his own efforts to probe such antitheses.

To address these problems, try approaching Hawthorne as a riddler and wry joker who challenged all authority including his own. Students enjoy recognizing Hawthorne’s self-mockery and his various forms of ironic self-presentation. Though self-mockery is most overt in Hawthorne’s letters and prefaces (the introduction to “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” for example), stu-dents can quickly discern the skepticism underlying Hawthorne’s uses of laughter, his assessments of America’s Puritan past and quotidian present, and his anatomization of his major characters. Introduce recurrent patterns of character, theme, image, and so forth, then invite students to identify variations on those patterns within Hawthorne’s works.

Comment on Hawthorne’s attempts to mediate between Puritan beliefs and Emerson’s, then encourage students to
locate how each of his fictions incorporates, accepts, or rejects particular beliefs. Alert them to Hawthorne’s assumptions about what human wholeness and happiness require—including the interrelationship of the mind, heart, spirit, will, imagination, and accommodation, though not indulgence, of bodily needs.

One useful strategy is to ask students what a story is “about,” then what it is also “about.” They soon realize that informed attention yields expanded meaning.

Current debates about canon formation and absolute literary value provide a useful context for discussing Hawthorne’s reputation. Briefly sketch how criteria for judgment have changed over time (e.g., after publication of The Scarlet Letter, after Hawthorne’s death, during the centenary celebrations of his birth, and during the heyday of New Criticism), and provide some comments about current critical approaches to Hawthorne including those of feminists and new historicists. Then invite discussion of why Hawthorne has been considered a major writer from the 1830s to the present.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Hawthorne’s major themes and thematic patterns include self-trust versus accommodation to authority; conventional versus unconventional gender roles; obsessiveness versus open-mindedness; hypocrisy versus candor; presumed guilt or innocence; forms of nurturance and destructiveness; the penalties of isolation; crimes against the human heart; patriarchal power; belief in fate or free will; belief in progress (including scientific, technological, social, and political progress) as opposed to nostalgia for the past; the truths available to the mind during dream and reverie; and the impossibility of earthly perfection.

Historical issues include marketplace facts—for example, where Hawthorne’s short stories first appeared (unsigned and low-paid) and which stories he chose to collect.
in *Twice-Told Tales* and in later anthologies. Related issues include how each book was advertised, how well it sold, how much money Hawthorne earned for it, and how it was reviewed. Students should also know something about the whys and wherefores of Hawthorne’s career options during and after college, of his undertaking literary hackwork and children’s books, of his interlude at Brook Farm, of his appointments to the Boston Custom House, the Salem Custom House, and the Liverpool consulate, and of his efforts to win reinstatement at the Salem Custom House. Additional historical issues include Puritan versus Whig ideas about the self and the historical past; the political practices and social climate of Jacksonian democracy; and genteel assumptions about women’s roles. Still other historical issues concern the particular place and period in which Hawthorne set each story.

Personal issues include the various ways Hawthorne’s family history and specific events in his life informed his writings—most obviously the introduction to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and his letters and journals. Students can easily recognize how “Young Goodman Brown” incorporates facts about his Puritan ancestors, and they are interested in asking such questions as whether the concern with female purity in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “The Birth-mark” may reflect Hawthorne’s anxieties in the aftermath of his marriage, and how Hawthorne’s anxieties about his role as an artist are expressed in “The Birth-mark” and the Custom House introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*. Students might also speculate about how Hawthorne’s experiences of intimacy and deprivation in the aftermath of his father’s death inform his fiction (e.g., Robin’s nostalgia for a home that excludes him). Other personal issues that interest students include Hawthorne’s relationship to the Mannings’ mercantile values, his antipathy to Salem, his experiences at Bowdoin College (including his nonconformity and his friendships with Bridge, Pierce, and Longfellow), his lifelong strivings to develop his talents and support himself by his pen (during his self-defined “twelve lonely years,” during his political appointments, and so forth), his secret engagement, and his identity as doting but fallible husband and father.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

1. Sketch versus tale and short story.
2. Romance versus novel.
3. Characters: recurrent “types” and interrelationships; authorial intrusion or objective display; heroism, villainy, and what Hawthorne seems to condemn, admire, or sadly accept.
4. Image clusters and patterns (for example, dark versus light, natural versus unnatural, sunshine and firelight versus moonlight and reflections, labyrinths).
5. Subjective vision (including fantasies, reveries, dreams, and narrator’s questions about objective “reality”).
6. Narrative antecedents, including biblical parable, Spenserian romance, allegory (Dante, Bunyan, and others), Gothic horror tales, sentimental love stories, old wives’ tales, fairy tales, and so on.
7. Reworking of notebook entries into fiction, and the relationship between earlier works and later ones.
8. Hawthorne’s open-ended endings.
9. The relation of prefaces and expository introductions to Hawthorne’s plots.
10. Narrator’s options to the reader (e.g., saying “Be it so, if you will” after asking if Goodman Brown had only dreamed about a witch-meeting).

Original Audience

For the tales and sketches: students should know something about the gift books and periodicals that published Hawthorne’s early work (including the practice of anonymous publication, payment, and other material published in a volume where Hawthorne appeared), and reasons for Hawthorne’s difficulty in publishing a collection.

For the collections: Hawthorne’s 1837 letter to
Longfellow; Hawthorne’s selections and sequence for a particular volume; his publishers; reviews and advertisements.

For the novels: Hawthorne’s aims as expressed in letters, journals, and prefaces and through his narrators; marketing, sales, and reviews; James T. Fields as publisher, editor, banker, and friend—and securer of English copyrights.

For all the fiction: Hawthorne’s challenges to period assumptions about gender roles, parent-child relationships, social and scientific progress, the trustworthiness of sense data (“seeing is believing”), and the importance of the inner life.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

- Irving: Use of America’s past including folktales, popular myths, picturesque and sublime settings
- Poe: Use of Gothic settings, themes, and characters; interest in dreams and other threshold states, and in sensitive individuals’ propensities to madness
- Melville: Plumbing of the dark depths of the human mind, antipathy to authority, celebration of individual striving and sympathetic nurturing
- Emerson: Celebration of striving toward self-fulfillment, criticism of hereditary privilege, egalitarian vision
- Stowe and the “damned mob of scribbling women”: Celebration of women’s capacities for dignity and heroism, religious piety
- James: Sensitive hero/narrator; psychological scrutiny; unresolved questions
- Conrad: Journeys to the heart of darkness; parallel of outer and inner experience
- Jewett: Minute attention to nature and to unheroic characters
- Welty: Comic irony, ambivalence, anti-authoritarianism, densely detailed landscapes
- Flannery O’Connor, Updike, Borges: Queries into the mystifying complexities of human behavior, dark comedy

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Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Provide some information about books that helped shape Hawthorne’s imagination (including historical and scientific writings and the popular literature of his day). Students can better appreciate “Rappaccini’s Daughter” after learning about Hawthorne’s uses of Milton, Spenser, Dante, and the Bible, his variations on the courtship plot in popular magazines, and his skepticism about contemporary scientific experiments (as well as scientific controversy in Renaissance Padua).

Students enjoy connecting particular works with subsequent ones—most obviously, tracing connections of “Mrs. Hutchinson,” “Young Goodman Brown,” “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Hawthorne’s letters to Fields, and The Scarlet Letter.

“Cultural” questions that students enjoy addressing include attitudes toward art in general and fiction in particular in nineteenth-century America. (Here they need definitions of such terms as picturesque and sublime.)

Formal questions that students can ask of each story include a comparison of the first and last views of a particular character; Hawthorne’s ambivalent treatment of women, writers, and artists, but also father figures; the questions the narrator raises but leaves unanswered; Hawthorne’s use of “preternatural ambiguity”—offering alternative naturalistic explanations for what seems to be supernatural; exposition versus dramatized scene; parallels between inner and outer landscapes; and a story’s formal design (symmetries, contrasts, repetitions, suspense, climax, and so forth).

Bibliography

In addition to the secondary works mentioned in the anthology, I would recommend recent books on Hawthorne and his period by Nina Baym, Michael Davitt Bell, Sacvan Bercovitch, Gillian Brown, Laurence Buell, and Philip Fisher, but also books written decades ago by Richard Harter Fogle.
Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

Contribution Editor: William Goldhurst

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students confuse Poe’s narrator with the author, so that in stories involving drug addiction and murders, students often say “Poe this” and “Poe that” when they mean the narrator of the tale. Poe’s reputation for alcohol abuse, drug abuse, poverty, and bizarre personal habits—all exaggerated—often comes up in classroom discussion and should be relegated to the irrelevant. Students ask: “Was he an alcoholic?” “Was he a drug addict?” “Was he insane?” I quickly try to divert attention from such gossip to the themes of Jacksonian America, asking them to ponder the nature and value of Poe’s vision.

I have a slide lecture, largely biographical, which always is well received. Lacking such materials, I would recommend a line-by-line reading of the major poems, with explanations as you go along. Particularly “The Raven” and “Ulalume” are understandable by this method. I would also prepare students for effects late in “Ligeia,” then have them read aloud the last few pages of this tale. I always prepare the class for the Poe segment with a quick review of President Andrew Jackson’s policies and what is meant by “Jacksonian Democracy.” I believe this to be essential for a study of Poe.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Stress Poe’s affinities with mainstream America. He was
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culturally informed, rather than isolated, reclusive, and warped. I have spent years studying his ties to Jacksonian popular culture. It is unrealistic to ask all teachers to be informed to this extent; but the point should be made, and repeatedly.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Poe’s fictional architecture is unparalleled. Stories such as “The Purloined Letter” and “Ligeia” have definite form and symmetry. On another level, while most critics align Poe with the Gothic tradition, I emphasize his links with the sentimental writers of his time and earlier.

The “cycle” form practiced by many painters of his time is reflected in poems such as “The Raven.”

**Original Audience**

It is important to establish the fact that death literature was common in Poe’s day, owing to the high mortality rate among the young and middle-class citizens. In some ways Poe participated in the “consolation” movement of this time, by which he attempted to comfort the bereaved.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**


**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. I always ask students to express their concept of Poe the man and Poe the author before we begin our studies.

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Later, I hope they have changed their image from the stereotype to something closer to reality. I also ask the students to mention more recent figures who compare to Poe. If they say Stephen King, I argue the point. I try to introduce them to Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock.

2. Explain the steps involved in the “Initiation Ritual,” and then ask the students to trace the initiation pattern in Poe stories. It works out very well for all concerned.

Bibliography

Editions of Poe


Biographies

documented.


Two recent biographies contain some of the old patronizing and sensational features of nineteenth-century commentary and should be approached very skeptically:


Criticism


*Poe Studies: Dark Romanticism*, a periodical published at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, publishes up-to-the-moment bibliographies listing critical articles on varied aspects of Poe.

The best and most complete critical book ever published on Poe is the recent release *Companion to Poe Studies*, edited by Eric Carlson, Greenwood Press, 1996, which has twenty-five chapters by Poe scholars on different aspects of Poe’s fiction and poetry, including his influence overseas, and many interpretive essays, all on a relatively high professional level. For Poe overseas, supplement the *Companion* with Carl Anderson’s excellent *Poe in North-Light*, Duke, 1973.

An extraordinary collection of Poe photographic portraits and daguerreotypes has been assembled in *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*, collected by Michael J. Deas, University of Virginia Press, 1989.

Much attention has been given recent psychoanalytic and deconstructive Poe criticism. Central arguments in these areas are collected in *The Purloined Poe*, edited by John Muller and William Richardson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.


A delightful review of Poe correspondence, clippings, and early criticism is found in *John Henry Ingram’s Poe Collection at the University of Virginia*, edited by John Carl Miller at Charlottesville, 1960.

The standard bibliography, but active only to 1967, is *Edgar Allan Poe: A Bibliography of Criticism*, edited by J. Lasley Dameron and Irby Cauthen, Jr., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974. As mentioned earlier, recent criticism is regularly listed in *Poe Studies: Dark Romanticism*.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)

*Contributing Editor: Jane Tompkins*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**
The primary problems you are likely to encounter in teaching Stowe are (1) the assumption that she is not a first-rate author because she has only recently been recognized and has traditionally been classed as a “sentimental” author, whose works are of historical interest only; (2) by current standards, Stowe’s portrayal of black people in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is racist; and (3) a lack of understanding of the cultural context within which Stowe was working.

In dealing with the first problem, you need to discuss the way masterpieces have been selected and evaluated. Talk about the socioeconomic and gender categories that most literary critics, professors, and publishers have belonged to in this country until recently, explaining how class and gender bias have led to the selection of works by white male authors.

The second problem calls for an explanation of cultural assumptions about race, which would emphasize the way—historically—scientific beliefs about race have changed in this country between the seventeenth century and our day. For her time, Stowe was fairly enlightened, although her writing perpetuates stereotypes that have since been completely discredited.

The third problem requires that the instructor fill the class in on the main tenets of evangelical Protestantism and the cult of domesticity, which were central to Stowe’s outlook on life and to her work. Beliefs about the purpose of human life (salvation), the true nature of reality (i.e., that it is spiritual), the true nature of power (that it ultimately resides in Christian love), and in the power of sanctity, prayer, good deeds, and Christian nurture would be crucial here.

One useful device is to have different groups of students (three or four in each group) read some of the classic works of American criticism—for example, F. O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase, R. W. B. Lewis, D. H. Lawrence—and then report to the class why the assumptions that underlie these works made it impossible for their authors to include Stowe or other women authors in their considerations. The purpose is to demonstrate how critical bias determines from the start what work will be thought important and valuable and which will be completely ignored or set at a discount. (The groups meet with...
Students love to talk about Augustine St. Clair and to speculate whether Uncle Tom or George Harris is the real hero of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Two of the historical issues that are important have already been referred to: evangelical Christianity and the cult of domesticity. To this should be added the abolitionist crusade in the 1850s, the furor over the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the change in the temper of the country after the Civil War—a turn from moral to social reform, and from romanticism to realism in literature—which accounts for the change in the temper and tone of Stowe’s writing in this period.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The biblical overtones of much of Stowe’s prose, the emotionalism of her rhetoric, her addresses to the reader, and the highly oratorical nature of her prose need to be discussed in relation to the predominance of sermons and religious writing in the 1850s and of the view of language which held that words should appeal to the feelings and make ideas accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. In other words, the ideology of Stowe’s style is evangelical and democratic, rather than elitist and aestheticizing, aiming for clarity and force over formal innovation.

It should be stressed that Stowe was a brilliant writer of dialogue, one of the masters of American realism before realism became the dominant literary mode; she also had a powerful grasp of literary character. (It is no accident that
three of the characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have become bywords in American culture—little Eva, Uncle Tom, and Simon Legree. Stowe also exploited the philosophical possibilities of the novel as a genre, discussing and dramatizing in fictional form complex theological, moral, and political issues of her day.

**Original Audience**

The astounding popularity of Stowe’s first novel is worth noting—she was probably the best-known American of her time throughout the world. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appealed to people regardless of social class, although it was unpopular in the South, after its initial reception there (which was favorable in some quarters) and was met with only a qualified enthusiasm by black readers in the North. Changes in beliefs about race, gender, religion, and literary value have made *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* somewhat less universally appealing today, though it still retains its power to move readers in a way that very few works of the period do.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Stowe can be usefully compared to Emerson, whose vision of ideal existence, as put forward in essays like “Self-Reliance” and “The American Scholar” is sharply at odds with hers. Emerson’s emphasis on individual integrity and self-cultivation, envisioning a time when “man will deal with man as sovereign state with sovereign state” contrasts with Stowe’s ideal of a community of co-workers, bound together by Christian love, mutual sympathy, and a common purpose (for instance, the Quaker kitchen scene in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the circle of women around Miss Prissy in *The Minister’s Wooing*).

Hawthorne is another author whom it is interesting to compare with Stowe: His view of slavery was diametrically
opposed to Stowe’s—he condoned it—and his approach to writing, as well as to life in general, is skeptical where hers is believing; self-doubting where hers is self-trusting; detached and withdrawn where hers is active and participatory.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Discussion questions should depend on the interest of the instructor. But I would encourage people to use Stowe’s work as an opportunity to discuss the issue of canon formation: What makes a literary work “good”? Can ideas of what is good change over time? Why in our own century was Stowe ignored in favor of writers like Hawthorne and Melville? Another approach might foreground students’ emotional responses to Stowe’s writing (it’s helpful to ask students to write first about how they felt and use that as a basis for discussion). Some questions to ask: What’s the role of emotion in understanding a work of literature? Is Stowe’s writing too emotional?

2. Some students might want to compare Stowe to other authors, especially Hawthorne and Emerson. Others might want to think about the text in a more personal way perhaps looking at issues of race in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a starting point for considering their own experience of race, or asking what contemporary issues they find comparable in importance to the issue of slavery in Stowe’s day.

William Wells Brown (1815–1884)

*Contributing Editor: Arlene Elder*

Classroom Issues and Strategies
It would be extremely useful to recount briefly Brown’s own history and to emphasize that he was self-taught after his escape from slavery and, therefore, influenced strongly both by his reading and by the popular ideas current during his time, for instance, common concepts of male and female beauty. Reading the class a short historical description of a slave auction and some commentary about the sale of persons of mixed blood, since even one drop of “Negro blood” marked one legally as black, hence appropriately enslaved, would also provide a context for the chapters from *Clotelle*.

One might provoke a lively discussion by quoting some of the negative comments on writers like Brown present in “The myth of a ‘negro literature’ ” by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in *Home Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966) or Addison Gayle, Jr.’s, designation of Brown as “the conscious or unconscious propagator of assimilationism” (*The Way of the New World, The Black Novel in America*, i1. New York: Anchor, 1976). Any denigration of functional or committed art by critics with New Critical persuasions should provoke thought about the novel’s place in the black canon as well as raise current theoretical issues about the political role of art and the artist.

Students are interested in the verification of the sale of “white” slaves: the historical basis for Clotelle as the alleged daughter of Thomas Jefferson; questions of nineteenth-century popular characterization as a source for Brown’s handling of his protagonists; the whole genre of the slave narrative; and theoretical issues such as art versus propaganda.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. Brown’s own personal experience as an aide to a slave trader.
2. The sexual exploitation of both female slaves and white wives by slave owners. Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides an actual situation of sexual exploitation. Since selections from *Incidents* appear in *The Heath Anthology*, it might be useful to teach *Clotelle* in conjunction with this slave narrative.
3. The historical role of Christianity as both an advocate of slavery and, for the slaves, a source of escapism from their situation.
4. The presence of rebellious slaves who refused to accept their dehumanization.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

One needs to place *Clotelle* within the dual contexts of the black literary traditions of slave narrative and folk orature and the mainstream genre of popular nineteenth-century drama and fiction. This dual influence accounts for what appears to be the incongruous description of Jerome, for instance, who could be seen, in his manly rebellion against an unfair beating as a fictional Frederick Douglass but also is described in a totally unrealistic way both to appeal to racist standards of beauty and to correspond to images of heroes in popular white novels.

Original Audience

Of equal influence on Brown’s composition of *Clotelle* are his two very different audiences, the white middle class and the black “talented-tenth,” with very different, sometimes conflicting, expectations, histories, aesthetics, education, and

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incomes, to whom Brown and other nineteenth-century black novelists had to appeal. Interestingly, there is still no homogeneous audience for black writing, *Clotelle* included, because American society is still not equal. Therefore, it should not surprise an instructor if the selections arouse extremely different responses from various class members.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Brown’s intertwined aesthetic and political complexities are echoed not only in the writing by other nineteenth-century African-American novelists but also in the work of all ethnic American writers, especially those of the present day, for whom issues of constituency and audience are extremely complicated. It is for this reason that *Clotelle* is extremely useful to demonstrate not only common subjects and themes with the slave narratives but, just as interesting, the influence of society upon artistic choices and the paradoxical position of the ethnic artist vis-à-vis African- and Euro-American literary heritages and his or her mixed constituency.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. Chapter II:
   (a) How is the idea as well as the historical reality of slaves being treated as dehumanized property expressed in Brown’s language and imagery?
   (b) How does the auction process reveal the complete dichotomy between the interests of the slaves and those of their traders and owners?
   (c) What is the intended effect of Brown’s description of Isabella on the auction block?
   (d) Why does Brown link the image of the auction block with that of the church spires in this chapter?
2. Chapter X:
   (a) What is the symbolic/thematic effect of Brown’s description of Isabella’s garden?
(b) What does this chapter reveal about the sexual exploitation of both female slaves and the wives of the white masters? What contradiction does it suggest about the possibly comforting concept of a “good master”?
(c) Have we been given enough information to explain Linwood’s behavior? How do we account for Isabella’s continued kindness toward him?
3. Chapter XI:
(a) Why doesn’t Linwood accept Isabella’s offer to release him from his promise to her?
(b) Do you think a nineteenth-century reader might react differently from a modern one to the unbelievability of Linwood’s mutterings in his sleep? If so, why?
(c) What is the function of religion for Isabella?
4. Chapter XVIII:
(a) How do you explain Brown’s incongruous physical description of Jerome?
(b) Who are George Combe and Fowler, and why are they alluded to here?
(c) What do the allusions to certain well-known lovers reveal about Brown’s reading?
5. (a) Comparison with details of slave life, especially female concubinage found in Harriet A. Jacobs, Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself.
(b) Discussion of Isabella and Clotelle as representatives of the popular “tragic octoroon” stereotype.
(c) Comparison of Clotelle with another nineteenth-century African-American novel about a female slave and her liberation, Frances E. W. Harper’s Iola Leroy.
(d) Discussion of Jerome as a “counterstereotype” intended to refute negative popular images of blacks. A look at Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass as well as Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s, The Clansman would provide polar contexts for this subject.
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Herman Melville (1819–1891)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

The primary problems I have encountered in teaching Melville are the difficulty of the language and the complexity of the narrative point of view. This is particularly true of “Benito Cereno,” but *Billy Budd* and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” also present problems for students unaccustomed to allusive and circuitous language and a complex narrative stance. Students usually find “Bartleby” and “The Encantadas” much more accessible. “Hawthorne and His Mosses” is daunting to students because of its allusiveness. It also needs to be set in the context of debate over how nineteenth-century American writers should go about producing an authentic national literature.

Each of the Melville selections demands a somewhat different strategy. What works best for me is not to teach Melville’s writings together in a separate unit, but to group individual Melville pieces with texts by other authors on
similar themes. For example, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” would make most sense to students in a unit on debates over literary nationalism and aesthetic theory, which could include Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” and review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales, Fuller’s “A Short Essay on Critics,” and Whitman’s 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass and Democratic Vistas. A unit on the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller) can be used to introduce such themes as individualism versus social responsibility (Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government”); alienation and the critique of industrial capitalism (Thoreau’s Walden); the critique of patriarchy and marriage as an institution, the parallels between the oppression of women and the enslavement of blacks, and the deconstruction of “true womanhood” and “woman’s sphere” as ideological concepts (Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century). In a follow-up unit of fiction illustrating these themes, “Bartleby” and “Billy Budd” would fit nicely with the Thoreau selections, while “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” would work well after Fuller, along with Elizabeth Stoddard’s “Lemorne Versus Huell,” Alice Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s,” and Caroline Kirkland’s A New Home. In my own current syllabus, I introduce the issue of women’s rights by teaching Sarah Grimké’s Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman (#8), selections from Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” Fanny Fern’s “Hints to Young Wives,” “Soliloquy of a Housemaid,” and “Working-Girls of New York,” and Sojourner Truth’s “A’n’t I a Woman?” I then devote several sessions to varieties of narrative and representations of women, in which I group “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” together with Poe’s “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Kirkland’s A New Home, Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s,” and Stoddard’s “Lemorne Versus Huell.” “Benito Cereno” obviously cries out to be assigned with other texts on slavery. Any of the following would work well: David Walker’s Appeal, Henry Highland Garnet’s 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the U.S.A.,”
Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s “Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” Wendell Phillips’s “Toussaint L’Ouverture,” Douglass’s Narrative, Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Lydia Maria Child’s “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” and selections from her Appeal, and Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Olaudah Equiano’s Interesting Narrative also helps illuminate “Benito Cereno,” though it is probably best to teach it with eighteenth-century selections.

I generally try not to overwhelm students with long analyses of style and point of view, but some brief treatment of these matters is indispensable, especially in the case of “Benito Cereno.” I often begin by reading key passages aloud to the students and having them analyze the tone of Melville’s rhetoric. When they actually hear the tone, they can usually pick up the undercurrent of satire in “The Paradise of Bachelors,” the smug insensitivity of Bartleby’s employer, and the sense that both Delano and the reader are being subtly mocked.

The question of tone leads easily into the issues of narrative point of view and audience. It is, of course, essential for students to realize that Bartleby’s story is narrated by his boss and that “Benito Cereno,” though in the third person, is narrated primarily from Delano’s point of view, except for the Deposition, which represents Benito Cereno’s point of view. After establishing these facts, I ask the students to consider why Melville did not choose instead to narrate his stories from the viewpoints of Bartleby, Babo, and the factory operatives in “Tartarus of Maids.”

It is extremely effective to emphasize the continuing applicability of Melville’s insights to our own times. Some of the issues his fiction raises are more relevant than ever. Many students (and their parents) work at jobs as meaningless and dead-end as Bartleby’s and identify strongly with him. One student described the law copyists as “living xerox machines.” Other students have drawn parallels between Bartleby and the homeless. The disparities between rich and poor are even more glaring now than at the time Melville wrote “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and the phenomenon called the “feminization of poverty” adds another relevant
twist to those disparities. In the 1960s “Benito Cereno” evoked Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, in the 1990s the struggle in South Africa. *Billy Budd* was perhaps never more relevant than during the Reagan-Bush era, with its wholesale glorification of militarism and its rollback of democratic rights in the name of national security.

The most persistent questions my students raise are why Melville chose to address issues of such vital importance through literary strategies so oblique and circuitous, and whether these strategies were at all effective in subverting his readers’ ideological assumptions, let alone transforming their political consciousness.

### Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

A major source of Melville’s continuing power is the prescient insight he displays into the central problems of our culture: alienation; violence against women and the repression of the “feminine in man” that usually accompanies it; the widening gap between a decadent ruling class and the workers it immiserates; racism and an ever-more-brutal assault against the world’s peoples of color; an unbridled militarism that threatens our very existence while demanding that we resign our civil liberties and human rights in the name of national security. Thus the most effective way of teaching Melville is to encourage students to draw contemporary lessons from the historical predicaments he dramatizes so compellingly.

Each story, of course, centers around a different theme. In teaching “Bartleby” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” I emphasize Melville’s critique of capitalism and the alienation it produces. “The Communist Manifesto” and Marx’s essays “Estranged Labor,” “The Meaning of Human Requirements,” and “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society,” from *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* are extraordinarily relevant to these two stories and illuminate them in startling ways. However, I find it preferable to let Marx indirectly inform the approach one
takes to the stories, rather than to get sidetracked into a discussion of Marx. A secondary theme in “Bartleby” is the Christian ethic of Matthew 25, which Melville counterpoises against the capitalist ethic of Wall Street (see Bibliography for useful articles on this subject).

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” naturally invites a feminist as well as a Marxist approach. Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, and the *Condition of Woman*, and Lydia Maria Child’s *Letters from New York* #50 (Women’s Rights) provide a ready-made framework for a feminist analysis of that story. Though “Benito Cereno” and *Billy Budd* do not focus on women, a feminist approach can enrich the students’ understanding of key episodes and subthemes.

In “Benito Cereno,” for example, Delano’s racist stereotypes not only prevent him from recognizing that a slave revolt has occurred on board the *San Dominick*, but distort his perception of the African women’s role in that revolt. Just as Babo protects his fellow rebels from discovery by catering to Delano’s stereotypes about blacks as faithful slaves, so the African woman Delano ogles does so by catering to his stereotypes about African women as sexual objects and primitive children of nature. By reading between the lines of the Deposition from a feminist perspective, we see that the African women have probably been sexually victimized by both their master and Don Benito and that they have played an active role in the revolt. Melville’s references to the “inflaming” songs and dances they sing while their men are fighting indicate his possible familiarity with such sources as Equiano’s narrative, which speaks of African women’s participation in warfare.

Similarly in *Billy Budd*, Melville connects his critique of militarism and the dehumanization it generates with a critique of Western culture’s polarization of masculine and feminine. The feminine imagery Melville uses to describe Billy suggests that he represents what Vere later calls the “feminine in man,” instructing his drumhead court that “she must be ruled out” of their deliberations. It also suggests that one of the roots of
Claggart’s and Vere’s homosexual attraction to Billy is his embodiment of the “feminine in man” that they have repressed in themselves and must continue to repress by killing Billy. Here again, Margaret Fuller’s analysis of the ways in which patriarchy victimizes men as well as women is relevant. “Benito Cereno” obviously needs above all to be set in the contexts of the antebellum slavery controversy and of the prior historical events to which the story refers (summarized in the footnotes): the Spanish Inquisition; the introduction of African slavery into the Americas under Charles V; the African slave trade and its relationship to the activities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English buccaneers; the Santo Domingo slave uprising of 1797–1804; the slave revolt on board the Spanish ship Tryal that the real Captain Delano had helped suppress; and the uncannily similar slave revolt that occurred on board the Spanish slave-trading schooner Amistad in 1839 (for useful articles on these aspects of the story, see the Bibliography below). As mentioned under “Classroom Issues and Strategies” above, the easiest means of teaching “Benito Cereno” in historical context is to assign it in conjunction with other texts on slavery.

Billy Budd reverberates with implications for the nuclear age and its strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Readers will also find Melville’s exploration of Vere’s and Claggart’s repressed homosexuality highly pertinent to debates over ending the ban against gays in the military. Teachers should not be afraid to exploit the story’s contemporary relevance, but they should also set the story in its twin historical contexts—1797, the date of the action, and 1886–91, the period of composition. See H. Bruce Franklin’s “From Empire to Empire,” cited below, for an invaluable discussion of these historical contexts.

Teachers might point out that “Bartleby” draws on Melville’s experiences of working as a clerk for a brief period and also reflects attitudes he must have associated with his brother Allan, a lawyer; that Elizabeth Shaw Melville’s debilitating pregnancies, as well as an actual visit to a paper mill, helped generate the feminist insights Melville displays in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”; that
Judge Lemuel Shaw’s conservative views on slavery and controversial role as the first northern judge to send a fugitive slave back to his master may explain the circuitous form Melville adopts in “Benito Cereno”; and that the suicide of Melville’s son Malcolm in 1867 may have some bearing on *Billy Budd*.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The traditional grouping of Melville with Hawthorne and Poe obscures not only the social vision, but the concept of art differentiating Melville from such canonical figures. Unlike them, Melville persistently rejects “the symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction,” holding instead to the principle that “Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges.” Teachers should point out the way in which Melville deliberately subverts formalist conventions in “Benito Cereno” and *Billy Budd* by appending the Deposition and the three chapters of sequel that force readers to determine the truth for themselves. It might also be useful to point out that the concept of art Melville articulates at the end of *Billy Budd* directly opposes Vere’s doctrine of “measured forms” (see Edgar A. Dryden, cited below). In contextualizing Melville with writers like Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child, Margaret Fuller, Alice Cary, Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others, teachers might suggest comparisons between their aesthetic of “Art for Truth’s Sake” (as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps called it) and Melville’s concept of literature as “the great Art of Telling the Truth” (delineated in his review “Hawthorne and His Mosses”). Although Melville’s short fiction is much less accessible and more oblique than the protest writings of these other authors, it is important to remember that four out of his first five books were autobiographical accounts of his life as a sailor—a genre not very different from the slave narrative. All five are filled with explicit and passionate social protest, culminating in *White-Jacket*’s powerful appeal for the
abolition of flogging in the navy, another parallel with the slave narrative.

Stylistically, I like to emphasize Melville’s use of irony and grim humor. If one adopts Babo’s point of view in reading “Benito Cereno,” one is struck again and again by the humor of the story. The shaving scene is one of the best examples, and I like to go over it at length, beginning with the way in which Babo responds to Don Benito’s slip of the tongue about Cape Horn by suggesting that Don Benito and Delano continue the conversation while he shaves his master.

“Bartleby,” too, presents many examples of Melville’s incisive irony and grim humor. See, for instance, the scene in which Bartleby announces that he will “do no more writing” and asks the narrator, “Do you not see the reason for yourself?”—to which the narrator, who does not see, responds by postulating that Bartleby’s vision has become “temporarily impaired.”

Original Audience

I generally let the subject of audience come up spontaneously, which it nearly always does. The students often infer—that Melville was writing for an audience linked by sympathies of class and race to the lawyer in “Bartleby,” the bachelors in “Paradise,” and Captain Delano in “Benito Cereno.” I then talk a little about Melville’s social milieu and the readership of Harper's and Putnam’s. (The latter was moderately anti-slavery, and distinctly more progressive than Harper’s, which Lydia Maria Child characterized as pro-slavery; nevertheless, its readers shared some of the racial and class attitudes Delano exemplifies.)

The question of audience is related to the literary strategy Melville adopted. In discussing Melville’s rhetoric and the discomfort it provokes in a reader who has an obscure sense of being made fun of, we speculate about whether Melville hoped to jolt readers into thinking about the implications of their attitudes.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

See suggestions above under “Classroom Issues and Strategies.” Bartleby has often been seen by critics as a Thoreau-like figure in his passive resistance, but Thoreau’s perspective on industrialization, capitalism, and alienation actually contrasts with Melville’s, which is closer to Marx’s.

Both Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” and Alice Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s” can be paired effectively with “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” Davis’s narrator, like Melville’s, is an outsider complicit by her class position in the oppression of the workers with whom she sympathizes, and Davis, like Melville, projects herself into workers of the opposite sex. Issues of creativity, class, and gender also intersect in “Iron Mills” and “Paradise and Tartarus.” Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s,” like “Paradise and Tartarus,” reveals the world of the patriarchs to be as sterile and perverted as the world of the patriarchs’ victims. Both “Uncle Christopher’s” and “Tartarus” are pervaded by images of freezing cold and make metaphorical use of an icy landscape. The seven girls winding seven skeins of blue yarn and knitting seven blue stockings in Cary’s story recall the “blank-looking” factory girls “blankly folding blank paper” in Melville’s; in both cases the women are silent and only the noise of their work is heard. While Melville’s story comments on how women factory operatives are deprived of a home life and turned into machines, Cary’s story shows how the home itself is turned into a factory, whose “boss” is not an “old bachelor” but the patriarchal father.

The reasons for grouping “Benito Cereno” with other works about slavery are obvious, but teachers can help students make specific connections between the slaves on board the San Dominick and Douglass’s battle with Covey, between the African women among them and Equiano’s reminiscences of women’s participation in battle, between the San Dominick’s “true character” as a slave ship and Equiano’s description of the slave ship that transported him across the Atlantic, between Melville’s use of the Deposition (and of the
three appended chapters in *Billy Budd*) and Child’s use of newspaper accounts at the end of “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes.”

At the same time, one can contrast Melville’s rhetorical strategy with the more direct strategy of appeal for the reader’s sympathy that other anti-slavery writers adopt. One can further contrast the male and female writers’ perspectives on slavery. For Melville and Douglass, the slave’s attempt to reclaim his “manhood” by fighting back and risking his life for freedom is central, while the female slave’s attempt to defend her children and to resist the violation of her humanity through rape is peripheral. For Stowe and Jacobs the reverse is true; Child balances the two perspectives in “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes.”

*Billy Budd* invites comparison with Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience, which casts an ironic light on the arguments Vere uses to have Billy sentenced to hanging. If teachers decide to group *Billy Budd* with the writings on slavery, rather than with those on industrialism and the oppression of women, they can underscore the parallels Melville suggests between the condition of sailors and that of slaves (a theme he develops at great length in *White-Jacket*). The Black Handsome Sailor who appears in the opening pages of *Billy Budd* and incarnates the ideal of the Handsome Sailor more perfectly than Billy also provides a strong, positive counterimage of blacks, offsetting the seemingly negative stereotypes presented in “Benito Cereno.” Formally as well, the two stories have much in common and invite comparison with “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes.”

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

I do not like to use study questions because I find them too directive. I prefer to train students to become attentive readers through more indirect strategies. My principal strategy (borrowed from H. Bruce Franklin) is to give students a quiz requiring them to analyze several key passages in the text, prior to class discussion. (The lawyer’s description of the place he assigns Bartleby in his office would be a good choice. So would the passage about the “odd instance” Delano observes.)
Questions for class discussion of “Bartleby”:

1. What does the subtitle of “Bartleby” suggest? What is the significance of Wall Street and the walls in the story?
2. What is the significance of the information that the narrator provides about himself and his employees at the beginning of the story? How does it prepare us to understand Bartleby and the narrator’s attitude toward him?
3. Why does Melville tell the story from the point of view of the employer rather than of the office staff or of Bartleby himself? What effect does this narrative strategy have on the reader?
4. How reliable is the narrator? Are there any indications that he might be obtuse or unreliable? Give examples.
5. What incident unleashes Bartleby’s passive resistance? What escalates it at each point?
6. What assumptions govern the question that the narrator asks Bartleby: “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?”
7. What ethic does Melville implicitly oppose to the ethic of Wall Street? (This question leads into a discussion of the New Testament echoes running through the story.)
8. Why does the narrator conclude that Bartleby “was the victim of an innate and incurable disorder”? How does it affect our responses to the story if we accept this conclusion?
9. What is the significance of the postscript the narrator appends to the story? What psychological (or ideological) purpose does it serve for the narrator? What symbolic purpose does it serve for Melville?
10. How much has the encounter with Bartleby changed the narrator by the end of the story? Is the narrator “saved”?
Questions for class discussion of “Paradise and Tartarus”:

1. What contrast does the opening of “Paradise” draw between the bachelors’ haven and the outside world? How does Melville develop the implications of the opening passage in the rest of the sketch?
2. How might the fate of the medieval Knights Templars be relevant to the nineteenth-century Templars?
3. Read out loud the paragraphs about the survival of Templars in modern London and ask: What effect does this imagery have? What attitude does it create toward the Templars?
4. Read out loud the description of the Templars’ banquet and ask: What is the significance of this imagery? What associations does it suggest to you? (The teacher might amplify the discussion by pointing out the parody of Plato’s *Symposium* suggested by dubbing the field-marshall/waiter “Socrates.”) What bearing does this description have on the second sketch of the pair?
5. What role does the narrator play in each of the two sketches? How would we situate him vis-à-vis the bachelors of the first sketch and the factory owner and the workers of the second sketch?
6. What business takes the narrator to the paper mill? What might his “seedsman’s business” symbolize?
7. Why does Melville link these two sketches as a pair? What devices does he use to cement the links? What connections does he invite readers to make between the bachelors and the maids, between Temple Bar and the New England paper factory? How is the contrast between the bachelors of the first sketch and maids of the second sketch continued within the second sketch?
8. Read out loud the passage describing the landscape of Devil’s Dungeon and ask what its imagery suggests.
9. What is the significance of the imagery Melville uses to describe the factory? (Read aloud passages drawing the students’ attention to the girls’ dehumanization and the machine’s preemption of their reproductive functions.)
10. What is Melville critiquing in this pair of sketches? Why does he link the economic to the sexual, production to reproduction?

11. Depending on the order in which assignments are made, teachers can also ask questions about:
— the continuities linking “Bartleby” with “Paradise and Tartarus.”
— the similarities and differences between Melville’s and Alice Cary’s critiques of patriarchy.
— the similarities and differences between the perspectives that Melville and Fanny Fern offer on working women.
— the insights that emerge from reading “Paradise and Tartarus” in the light of Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, Lydia Maria Child’s “Letter from New York” #50 on Women’s Rights, and Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

Questions for class discussion of “Benito Cereno”:

1. Through whose eyes do we view the events in the story? Where in the text does Melville shift into Delano’s point of view? Whose point of view does the Deposition represent? (N.B. I have found again and again that students confuse third-person narrative with omniscient point of view and a character’s subjective point of view with first-person narrative. Unless instructors take special care, students will end up referring to Delano as the narrator in their papers and exams.)

2. Why doesn’t Melville choose to write the story from Babo’s point of view? What might his purpose be in confining us to Delano’s and later Benito Cereno’s point of view? What limitations does this narrative strategy impose on us as readers?

3. How reliable are Delano’s perceptions of reality? What tendencies in particular make him an unreliable interpreter of the behavior he sees manifested on board the *San Dominick*? (Draw the students’ attention to the racial assumptions embedded in his perceptions of the...
oakum-pickers and hatchet-polishers; in his endorsement of the “contrast in dress, denoting their relative positions,” that distinguishes Don Benito from Babo; in his ogling of a naked African woman and his failure to realize the terrible irony of the possibility that she might be one of “the very women Mungo Park saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of”; in his belief that the blacks are “too stupid” to be staging a masquerade and that no white would be “so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes”; in his ludicrous misinterpretation of Babo’s intent in using the flag of Spain as a bib. Obviously there will not be time to discuss all these passages, but one or two should be singled out for discussion.)

4. The best example of how Delano’s racism keeps him from recognizing that the blacks have staged a revolt is the episode in which he sees Babo use the flag of Spain as a bib for Don Benito, but misinterprets it as an “odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows.” How does that episode originate? (Draw the students’ attention to Don Benito’s slip of the tongue and Babo’s quick invention of the shave as a ruse to prevent further inopportune slips. Use an analysis of the episode to show how brilliantly Babo manipulates Delano’s prejudices.)

5. What attitude toward slavery does Delano exhibit? How does his attitude differ from Benito Cereno’s? (Point out passages showing Delano’s envy of Don Benito, even as he feels the Yankee’s superiority to the decadent slave-holding aristocrat; most crucial is Delano’s insistence on pursuing and capturing the San Dominick with its cargo of slaves “worth more than a thousand doubloons.”)

6. Most of the confusion in interpreting “Benito Cereno” arises from the latter part of the story. It is easy to see that Delano’s view of blacks as stupid is wrong, but does Melville present Benito Cereno’s view of blacks as a corrective to stereotype, or merely as another stereotype? Does the Deposition represent the “truth”? 

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7. How does the language of the Deposition differ from the language Melville uses elsewhere in the text? What makes us take it for the “truth”?

8. What is Benito Cereno’s interpretation of events, as opposed to Delano’s initial interpretation? How does he explain the slaves’ revolt?

9. Does the Deposition indirectly provide any alternative explanations of why the blacks may have revolted? What does it tell us about the blacks’ actual aims? How do they try to achieve those aims? (If necessary, point out the hints that the slave women have been sexually abused by Aranda and Cereno; also consider the conversation between Cereno and Babo during the revolt, when Babo asks Cereno to transport the blacks back to Senegal and promises that they will abide by the rationing of water and food necessary to effect such a long voyage.)

10. Does Melville provide any clues to an interpretation of the story that transcends the racist stereotypes of Delano and Cereno? (Point out the allusions to the ancient African civilizations of Egypt and Nubia; the allusion to Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones; the symbolism of the San Dominick’s “shield-like stern-piece” and the way in which the identities of the masked figures get reversed at the end of the story.)

11. What is the narrative point of view of the few pages following the Deposition? How do you interpret the dialogue between the two captains? Does it indicate that either Delano or Cereno has undergone any change in consciousness or achieved a new understanding of slavery as a result of his ordeal?

12. What seems to be the message of the scene with which the story ends? What do you think Melville was trying to convey through the story? How does the story continue to be relevant or prophetic?

13. How would you compare “Benito Cereno” to: David Walker’s Appeal? Henry Highland Garnet’s 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the U.S.A.”? Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s “Nat Turner’s Insurrection”?

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Questions for class discussion of *Billy Budd*:

1. Why does Melville begin the story with a description of the Handsome Sailor? What does this figure seem to represent? What is the significance of the fact that the first example Melville cites of the Handsome Sailor is “a native African of the unadulterate blood of Ham”? What characteristics does Billy share with the black Handsome Sailor? What is the purpose of the analogies Melville suggests between the “barbarians” of pre-Christian Europe, Africa, and the South Seas? In what respects does Billy fail to conform fully to the Handsome Sailor archetype?

2. What are the historical contexts of the story? What is the purpose of the historical background Melville supplies on the Nore and Spithead mutinies? (Note that the story takes place only a few years after the American War of Independence against Britain and that it begins with an impressment, recalling the frequent impressment of American sailors by the British—one of the grievances that led to the War of 1812. See H. Bruce Franklin’s “From Empire to Empire” for a full discussion of the story’s historical contexts.)

3. What is the significance of Billy’s being impressed from the *Rights-of-Man* to the *Bellipotent*?

4. What relationship does Melville set up between Billy, Claggart, and Vere? What qualities does each represent? Why are Claggart and Vere attracted to Billy? In what ways is he a threat to them?

5. How do you interpret Melville’s definition of “Natural Depravity”? To whom does it most obviously apply in the story? To whom else might it also apply? (A number of critics have pointed out the applicability of the passage to Vere as well as Claggart.)
6. How does the tragedy occur? How might it have been avoided?

7. How does Melville invite the reader to judge Vere’s behavior and decision to hang Billy? What passages, dialogues, and scenes must we taken into account?

8. What tactics and arguments does Vere use to sway his officers? What are the political consequences (in real life as well as in the story) of accepting Vere’s arguments? Do you see any contradictions in Vere’s arguments, or do you find them rational and persuasive? Is Melville’s description of “Natural Depravity” at all relevant to an evaluation of Vere’s conduct at the trial (“Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound”)?

9. How do you interpret the many biblical allusions in the story? In what ways do they redefine or amplify the meaning of the story? What relationship(s) do you see between the religious and political interpretation the story invites? How does Melville characterize the role of the chaplain?

10. After the hanging, Vere forestalls possible disturbances by ordering the drums to muster the men to quarters earlier than usual. He then justifies his action by explaining how he views art and the purpose it serves: “‘With mankind . . . forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.’” Does Melville endorse this concept of art in *Billy Budd*? How does the form of the story jibe (or conflict) with Vere’s ideal of “measured forms”? How does the glorification of the Handsome Sailor, and the imagery used to describe him, jibe (or conflict) with Vere’s view of “the wild denizens of the wood”?

11. What is the effect of the three sequels Melville appends to the story? What further light do they shed on Vere and on the political interests governing his decision? To whom does the story give the last word?
12. Depending on the order of assignments, teachers can invite students to draw connections between:
— the status of slaves, sailors, and factory workers.
— the legal arguments Vere uses in his role as prosecuting attorney at Billy’s trial, and the portrayal of lawyers and the law in “Bartleby” and “Paradise and Tartarus.”
— Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience and Vere’s defense of martial law and the Articles of War.
— Vere’s insistence that “the heart, sometimes the feminine in man, be ruled out” and Fuller’s critique of the rigid sexual stereotypes that patriarchal ideology imposes on men and women.

Questions for class discussion of “Hawthorne and His Mosses”:

1. How would you compare “Hawthorne and His Mosses” with Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” and review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales, and Whitman’s 1855 Preface of Leaves of Grass?
2. To what extent (or in what ways) do you find this essay helpful for understanding Hawthorne’s fiction?
3. To what extent (or in what ways) do you find it helpful to illuminating Melville’s own artistic aims and practices?
4. Of the Hawthorne stories Melville praises, which ones continue to be highly regarded today? Does Melville omit mention of any stories in Mosses from an Old Manse that regularly appear in present-day anthologies? What do you make of the differences in aesthetic taste or judgment that this might suggest?
5. What does Melville value most in Hawthorne’s fiction? What does he mean by “blackness”?
6. Why does Melville argue against idolizing Shakespeare? How would you sum up his opinion of Shakespeare?
7. What are the implications of Melville’s view that Americans should give their own authors “priority of
appreciation” before acknowledging the great writers of other lands? How might this view apply to other nations or groups attempting to create a literary tradition of their own?

8. What do you make of Melville’s list of the significant American writers among his contemporaries? Which ones are still considered major American writers? Whom does Melville omit from his list?

9. Why does Melville disparage Irving? What does he reveal in the process about his own literary aims and values?

Since I group readings together, I also try to formulate paper topics that involve comparisons and contrasts of several readings. Most of the following topics are thematic. Instructors who would prefer formalist topics that focus exclusively on Melville’s stories might adapt some from the questions for class discussion listed above.

Choose two or three works from the following list, and compare and contrast their literary styles, narrative techniques, and handling of point of view: Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” or “Rappaccini’s Daughter”; Poe’s “Ligeia” or another Poe story of your choice; Kirkland’s A New Home—Who’ll Follow?; Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s”; Stoddard’s Lemorne Versus Huell; Melville’s “Bartleby” or “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” or “Benito Cereno” or Billy Budd.

Compare and contrast the aesthetic theories and views of literary nationalism reflected in several of the following: Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition,” Melville’s “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” and Whitman’s Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass or Democratic Vistas.

Choose some issue explored in the assigned readings and compare and contrast several works that provide different perspectives on it:

1. Use Thoreau’s discussion of alienation in Walden as a framework for analyzing “Bartleby.” In the process,
2. Use Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” as a framework for analyzing Bartleby’s interaction with his employer. You may wish to consider the forms of “resistance” the other office workers engage in as well.

3. Use Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” as a framework for analyzing Billy Budd and the issues it raises.

4. Compare and contrast Thoreau’s and Melville’s critiques of industrialism and capitalism in Walden and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.”

5. Compare and contrast Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s,” focusing on some of the following points: the perspectives each provides on the effects of patriarchal (and/or capitalist) ideology; the causes to which each story attributes the dehumanization and sterility it depicts; the kinds of contrasts each story sets up between oppressor and oppressed; the narrative point of view; the role of landscape and setting; the use of symbolism and metaphor. Instructors can suggest similar comparisons with Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills.”

6. Apply Sarah Grimké’s, Lydia Maria Child’s, and/or Margaret Fuller’s analysis of “the woman question” to one or more of the following:
   —Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” and/or “Rappaccini’s Daughter”
   —Poe’s “Ligeia”
   —Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”
   —Elizabeth Stoddard’s “Lemorne Versus Huell”
   —Caroline Kirkland’s A New Home—Who’ll Follow?
   —Alice Cary’s “Uncle Christopher’s”
   —Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
   —Emily Dickinson’s poems (selections of your choice)

7. Apply one or more of the following works to an analysis of Melville’s “Benito Cereno”:

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Choose some aspect of slavery explored in the assigned readings, and compare and contrast the perspectives these various works provide on it.

1. The issue of slave resistance and rebellion (can include violent and nonviolent, individual and collective resistance).
2. The issue of Higher Law versus the law of the land.
3. The contrast between the masters’ and the slaves’ viewpoints and values (e.g., Douglass and Jacobs and their fellow slaves versus their masters; Uncle Tom, Chloe, Cassy, etc., versus the Shelbys, St. Clares, and Legree; Babo versus Ceno and Delano).
4. Religion and slavery, or religion and militarism (can include the indictment of the church’s hypocrisy, the use of the Bible to support or condemn slavery, the theme of apocalyptic judgment, the use of typology and religious rhetoric and symbolism).
5. Comparative analysis of the rhetorical techniques, purposes, and intended audiences of three writers among those assigned, or of the metaphors each writer uses to describe slavery and structure his/her narrative.
6. The use of irony in the anti-slavery argument (can analyze the different types of irony found in slave songs, Douglass’s and Jacobs’s narratives, Child’s anti-slavery writings, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and “Benito Cereno”).
7. The image of Africa and the portrayal of the slave trade in Equiano’s narrative and “Benito Cereno.”
8. Double meanings and the theme of appearance versus reality in any of the assigned readings.
9. The theme “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did
to me” (a quotation from Douglass’s Narrative as applied to the individuals who people the assigned works, or to the North and the South, blacks and whites, oppressed and oppressing classes, the American nation in general).

10. The picture of slave life and the slave community that emerges from any three of the assigned works (preferably three representing different racial, regional, or gender perspectives).

11. The theme “Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women,” as dramatized in several of the assigned readings.

**Bibliography**

For a broader intellectual context, teachers who have time to read “The Communist Manifesto” and perhaps Marx’s essays “Estranged Labor,” “The Meaning of Human Requirements,” and “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society,” from The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 will find them extremely relevant to both “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and “Bartleby.” In particular, Marx discusses workers’ reduction to commodities, their enslavement to machines, and their resulting alienation.

For a complete bibliography, covering all of Melville’s short fiction except Billy Budd and including overviews of the stories’ reception, see Lea Bertani Vozar Newman’s A Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville (Boston: Hall, 1986). See also Brian Higgins’s Herman Melville: A Reference Guide, 1931–1960 (Boston: Hall, 1987), covering all Melville criticism published since 1930. For an excellent reconstruction of the stories’ chronology, circumstances of composition and publication, and contemporary reception, see Merton M. Seals’s Historical Note in the Northwestern-Newberry edition of The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860 (Evanston and Chicago: 1987, 457–533). The volume also reprints the chapter of Delano’s Narrative that Melville used as a source.

For biographical studies that situate Melville and his family in the context of contemporary politics, see Michael
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For feminist criticism portraying Melville as hostile to women, see Joyce W. Warren, The American Narcissus: Individualism and Women in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), Chapter 5; and Elizabeth Renker, Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For more sympathetic or nuanced feminist perspectives on Melville, see Kristin Herzog, Women, Ethics, and Exotics: Images of Power in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), Chapter 2; the essays on

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Listed below are the critical studies I have found most useful for illuminating the Melville selections in this anthology, and for developing approaches toward teaching them.


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Study of Billy Budd should begin with the indispensable notes provided by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Seals in their 1962 edition (University of Chicago Press). Besides pointing out innumerable parallels between Billy Budd and Melville’s other works, of which White-Jacket and Israel Potter are the most relevant, Hayford and Seals sum up previous criticism. Among recent critics, Milton R. Stern formulates the most persuasive version of the pro-Vere...

On “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” see Parker, *Herman Melville*, 752–81, cited above; and Ellen Weinauer, “Plagiarism and the Proprietary Self: Policing the Boundaries

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Alice Cary (1820–1871)

Contributing Editor: Judith Fetterley

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students are turned off by what they perceive as her didacticism, the morals attached to the ends of the stories. They also have trouble with what they perceive as her Christian dogma or perspective. And occasionally they perceive her stories as sentimental.

These problems are endemic to the reading of texts by nineteenth-century American women writers. They are useful and interesting problems to encounter in the classroom because they raise quite clearly the issue of aesthetic value and how the context for determining what is good art changes over time. The instructor needs to be aware of how contemporary critics have addressed this issue. The single best book for the teacher to have and use is Jane Tompkins’s Sensational Designs. The instructor might wish to assign the last chapter of this book, “But Is It Any Good?” to the class, since this chapter raises directly the questions most of them have about nineteenth-century women’s texts.

Compared to other nineteenth-century American women writers, Cary is minimally didactic, Christian, or “sentimental.” So, in teaching her, my approach consists of comparing her work with that of writers who are much more didactic, Christian, and “sentimental” and asking how it is that

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she avoids these patterns. What fictional techniques has she
developed to tell the story she has to tell without in fact
resorting to didacticism, etc.? This usually leads into a
discussion of the form of the short fictional piece, and more
specifically into a discussion of regionalism. (See the Norton
Anthology of American Women Regional Writers, edited by
Fetterley and Pryse.)

Students respond to the issue of storytelling—how
women tell stories and the relation between their telling of
stories and their context of domestic work. They are also
interested in the issue of landscape—how Cary manages to
create a mood through her description of the landscape and
how she manages to convey the open-ended nature of her
stories. Their lack of plot in the conventional sense is worthy
of discussion as is the fact that Cary tells stories about
women’s lives and experience from the point of view of a
female narrator.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal
Issues**

It is important to emphasize that Cary was essentially a self-
made writer. She had little formal education, little support
from family or extended personal contacts; yet she made
herself into a poet whose name was known throughout the
country. Her decision to move to New York in 1850
represented an extraordinary act of self-assertion for a woman
at the time. She determined that she needed to get out of the
“provinces” in order to have the literary career she wished and
she did it. She set up a household in New York that included
two of her sisters and she supported this household by her own
work. She is an example of the way in which nineteenth-
century American women writers were able to set up
supportive networks that were based on connections with other
women. She is an example of a nineteenth-century American
woman writer who was genuinely financially independent of
men. She ran her house, earned the money for it, and handled
her money herself.

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In terms of literary themes, it is important to emphasize the fact that Cary began to write seriously about her Ohio neighborhood after she left it for New York. She saw herself as trying to present a realistic picture of this neighborhood and to create a place in literature for the region, but she was able to do this only after she had left it for New York.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

It is important to point out that Cary thought of herself primarily as a poet. Her reputation during her lifetime and thereafter was based on her poetry. The conventions that governed poetry by women in the nineteenth century by and large produced a body of poetry that is not of interest to the late twentieth-century reader. The novel was also a highly determined form. Women were expected to write certain kinds of novels, to produce “women’s fiction” with the appropriately feminine perspective and set of values. The short fictional sketch, however, was a relatively undetermined territory. It was not taken as seriously as were the novel and poetry and no theory existed as to what kind of fictional sketch a woman should or should not write in order to demonstrate that she was in fact a woman. As a result, in writing her Clovernook sketches Cary was on her own, so to speak. She was able to write organically, to let the shape of the fiction emerge from the nature of the story she wished to tell. As a result, her short fiction holds interest for the contemporary reader; it seems fresh, new, not written to fulfill convention or previously determined script, but deriving from some deep personal place that produces a uniquely marked and signed prose. Thus any discussion of Alice Cary needs to address the role that the form of the fictional sketch plays in creating fiction that interests us. In other words, the issue of form is central to the discussion of Alice Cary. Specific features of this form include: the freedom this form gives to focus on character and setting as opposed to plot; the lack of closure in many of Cary’s sketches; the intermingling of realism and surrealism. For a fuller discussion of these and other issues relative to the
form of the sketch in relation to Alice Cary, I refer the instructor to my “Introduction” to the Rutgers Press edition of the short fiction of Alice Cary, *Clovernook Sketches and Other Stories*.

It is also important to discuss the issue of realism in relation to Cary. Since American literary history, until very recently, has been based on a study of male writers, the predominant view is that realism began in America after the Civil War. However, women writers were experimenting with realism in the decades before the Civil War. Cary’s “Preface” to the first volume of Clovernook sketches, published in 1852, lays out her theory of realism and the instructor should be familiar with it. She sees herself as participating in the effort to write about American subjects and she sees herself as doing something “new” in choosing to write about these subjects as “they really are.” In making this choice she is in effect following the lead of writers like Caroline Kirkland and participating in the development of realism as a mode suited to the needs and interests of women writers in the nineteenth century. Alice Cary thus provides the instructor with the opportunity to at once raise the issue of the bias in literary history and the issue of the development of realism as an American mode.

**Original Audience**

As I have indicated above, Cary’s primary audience during her lifetime was for her poetry. Her short fiction was not a big popular success and was not reprinted. But the nineteenth century, as I said before, did not take the genre of short fiction as seriously as it did that of poetry and the novel. So in a way this does not tell us much about how well her short fiction was received by her readers. Her short fiction, much of which was initially published in periodicals, may well have been as popular as that of any other contemporary writer, male or female. The point is that the genre itself was not as popular. Interestingly enough, however, Cary’s greatest critical successes came from her short fiction. Once again, though, this may simply indicate that the genre itself was not taken very
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Cary can be fruitfully compared with a number of different writers in a number of different contexts. She can be compared with writers like Poe and Hawthorne in the use of fiction as dream work and projection. She creates the same kind of uncanny, eerie, dreamlike atmosphere that they do. She can also be compared with them in terms of her use of the first-person narrator and the complexities of that narrator’s relation to the story she tells and the characters she creates. She can also be compared with them in terms of her use of setting.

She can be compared with nineteenth-century women writers like Caroline Kirkland for her use of realism and for her commitment to telling the woman’s side of the story. She can also be compared with other nineteenth-century women writers for her ability to avoid some of their didacticism, Christian moralizing, and “sentimentality.”

She can be most interestingly compared to Emily Dickinson in her ability to place herself and her imagination at the center of her work. Very few nineteenth-century American women writers were able to overcome the dicta that required of women self-effacement in literature as in life. Dickinson overcame it by virtue of not publishing. Cary overcame it through her use of the nonconventional form of short fiction. Her work is remarkable for the sustained development of first-person narration. Her collections of Clovernook sketches are as much about the narrator as they are about anything else. She creates a remarkable I/eye for her work.

Bibliography

I refer the instructor to the discussion of Alice Cary in Provisions and to the “Introduction” to the Rutgers Press volume of Cary’s short fiction, Clovernook Sketches and Other Stories. Also to Annette Kolodny, The Land Before Her.
Elizabeth Stoddard (1823–1902)

*Contributing Editors: Sybil Weir and Sandra A. Zagarell*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Stoddard’s terse narrative style, the limitation of point of view to the indirect, ironic woman narrator, and the oblique portrayal of the major act on which the plot turns may make it difficult for students to follow “Lemorne Versus Huell.” Also, students unfamiliar with conventions of gothic fiction and mid-century history may miss much of the social commentary. It may therefore be useful to ask students to review the plot. It may also be useful to give background on sentimental fiction’s featuring of courtship plots and frequent endorsement of female self-sacrifice and male paternalism (as in *The Wide, Wide World*) so that students get a sense of Stoddard’s critique of such conventions.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Although Stoddard’s major subjects, like those of many antebellum women writers, include her protagonists’ urges toward selfhood and the sociocultural conventions that thwart or channel those urges, she is at once far more ironic about conventions—including literary conventions—and far more sympathetic to women’s personal ambition, her own as well as her protagonists’, than a Susan Warner or a Maria Cummins. In “Lemorne” she calls attention to the limitations that gender and class impose on her protagonist and to the limitations of the feminine strategies of irony and passive aggressiveness with which Margaret both adapts to and resists her circumstances. She also emphasizes romantic love as a convention that facilitates the bartering of women and portrays
marriage and family as institutionalizing the possession of women who are without power. These aspects of “Lemorne” exhibit the intense critique of bourgeois Victorian American gender arrangements to be found in much of Stoddard’s fiction. At the same time, “Lemorne” is unquestioning of other dimensions of antebellum America. It uses slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law as vehicles to suggest the need for more liberal circumstances for white women while remaining silent about the circumstances of the enslaved population of the United States. In converting slavery to a metaphor for the condition of white women, Stoddard participates in a construction of white femininity that relies on a racially polarized society and is prevalent throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth—as Hazel Carby demonstrates in *Reconstructing Womanhood*.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Primary questions have to do with Stoddard’s use of the literary traditions of her day—traditions of sentimental fiction and gothic romance. She undercuts the standard courtship plot with her ironizing of the hero as rescuer, yet sustains a degree of erotic intensity rare in fiction by antebellum women writers and much influenced by Charlotte and Emily Brontë, whom she esteemed highly. I’d also emphasize Stoddard’s interweaving of the Fugitive Slave motif and references to European literature, and her satirization of Newport society.

I would also stress Stoddard’s humor and her importance “as an experimenter in narrative method. She anticipates modern fiction in using a severely limited mode with minimal narrative clues” (Buell and Zagarell, “Biographical and Critical Introduction,” p. xxiii).

**Original Audience**

“Lemorne Versus Huell” was first published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, suggesting that Stoddard’s fiction was directed to a middle-class, educated audience. In fact, neither...
her short fiction nor her novels were ever popular or recognized beyond a small circle of intellectuals and writers. Presumably, the audience of her own day was put off by her elliptical style and by her often satiric questioning of prevalent assumptions about female virtue, self-abnegation, and religious piety, as they may also have been by what James Russell Lowell termed her “coarseness.”

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

I would compare Stoddard’s fiction with that of Stowe and Spofford. For example, in what ways does her characterization depart from Stowe’s emphasis on religious piety? How do her use of an unusual situation and her intensity compare with those of Spofford? How, and under what circumstances, do all three writers emphasize their heroines’ self-reliance (or the perils of self-abnegation)? Other appropriate comparisons and contrasts have to do with point of view (emphasizing Stoddard’s rather unusual use of first-person narration) and with gender commentary. An interesting comparison can be made with the journalistic essays of Fanny Fern, which also take up the marriage contract, the condition of women, and women’s work, though in a very different mode, and which also use humor, though of a much broader kind.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What is the effect of the first-person narrative?
2. In what ways is distance from the narrator achieved?
3. What do you make of the ending? Is it unexpected? How does it affect your assessment of Margaret’s passivity? Of her marriage?

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910)

*Contributing Editor: Judith Roman-Royer*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Problems in teaching Davis include: dialect, allusions, confusing dialogue, hard-to-identify speakers, vague frame story, religious solutions, and the juxtaposition of sentimental language with religiosity and realism. To address these problems consider the following:

1. Explain the dialect (see the footnotes).
2. Try to ignore the allusions; most are not important to the heart of meaning.
3. The names of characters, their jobs, the speakers, and their roles need to be clarified:
   - Kirby, son of Kirby the mill owner—He is aware of the problems of the workers but sees them as insoluble; he takes the attitude of Pontius Pilate.
   - Dr. May, a town physician—He is idealistic, sympathetic to the workers, but naïve about reality and thus unintentionally cruel to Hugh.
   - “Captain”—The reporter for the city paper.
   - Mitchell, Kirby’s intellectual brother-in-law, visitor to the South—He is cold, cynically socialistic.
4. Discuss the frame story. Careful readers will find inconsistencies in the frame narratives that explain the narrator’s perspective. Early in the story, the narrator “happens” to be in the house, apparently a visitor, but at the end of the story, the house and statue of the korl woman seem to belong to her. The story of the Wolfe family is said to be set thirty years in the past, so how did the narrator come to know it in such intimate detail? One of my students suggested that the narrator may be Janey, who has somehow risen above her environment and become a writer, a solution that is provocative and unsubstantiated by the text.

5. Show how Davis is ambiguous about a religious solution. She espouses it, but her realistic picture of the problem is so vivid that it seems impossible to the reader that just Quaker kindness will solve the problems.

6. The swing between romanticism and realism is at the heart of this author.

Some students find this work depressing, but some like it. They can be asked to compare the situation of the poor today, especially the homeless and today’s immigrants. Students can also be interested in a discussion of religion’s role in comforting and/or silencing the poor.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

“Life in the Iron-Mills” is an accessible text that can be assigned and discussed in a single class meeting. Many students reject the “naturalistic” view inherent in the story that the characters could do little to help themselves. Contemporary students, educated to believe in the Alger myth, are eager to protest that Hugh could have lifted himself out of his poverty or moved to the city to become an artist.

Perhaps a greater problem may be students’ unwillingness to see the feminist subtext of the story discovered by Tillie Olsen. The story deals quite openly with
the life of an iron-worker; how, then, do we find in it the story of a thwarted “spinster” fiction writer? To make this reading credible, students will need to know something of Davis’s life story (see headnote); the position of unmarried women in society (their dependence on their families, the lack of socially acceptable ways for a woman to earn a living, and the impossibility of living alone); and the incredible isolation of writers who lived anywhere in America outside of Boston and perhaps New York at this period. In the context of a traditional American literature survey, Davis’s frustration could be related to that of writers like Cooper and Irving and the sense of the United States as an artistic wilderness that prevailed early in the century.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

As far as style, many would have found the work oppressively realistic and unpleasant. The Hawthornes used words like “gloomy” and even “mouldy” to describe Davis’s writing.
Original Audience

The work was written for an upper-middle-class and upper-class audience, the readers of the Atlantic, who were the elite of the country at the time. Many had familiarity with languages and the literary allusions in the work as well as intimate knowledge of the New Testament. Most were “liberal” Christians and although some were social reformers, virtually all believed the individual Christian had a responsibility to people like Hugh and Deb. The audience was highly receptive to Davis’s message.

The difference in the audience now is that college students come from a broader spectrum of society. This has two effects: First, some of them may have worked in factories or come from blue-collar families and have experience closer to that of Hugh and Deb; second, the language of the text is apt to be more difficult for them. The excess of punctuation is an impediment. The sentimental exclamations probably differ little from some kinds of contemporary popular literature that students may have encountered.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Davis can be compared to

1. Hawthorne, who had an influence on Davis, especially House of the Seven Gables; American Romantic literature.
2. Dickens—sentimental realism.
3. Popular literature of today.
4. Novels of social criticism, such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin; even later muckraking novels, such as The Jungle.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing
1. What is the purpose of the rhetorical questions posed by the author/narrator at various points in the story? Do they refer simply to the prospect of salvation for a man convicted of stealing, or do they imply the naturalistic view that Hugh’s theft is excused by his unfortunate environment and heredity? Some students may recognize what is probably religious rhetoric in the questions: perhaps the teacher can simply encourage students to seek additional possibilities.

2. They could write a paper discussing the story as a transitional work between Romanticism and realism, using traits outlined in Richard Chase’s *American Novel and Its Tradition*.

**Bibliography**

Tillie Olsen’s essay in the Feminist Press edition is probably the most accessible place to go for additional information. It is highly personal but helpful.

**The Emergence of American Poetic Voices**

**Songs and Ballads**

*Contributing Editor: Paul Lauter*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Students immediately ask, “Is it literature?” The songs raise all of the issues about “popular culture,” including their “quality” as literary texts, their changeableness from version to version,
their audience, their relationship to music. Can they be, should they be, studied in a literature classroom rather than in a music classroom?

It is useful to play versions of the songs and ballads—especially the spirituals. Surprisingly few students have ever actually heard such a song, and they often find them powerful. But this can be overdone—after all, the musical vocabulary is, on the whole, even more remote from student culture than are the texts. A less inhibited or more skilled instructor may wish to involve students in the singing; indeed, some may be able to lead a class, and that experience can pay off significantly when one gets to the question of audience.

It can be important to confront directly the question of what constitutes the domain of “literature.” Who decides what is included there? And on what basis? If these texts are, as some are, extraordinarily simple, does that remove them from what we think of as significant literature? Are there questions of audience and function involved? What are—and have been—the functions of such songs? Who sings them, and when, and why? Are these significant literary questions?

Another issue best confronted directly is the question of the mutability of such songs. Is it a good thing or a bad thing that people change them?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

 Obviously, the spirituals draw deeply on the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Many are built on a fundamental analogy between black slaves and the Hebrews. They can also be read ethnographically, for they express a good deal about the character and functions of religion and other forms of culture in the slave period.

Both the songs of black and white communities interestingly focus on everyday experiences of work, courting, religion (as well as on eschatological visions).
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The headnote points to a number of formal features, like refrains and repetitions, qualities of language, characteristic patterns of imagery, the ways in which songs are taken up, reframed, renewed. It can be useful to discuss how these songs are similar to and different from more “formal” poetry and also from one another.

Original Audience

The most interesting issue may be how, in the origins of such songs, the distinction between creator/singer and audience did not, on the whole, exist. The end of the Introduction to the period considers that issue. Raising this problem allows a class to explore the difference between culture as a commodity produced by persons other than oneself, and culture as an integral part of human life, serving a variety of functions, including discharging grief, inspiring hope, and offering opportunities, in the singing, for physical and psychological expression. The song, Bernice Reagon has pointed out, is only the vehicle or perhaps excuse for the singing.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

This unit is designed to allow, indeed, encourage, comparisons between varieties of poetic texts from very different cultures.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) How are these songs similar to/different from more formal kinds of poetry?
   (b) What patterns of imagery, features of language, do you notice?
   (c) What are the structural features common to some or
2. (a) Make up an additional verse to . . . (Useful since it helps students see the formal features of a text, and also to overcome their wariness of “poetry.”)
(b) Should such songs (or other forms of popular culture) be taught in literature courses?

Bibliography

The first chapter of Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* offers important insights about the functions and structure of spirituals.

William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878)

*Contributing Editor: Allison Heisch*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Most of the Bryant selections in the anthology are ruminative poems about the nature of life and the nature of nature. Some students really like this sort of thing, but substantial numbers are allergic to it.

The most effective strategy I have found is to provide visual backup in the form of a Hudson River School slide show. A fancy version would parallel English Romantic poets (especially Gray, Cowper, and Wordsworth) and painters (e.g., Constable and Turner).

Bryant is a fine example of a writer who was not only popular but famous in his day. He can be used to open a discussion of the social and historical implications of such popularity (why it comes and why it goes), the essentially political character of anthologies (yes, even this one), and the idea of “fame” in connections with contemporary poets and
For students (and they are many) who do not naturally respond to Bryant, the questions generally run to “Why are we reading this?” Or, more decorously, “Why was he so popular?” Yet, they do respond to him as an example of how the American high culture invented itself. In an altogether different vein, the personal philosophy expressed in “Thanatopsis” has some enduring appeal.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Bryant is very useful as a means of demonstrating the imitative mode through which New Englanders of an intellectual bent sought to establish an acceptable American literary voice. This is easily demonstrated by pairing his poems with comparable English productions. He can also be linked to the Transcendentalists—though with great caution, since much more is going on.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Again, he should be shown in connection with his English models. It’s useful to point out the self-conscious regularity of these poems both in connection with their particularly derivative subject matter and in contrast with the form and subjects of those contemporary poems and songs (well represented in this anthology) that were not informed by the dominant English literary culture.

Original Audience

I have usually talked about Bryant’s audience in connection with the expansion of publishing in nineteenth-century America—especially magazines and newspapers. Ordinarily, students have no idea what a nineteenth-century newspaper would have looked like or contained. They never expect them to contain poetry. To demonstrate the probably contemporary audience, I have found it useful to collect and read commercially produced greeting cards.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

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Freneau’s “The House of Night” may be read with “Thanatopsis” to demonstrate both the imitation of dominant English poetic forms and transatlantic lag-time in creating them for American audiences. Obviously, Bryant may be read with Emerson and Thoreau as a pre- or proto-Transcendentalist. It is interesting to contrast Bryant’s earnest view of nature with Emily Dickinson’s ironic one. Bryant’s poem on Abraham Lincoln against Whitman’s (“When Lilacs Last . . . Bloom’d”) makes a memorable contrast between Anglophile American poetry and poetry with a genuine American accent.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) Based upon what you can glean from these poems, what sort of religious and philosophical outlook does this writer have?
(b) Compare the view of nature in poems such as “To a Waterfowl” and “The Yellow Violet” with that in “The Prairies.”

2. Bryant’s “Thanatopsis” is often read as a proto-Transcendentalist poem; yet it was discovered and rushed to publication by Bryant’s father, who by all accounts was a Calvinist. Some options:
(a) Provide a Calvinist “reading” of “Thanatopsis.”
(b) Locate, compare, and explain potentially “Transcendental” and “Calvinist” elements in the poem.
(c) Argue that it’s one or the other (very artificial, but effective).

Bibliography


Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)

Contributing Editor: Allison Heisch

Classroom Issues and Strategies

If students have encountered Longfellow before taking a college course, the poems they know are not in this anthology: Evangeline, The Song of Hiawatha, The Courtship of Miles Standish. The Longfellow of this anthology is our late
twentieth-century “revisionist” Longfellow, and except in poems such as “A Psalm of Life,” he is almost unrecognizable as a writer who might have written those famous poems. If students have not actually read Longfellow, but merely heard of him (the typical case), they want to know why he’s so famous.

Longfellow is accessible, and the fact is that in almost any class there will be students who adore “A Psalm of Life” and students who cannot stand it. Such a division, of course, presents the teacher with an ideal point of departure.

Although Longfellow is now very unfashionable, he is nevertheless an excellent vehicle for teaching about poetry either to the unlimited or the turned-off. Oddly enough, students in general respond to the story of his life almost more readily than to his poetry. That, therefore, is a good place to begin. They often ask about his fame. Some respond very positively to his sentimentalism, which can be tricky.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Longfellow’s themes in the poems in this collection are nearly indistinguishable from those of his contemporaries in England. It’s useful to show him, therefore, as an example of the branch of American literature that created itself in admiring imitation of English literature. He is also that rare thing, a genuine celebrity of a poet, whose fame has subsided and whose stature has shrunk accordingly. Many of the poems we now admire most are from his later years, and conform better to modern taste than the poems for which he was famous in his lifetime. Thus, he can be used as a good example of the ways in which changing literary taste alter literary reputations.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Longfellow’s poems are not only accessible in their meaning.
but they are also highly regular in their form. It is very simple to teach metrics with Longfellow because he provides easy and memorable examples of so many metrical schemes. These can be presented in connection with Longfellow’s personal history, for he is of course an academic poet, and as such a poet writing often self-consciously from a learned perspective. Thus, nothing with him seems wholly spontaneous or accidental.

**Original Audience**

Two points are easy and convenient where audience is concerned: First, the fact that Longfellow was in his time as popular as a rock singer might be in ours. Second, the fact that while he was writing for an audience descended from transplanted Englishmen, he was nevertheless trying to create for them an American poetry crafted from “native” materials, thereby making chauvinist myth. Admittedly, it’s hard to get to that point from the selections in the present anthology, but since “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” was originally part of *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, a way can be found.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

There are many directions to travel here: First, locate Longfellow in New England with Emerson and the Transcendentalists; second, locate him as a (necessary?) predecessor to Whitman, and then compare their views of America; third, set his view of life and nature against that of native poets.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. (a) To whom is he writing? What is his message?
   (b) Translate “A Psalm of Life” *literally* and say whether you agree or disagree.
   (c) What are Longfellow’s favorite words?
2. How has Longfellow changed or maintained his essential view of life between “A Psalm of Life” and “Aftermath”?

Bibliography

Because his poetry is more impressive taken together than individually analyzed, Longfellow has commanded whole books more often than single articles.


Frances Sargent Locke Osgood (1811–1850)

*Contributing Editor: Joanne Dobson*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students generally find Osgood appealing. Her apparently self-contradictory take on the position of women can be addressed through discussion of “A Reply,” in which Osgood speaks of the necessity for women in a repressive society to express themselves obliquely rather than directly.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Osgood is generally a sentimental poet; that is to say, she is concerned primarily with affectional issues. My essay on literary sentimentalism in *American Literature* (1997) might help an instructor define the broader contours of sentimental literary practice. In addition, her focus on gender politics—on
the inequitable balance of power between the sexes in a patriarchal society—could be looked at in light of the women’s rights movement of the 1840s. Students will inevitably be interested in Osgood’s relationship with Poe, so a knowledge of his life would help; however, I would advise against allowing romantic speculation to dominate discussion. Osgood’s apparently unhappy marriage to a husband who traveled extensively and her residency at the Astor Hotel could be discussed in light of contemporary expectations for domestic life, and her arch and flirtatious self-presentation could be explored from the perspective of cultural expectations for female behavior. Class issues and the international nature of Osgood’s experience could also be usefully considered.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Osgood’s versification is skillful, even brilliant, and provides material for aesthetic discussion. Instructors might find it useful to research the poetic tradition of the *blason* before approaching “The Maiden’s Mistake,” a witty deconstruction of a misogynist tradition. My essay on Osgood’s poetry in *American Literature* (1993) offers further “salon” verses. See also my essay on sentimental literary practice, noted above.

Original Audience

Osgood had at least two primary contemporary audiences: a wide-ranging public audience, to whom she catered and who seemingly adored her, and an elite private audience of her sophisticated New York City peers, for whom she wrote a number of poems to be read aloud at salon gatherings.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

A comparison of Osgood’s private poetry with that of her
small-town New England contemporary Emily Dickinson could elicit some lively discussion. Her connection with Poe is a natural for discussion.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Look at other poets in Griswold’s *Female Poets* for comparison of themes and realizations.

Consider “A Reply” in the context of Griswold’s assumptions about female authorship as revealed in his introduction.

Read “Lines on . . . a Bill for the Protection of the Property of Married Women” (1848) in light of the Seneca Falls “Sentiments.”

Compare “To a Slandered Poetess” and Emily Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody!” (J288).

Compare Osgood’s “Alone” and Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone.”

Bibliography

Along with the material listed in the text, it would be useful to look at Rufus Griswold’s *The Female Poets of America* (1848), both the general introduction and the introduction to Osgood’s work. Other helpful contemporaneous publications are *The Memorial: Written by Friends of the Late Mrs. Osgood*, edited by Mary E. Hewitt in 1851, and Poe’s considerations of Osgood in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, March and September of 1846. Poe biography is generally biased against Osgood, but Kenneth Silverman’s *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (1991) gives a fairly objective account.
Classroom Issues and Strategies

I use the 1855 versions of “Song of Myself” and “The Sleepers” because I think these poems represent Whitman at his unrevised best. I begin with a biographical introduction, stressing Whitman’s active engagement as radical Democrat and party journalist in the major political conflicts of pre–Civil War America. The inscription poem “One’s-Self I Sing” and his vision of the poet balanced between pride and sympathy in the 1855 Preface serve as a good introduction to “Song of Myself.” I usually begin by asking the students to talk about Whitman’s free verse technique. What ordering devices does he use in the opening lines to achieve his poetic design: these include repetition, biblical parallelism, rhythmic recurrence, assonance, and consonance.

Section 15 is a good illustration of the ways Whitman’s catalog technique serves as a democratizing device, inscribing the pattern of many and one. By basing his verse in the single, end-stopped line at the same time that he fuses this line—through various linking devices—with the larger structure of the whole, Whitman weaves an overall pattern of unity in diversity. This pattern of many and one—the e pluribus unum that was the revolutionary seal of the American republic—is the overarching figure of Leaves of Grass.

I present “Song of Myself” as a drama of democratic identity in which the poet seeks to balance and reconcile major conflicts in the body politic of America: the conflict between “separate person” and “en masse,” individualism and equality, liberty and union, the South and the North, the farm and the city, labor and capital, black and white, female and male, religion and science. One can discuss any of the individual sections of the poem in relation to this conflict. Moments of particular conflict and crisis occur in sections 28 and 38. I ask
the students to discuss the specific nature of the crisis in each of these sections. Both involve a loss of balance.

In section 28, the protagonist loses bodily balance as he is swept away by an erotic, masturbatory urge. Ask the students to think about why a masturbation fantasy occurs in a poem about democracy. Ask them to think about why the masturbatory fit is represented in the language of political insurrection. These questions lead to interesting observations about the relation between political power and power over the body. Masturbation is, in effect, the political ground on which Whitman tests the theory of democracy. Within the democratic economy of his poem, the turbulence of the body, like the turbulence of the masses, is part of a natural regenerative order.

If section 28 involves a loss of bodily balance, section 38 involves a loss of self in empathetic identification with others. In discussing the crisis in section 38, ask the students what Whitman means by the lines: “I find myself on the verge of a usual mistake.” This will usually lead back to the end of section 3, where the poet begins identifying with scenes of suffering, carnage, and death. Some of these scenes are linked with the nation’s history: the hounded slave, the Texas war, the American Revolution. The poet appears to be on the verge of losing faith in the divine potency of the individual and the regenerative pattern of the whole. He resolves the crisis by remembering the divinity of Christ as a living power existing within rather than outside of every individual.

The resolution of this crisis leads to the emergence of the divinely empowered poet who presides over the final passages of the poem, declaring his ultimate faith in the “form, union, plan” of the universe. Here you might want to discuss the relation between this poetic affirmation of democratic faith and union and the fact of an American Union that was in the throes of dissolution.

Since Whitman’s poetic development corresponds with stages in his own and the nation’s history, a chronological presentation works well in the classroom. After discussing “Song of Myself,” you might want to discuss other 1855 poems such as “The Sleepers” and “There Was a Child Went
Forth.” “The Sleepers,” which was toned down in later versions, represents in both its form and its content the half-formed, erotically charged, and anxiety-ridden fantasies of the dream state. The poem anticipates Freud’s “unconscious” and the literary experiments of the surrealists. But the poem is revolutionary not only in its psychosexual dimension. The poet also descends into a kind of political unconscious of the nation, dredging up images of regeneration through violence associated with Washington and the battle for American independence, the slave as black Lucifer, and the Indian squaw.

If you have time to do later work by Whitman, the 1860 poems might be grouped together since they correspond with a period of both personal and national crisis. Within the context of *Leaves of Grass*, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” appears to respond to this crisis. Ask the students to comment on the differences between the “amative” poems of *Children of Adam* and the “adhesive” poems of *Calamus*. This will lead to a discussion of Whitman’s sexual politics.

Women students have particularly strong and mixed reactions to “A Woman Waits for Me”; they are attracted by Whitman’s celebration of an erotically charged female body, yet are repelled by the fact that she seems rhetorically prone. The students will usually note that Whitman’s poems to men seem more immediate and personal than the poems of *Children of Adam*. “In Paths Untrodden” reflects Whitman’s split at this time between the public culture of democracy and his desire to tell secrets, to “come out” poetically by naming his hitherto unspeakable passion for men. You might want to remind the students that the term “homosexual” did not yet exist, and thus Whitman was breaking the path toward a language of male love. His invention is particularly evident in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” where the power and tenderness of his feelings for his lover are linked with the rhythms of a completely natural order. The “confessional” note in the poems anticipates the later work of Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. Ask the students to reflect on why it was the poems of *Children of Adam* and not *Calamus* that most shocked the literary establishment. It was really not
until Allen Ginsberg wrote his comic tribute to Whitman, “In a Supermarket in California,” that Whitman, the homosexual poet, came fully out of the closet—at least in America.

I usually begin discussion of the war poems by asking how the experience of fratricidal war might affect Whitman as the poet of national union. This will lead to reflections on the tragedy of the Civil War. The poems of *Drum-Taps*—which proceed from militant exultation, to the actual experience of war, to demobilization and reconciliation—might be read as an attempt to place the butchery of the war within a poetic and ultimately regenerative design. Ask the students to compare Whitman’s war poems with his earlier poems. They are at once more formally controlled and more realistic—stylistic changes that are linked with the war context. “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” and “The Artilleryman’s Vision” are proto-modern poems in which the individual appears as an actor in a drama of history he no longer understands or controls. Whitman’s ambivalence about black emancipation is evident in “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors.” “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” and “As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado” are particularly effective in suggesting the ways the wartime context of male bonding and comradeship gave Whitman a legitimate language and social frame within which to express his love for men.

In discussing Whitman’s famous elegy on the death of President Lincoln, it is interesting to begin by asking what remains unsaid in the poem. For one thing, Lincoln is never named as the subject within the context of the poem; his death becomes representative of all the war dead. By placing Lincoln’s death within a timeless regenerative order of nature, Whitman’s “Lilacs” also “covers over” the fact of Lincoln’s unnatural and violent assassination. Although the vision of battle in section 15 is often passed over in critical considerations of the poem, this bloody sight of “battle-corpses” and the “debris” of war is, I believe, the unspeakable horror and real subject of the poem.

*Democratic Vistas* (1871) might be read either as an introduction to or a conclusion to the study of Whitman. In the essay, he struggles with the central tensions and paradoxes of
American, New World experience. These conflicts intensify and are more urgently addressed in the post–Civil War period as the unleashed force of market capitalism and the dynamic of modern civilization appear to spin out of control. “Who bridles Leviathan?” Whitman asked in *Democratic Vistas*. It is a fitting question with which to conclude the study of Whitman and to begin the story of the modern world.

**Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)**

*Contributing Editors: Peggy McIntosh and Ellen Louis Hart*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Students may have problems with the appearance of the poems—with the fact that they are without titles; that they are often short and compact, compressed; that the dash is so often used in the place of traditional punctuation. Some students will be put off by the grammatical elisions and ellipses, and some by the fact that the poems often do not quickly display a central, controlling metaphor or an easily identifiable narrative theme. Students who are already intimidated by poetry may find the poems difficult and unyielding. Some, however, may find Dickinson’s brevity and conciseness startling and enjoyable. Those who have false notions that everything in poetry means or symbolizes something else, and that the reader must crack the code and come up with a “solution” to each poem’s meaning, will be frustrated by Dickinson or will read the poems with atrocity insensitivity. Dickinson’s work requires intense concentration, imagination, and unusually high tolerance for ambiguity.

Some students may want to dismiss Dickinson as an “old maid” or as a woman who “missed out on life” by not marrying. One student asked “Why didn’t she just move to Boston and get a job?” Students want to know about
Dickinson’s life and loves, her personal relationships with both men and women; they are curious about why she chose not to publish; they are interested in her religious/spiritual life, her faith, and her belief in immortality. They want to know what the dilemmas of her life were, as they manifested themselves in her writing: What her psychic states were, what tormented her, what she mourned, what drove her close to madness, why she was fascinated with death and dying. Addressing these questions allows the opportunity to discuss the oversimplifying and stereotyping that result from ignorance of social history as well as insistence of heterosexism.

Students should be prepared for the poems by being encouraged to speculate. An instructor can invite students to explore each poem as an experiment, and to ease into the poetry, understanding that Dickinson was a poet who truly “questioned authority” and whose work defies authoritative readings. All of her difficulties as listed above can be seen as connected with her radically original imagination.

Students can be directed toward approaching these poems with “lexicon” in hand, as Dickinson wrote them. Here is the perfect opportunity for an exercise with the OED. Students can be asked to make a list as they read of words that begin to seem to them particularly Dickinsonian; “Circumference,” for example. They can also list characteristic phrases or images. The selection of poems can be parcelled out in certain groupings in which linked images, emotions, or descriptions of natural phenomena are easily recognizable.

Students can be assigned to write journals in which they record their first impressions and discoveries, as well as later commentary on poems and further stages of interpretation. Asking people to read poems out loud will help them to learn to hear the poet’s voice and to tune their ears to her rhymes, rhythms, and syntax. Above all, the instructor should not pretend assurance about Dickinson’s meanings and intentions.

It works well to have students make a selection of poems on a theme or image cluster, and then work in groups with the selected poems, afterwards presenting their readings. Such group work can create flexibility while giving students
confidence in their own perceptions.

Another presentation that is very useful is the kind of demonstration Susan Howe gives and which some other teachers now use. Make a copy of a Thomas Johnson version of a poem and then make a typed transcription of the same poem using Franklin’s *Manuscript Books*. This can lead to interesting discussions of editing questions involved with Dickinson: how to represent the line breaks and the punctuation; how to render these unpublished poems in print.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Students need to know something about Dickinson’s life, her schooling, religious upbringing and subsequent rebellion, her family members, and the close friends who became the audience for her poems. (Much of this is outlined in the headnote.) They will be helped by having some historical sense of women and men in nineteenth-century New England. They need information on women’s habits of reading and writing, on friendships among women, religious revivalism, and life in a small college town like Amherst. Awareness of class, class consciousness, and social customs for families like the Dickinskons and their circle of friends will help prevent questions like the one cited above on why Dickinson didn’t just move and “go for it” in a city. Students should be discouraged from discussing the poems as “feminine” or as demonstrating “the woman’s point of view.”

A discussion of homophobia is necessary. Here the headnote should be helpful. The love poems are not exclusively heterosexual. Students should be encouraged to examine the erotics of this poetry without being limited to conventional notions of gender. Dickinson uses a variety of voices in these poems, writing as a child (often a boy), a wife-to-be, a woman rejected, and as a voice of authority which we often associate with maleness. These voices or roles or “poses,” as they are sometimes called, need to be identified and examined. Here are the multiplicities of self. Do we need to reconcile these voices? What happens when we don’t?
Students may reflect on or write about multiplicities of experience, perspective, and voice in themselves.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Information should be provided about other American and British writers publishing at this time, those whom Dickinson read, those especially popular at the time but not as well known, as well as those still recognized: Emerson, Longfellow, Stowe, Helen Hunt Jackson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Dickens.

Dickinson’s poetry is very dissimilar to poetry being published at the same time. Attention needs to be drawn to this fact and to the originality, the intentional and consistent innovativeness, of her style. Questions of style can also lead to observations concerning the thin line between poetry and prose in Dickinson’s letters, and about the complex and integral relationships between the two genres throughout her writing. Students can be invited to read letters as poems and to read poems as letters, exploring the ways in which Dickinson’s work challenges traditional notions of the boundaries of genre.

Students need to know about the publishing and editing history of the poems, to understand how Dickinson worked—collecting poems into packets, identifying words for revision, sending poems to various recipients, and apparently avoiding publication during her lifetime. There is also the question of the editing: What did a given poem look like when early editors published it, and when Thomas Johnson published the same poem in the variorum edition? Students should be made familiar with Thomas Johnson’s variorum as well as R. W. Franklin’s *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*. What did the variorum edition of the poems bring to Dickinson scholarship? What was available before? What has R. W. Franklin’s publication of the manuscript books meant? And what about Susan Howe’s argument that Dickinson’s original line breaks must be honored? Some students may wish to take up the question of how to represent in type Dickinson’s marks of punctuation.

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For two poems in our selection we include in footnotes all the “variants,” or alternate word choices Dickinson noted for each poem. Using Franklin’s *Manuscript Books*, students can observe in detail the poet’s system for marking possible changes and listing variants. Furthermore, study of the facsimiles in the Franklin edition will give students an opportunity to observe the artistic conventions in Dickinson’s manuscripts—lineation and punctuation as well as her handwriting, or calligraphy, and her use of space between letters, words, and at the end of a line. Investigation of the manuscripts will give students the opportunity to discuss what has been lost in her visual art in the print transcriptions of the poems. In addition, reading the poems in the manuscript volumes encourages students to test out the theories of some critics that these volumes are artistic units with narrative and thematic cohesion.

It is important to point out that the number that appears at the head of each poem in our selection is not a part of the space of the poem, and that these numbers were never used by the poet. They were established by Thomas Johnson in his attempt to arrange the complete poems chronologically. Since so few of Dickinson’s manuscripts can be dated, the Johnson numbers are most often speculative. Their standard use has been as a system of reference, and as convenient as this system may be, a less artificial way of referring to a poem is to use the first line.

**Original Audience**

Students should look at Franklin (or photocopies of pages from Franklin) to see how the “packets” or “fascicles” looked. Reading poems sent in letters or with letters is a way of considering audiences, both Dickinson’s immediate audience and her writing for posterity. The variorum edition identifies poems sent in letters; the three volumes of *Letters* list many enclosed poems.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Dickinson can be read with her contemporaries, the American and British writers of her time. She may also be read in the context of twentieth-century New England writers, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, for example, or with current New England women writers, May Sarton and Maxine Kumin, for example. A regional sense is a strong thread in Dickinson’s writing. She may be read in the context of experiments in modernism, in relation to e. e. cummings, for example. Dickinson also fits within a continuum of American women poets from Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley through Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, H.D., Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Judy Grahn. (This, of course, is only one selection, which represents many of the best-known American writers. There are other such lists.)

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Cumbersome term papers “arguing” a single thesis on Dickinson are usually quite out of tune with her own multifaceted sensibility and intelligence. Reading a poem as a statement of a creed, that is, as a “proof” that Dickinson believed this or that, is usually fatal to common sense. We suggest that the following 15 writing assignments on Dickinson will suit a variety of students with a variety of learning styles.

1. All her life, Emily Dickinson seems to have felt she was encumbered by structures that did not fit her, whether structures of religion, belief, value, language, thought, manners, or institutions. If you share her feeling, give some examples of her sense of the problem and then some examples of your own sense of it, in your life.
2. 1862, a year in which Dickinson wrote more than 300 poems, seems to have been a year of great emotional
intensity for her. Drawing on poems from 1862 given in this anthology, trace some recurrent themes or designs in the poems of that year.

3. Kathleen Raine has written: “For the poet when he begins to write there is no poem, in the sense of a construction of words; and the concentration of the mind is upon something else, that precedes words, and by which the words, as they are written, must constantly be checked and rectified.”

If this quotation rings true for you, choose one or more poems and discuss the “something else” and the process by which Dickinson apparently revised toward it, using Johnson’s three-volume edition, which shows all known revisions.

4. You are Emily Dickinson. An acquaintance who does not know you very well has just suggested that the time you spend alone must feel somewhat empty. Write a fragment of a letter or a poem in which you respond as you think she might.

5. Many of Dickinson’s poems are not so much about ideas or themes, as about the process of seeing or coming to see, or guess, or know. Trace the elements of process in one or more poems; then imitate the sense of process in a passage of poetry or prose of your own.

6. What do you appreciate about Emily Dickinson, and what do you think she hoped readers would appreciate about her?

7. Read Jay Leyda’s collection of documents about Emily Dickinson’s year of college in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, and read Dickinson’s letters from her year away. Compare your own college experience with hers. Considering both the pressures on you and the pleasures you experience, how do you differ from or resemble her?

8. Dickinson’s poems have both authority and obliqueness, as suggested in her line “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” Discuss examples of Dickinson’s techniques of slantwise style and some of their effects on you as reader.
9. Reading Dickinson is a personal matter, and readers’ perceptions of her change continually. On each of three different days, begin an essay entitled “On Reading Emily Dickinson.” Do not work for consistency, but rather for a fresh account of your perception on each day.

10. For many English and American poets, moments of “seeing” accurately have often been moments of affirmation. For Dickinson, they were often moments of pain. Discuss any aspects of the poems on pain that interest you, shedding light, if possible, on her words “A nearness to Tremendousness/An Agony Procures. . . .”

11. Richard Wilbur wrote:

“At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile, telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things. . . . Of course, that is not a true story, but it is a way of saying what I find most remarkable in Emily Dickinson. She inherited a great and overbearing vocabulary which, had she used it submissively, would have forced her to express an established theology and psychology. But she would not let that vocabulary write her poems for her.”

Analyze some of the religious poems that seem to you unorthodox or surprising, and write a short piece of your own, in poetry or prose, in which you use the vocabulary of a religious tradition in an unusual way that “subserves your own sense of things.”

12. Write four alternative first paragraphs to a paper entitled “Emily Dickinson.”

13. Imagine a conversation between Emily Dickinson and any one of the other women writers read for this course. What might they have to talk about? Add a third woman (perhaps yourself) to the conversation if you like. Draw on all the sources of evidence that you have.

14. Dickinson used traditional hymn meter, but her poems are not like traditional hymns. Choose the words to any hymn you know, and rewrite them until they sound as much like Dickinson as possible. You may virtually have to abandon the original hymn.
15. Emily Dickinson’s first editors thought they were doing her a favor by changing certain words, repunctuating her poetry, and standardizing the line breaks. Using the three-volume Johnson edition and the Franklin manuscript books, judge for yourself, in the case of two or three poems in which changes were made.

Bibliography


Smith, Martha Nell, Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson, 1992.