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Seriously Popular: Rethinking 19th-century American Literature through the Teaching of Popular Fiction

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Seriously Popular: Rethinking 19th-Century American Literature through the Teaching of Popular Fiction

It comes up every year as students slog through Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” or The Scarlet Letter: “This is boring.” While I couldn’t disagree more with their assessment and try hard to breathe life into Hawthorne’s work, I cannot deny that reading Hawthorne is hard, and that the jump from hard to “boring” is not far for most students. The problem is that their assessment of “boring” can mean so many things. From a skeptic’s point of view, this indictment amounts to an admission of guilt: the students did not read the book at all, or did so in a cursory manner. But if we take a more generous approach, we could assume that maybe, just maybe, the students actually tried but failed to understand what Hawthorne possibly meant when he wrote, “They averred, that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth tinged in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing alight, whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time” (Hawthorne 79). As Cris Tovani points out in her book I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers, struggling readers often mask their frustration with the pat response, “It’s boring,” or really do experience boredom as a legitimate consequence of not having good reading comprehension strategies at their disposal. I tended to read struggling students’ reactions as being in line with this latter reading.

But what about the students I taught who did not generally struggle with reading, but had the same reactions to Hawthorne? These students’ reactions, taken together, point to a layer we often gloss over as teachers: taste. What do our students expect from the books they read? And that question surfaces a related one about readers in Hawthorne’s time: What did 19th-century readers expect from their texts and how did Melville’s and Hawthorne’s work address or interact with those expectations? Curious about the connections between my students’ reading tastes and those of 19th-century readers, I read Nina Baym’s excellent text Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America to gain a sense of how readers in the 1800s might have thought about the texts that they read.

Nineteenth-century readers wanted their novel to be a “story proper” (or a “novel proper”) with a beginning, middle, and end. There could be complicated action and nonlinear events, but the events needed to cohere; plot was essential (Baym, Novels 71). Novels should not be allegories because allegories were too simple; similarly, characters should develop and not simply be vehicles for concepts (92). Because novels should seek to improve us as people, they should have some kind of moral or “meaning” (we call this “theme”), but the narrator shouldn’t overtly moralize (126–27): “A novel of good moral tendency created love and esteem for one’s fellow human beings; one of bad tendency made for misanthropy” (176). Dialogue—or “conversations” as it was called in the 19th century—should be “spirited and thoughtful” and should be believable for the character speaking.

To see where my urban high school students lined up with Baym’s synthesis of what 19th-century readers looked for in novels, I generated a
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Chart outlining her findings and asked students to agree or disagree, making sure to provide reasons. I was surprised to find a strong overlap: the students’ surveys revealed that they also wanted to read novels for pleasure; that believable and natural dialogue was central to a book being a “good read”; that novels should have an identifiable plot (a beginning, middle, and end); and, finally, my students agreed that allegories were uninteresting as novels (which certainly helped me understand their aversion to excerpts of *Moby Dick*). Once I had a deeper sense of the reading tastes that underpinned my students’ approach to writers such as Hawthorne and Melville, I was better prepared to confront this openly, using their frustrated question “Who actually read this stuff?” to frame the unit and drive our conversations on mid-19th-century American literature.

Approaching mid-19th-century texts through this literary historical lens enables us not only to contextualize texts in more interesting and robust ways but also enables us to engage our students with the controversial and fiery debates around the canon: Why, for example, if no one liked or read Melville when he was writing, should we be interested in reading him now? If he was “misunderstood” in his own time, his genius unrecognized to the masses purchasing books, does that logic hold for writers who are not regarded as “serious” today? Who decides what we read and what is good and with what reasons? As English teachers we know that these canonical debates are the meaty, engaging stuff of literature; it is part of what keeps us talking and thinking about what is “good” and what is “worthwhile.” Thus, by choosing to complicate, historicize, and reframe our 19th-century American literature units through the inclusion of 19th-century popular fiction, we are allowing our students to take part in important debates that we as English teachers and readers enjoy. As a result, all students, not just those in Advanced Placement classes, are invested in a deep and engaging exploration of the canon.

Seriously Popular: The Reading Tastes of 19th-Century Readers

So who was reading Hawthorne or Melville in the 19th century? It’s not such a silly question. After all, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* sold a meager 7,800 copies of the 10,000 printed during his lifetime, netting him a whopping $1,500 in 1864 (Baym, “Introduction” vii), which, in today’s currency, would amount to approximately $21,000. Hawthorne, who had been drawn to popular fiction when he was a child, yearned for success in the reading world (viii). Yet he couldn’t quite laud all contemporary literature. When the reading public went crazy over Maria S. Cummins’s 1854 novel, *The Lamplighter*, Hawthorne famously declared to his publisher, William Ticknor,

America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter*, and other books neither better nor worse?—and worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000. (qtd. in Showalter xxxv)

And as for Melville’s *Moby Dick*, a tome dedicated to his friend and mentor, Hawthorne, the numbers are decidedly more modest: 3,000 copies were printed, and by the time Melville died, not all of them had sold.

*The Lamplighter*, on the other hand, Cummins’s book that elicited Hawthorne’s scathing critique of “scribbling women,” was a text that deeply satisfied 19th-century readers’ expectations and reading tastes. This book about an orphan girl, Gertie, who was rescued by Trueman Flint, a lamplighter, from a terrible life of mistreatment, was called by *The Knickerbocker* “one of the most original and natural narratives we have encountered in many a year” and promised that “you will rise from its perusal with a purer and more elevated idea of human nature” (Williams 72). The *Boston Daily Atlas* concluded (with emphasis added by Cummins’s publisher) that its author “has evidently a highly cultivated and refined as well as an original and imaginative mind, and writes with the ease, the classical correction of diction, and that choice selection of

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terms which indicate the good English scholar” (Williams 72; italics in original). Cummins’s book was only second to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in popularity.

Cummins was not the only writer who trumped Hawthorne. While Hawthorne struggled to pry the reading public from the magnetic pull of “scribbling women,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was enjoying unprecedented success as the most popular 19th-century American poet. Given the marginalized status of Longfellow in American literature curricula today, it might be hard to imagine that Longfellow’s popular success during his lifetime makes other popular writers of the day pale in comparison. His epic poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, sold 25,000 copies in two months in the United States and 10,000 copies in London in one day (Basbanes 2). Part of what made Longfellow so irresistible to the reading public was his accessibility and his ability to tell good stories.

Longfellow was the writing contemporary, rival, and/or friend of most of the canonical American writers that now hold court in our textbooks. It is therefore odd that there is little, if any, space in textbooks dedicated to the relationships, conversations, and interactions that these writers had with one another. Christoph Irmscher’s compulsively readable *Longfellow Redux* explores these relationships in utterly compelling ways. For example, Poe interpreted Longfellow’s reliance on European traditions and his co-opting of traditional stories and poems as downright plagiarism (Irmscher 15; Poe would later be accused of this same thing). Melville considered Longfellow to be unoriginal; Whitman derided Longfellow as the “expresser of common themes” and a “singer of little songs of the masses” (Irmscher 58). That said, Whitman had no choice but to review his own book, *Leaves of Grass*, while Longfellow’s poem *The Song of Hiawatha* was an immediate hit, selling 50,000 copies in 1857 (Irmscher 11). Hawthorne, on the other hand, appealed to Longfellow, his 1825 classmate at Bowdoin, to review *Twice Told Tales* for *The North American Review*, which Longfellow did with his characteristic generosity despite the fact that they had been more acquaintances than friends during college (Wineapple 95).

Not only were Longfellow’s poems a smash hit with the reading public at large, but they also became fixtures in 19th-century American classrooms, a sure irony given Longfellow’s invisibility in classrooms today. In her book *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917*, Angela Sorby traces the pedagogical function of Longfellow’s poetry (as well as Whittier’s and Dickinson’s) in American classrooms throughout the country. Longfellow’s epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), for example, was an extraordinarily popular text for children learning how to read. Students would later encounter performances of this poem throughout their lives as summer camps with Indian themes became popular (Sorby 8). Sorby explains that “[t]hrough the schools, *The Song of Hiawatha* made the homeland visible and audible to students—not as a map or a chart but as an archaic point of origin that could never be changed or defiled, and that could always be revisited through repetition” (10).

Irmscher explains that over the course of his life, Longfellow penned more than 20,000 letters to the fans who wrote to him, writing up to 20 letters a day. (Whitman, on the other hand, was often annoyed by the letters he received from fans, responding to them inconsistently [Irmscher 34].) The mass of correspondence Longfellow received actually
haunted him in his dreams, and when Longfellow died, his friend and fellow poet John Greenleaf Whittier speculated that it was answering fan mail that ultimately killed him (Irmscher 35–36). Some of his correspondents? The King of Brazil and Laura Bridgman, a prize pupil at the Perkins School for the Blind. It would be easy to dismiss Longfellow’s popularity as a sign of his vapidly. On the contrary, Longfellow tapped deeply into something that 19th-century readers wanted and needed, so much so that they wrote him time and time again to tell him that his poetry had soothed and inspired them.

Using Longfellow and Hawthorne to Catalyze Canonical Debates

So why was it that Longfellow, the most celebrated and widely read American poet of the 19th century, has fallen out of the canon, while Hawthorne, who was not widely read at the time, ascended to near-sacred status? This was the question that 30 English teachers from around the country and I explored at a three-week National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) seminar in 2006. The short answer, according to Irmscher, is that the modern aesthetic of difficulty, represented most clearly by modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (who believed himself to be a distant relative of Longfellow, by the way), made the accessibility and conventionality of Longfellow appear “unacademic” and trite. Irmscher points out, “Longfellow wrote poems that were meant to be enjoyed. Storytelling, unfortunately, goes against the modernist belief that in order to be any good a poem has to be concise and compressed, and difficult to figure out” (qtd. in Basbanes 3). And this debate is not confined to the past: we see it in language arts and English classrooms as teachers, parents, and even students debate the worthiness of The Kite Runner or Twilight or fan fiction.

This question of what is “worthwhile” goes beyond the American literature curriculum and into print or online media. Some narratives and myths dominate while others take a backseat. It is the common phenomena of stories that we tell, remember, and value. In American literature, texts from writers such as Cummins and Longfellow recede and disappear, thereby becoming occluded. In their article “Common Belief and the Cultural Curriculum: An Intergenerational Study of Historical Consciousness,” Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, and Ariel Duncan write that “Occlusion stands opposed to collective memory. It speaks to that which is no longer ‘common knowledge,’ no longer easily retrieved or taken for granted. The connotations that attend to this term—partiality, opacity, blockage—ask us to think about the stories, images, and cultural codes that have become muted in the transmission from one generation to the next” (66). We take our collective memory of a particular text or author—Whitman or Melville, for example, as being the “most American” of writers—as the only truth, rather than investigating the ways that these texts functioned in, circulated in, or represented the actual literary and historical moment of the 19th century. Our memory trumps history. Investigating why stories become occluded is the million-dollar question, to be sure. But what I would like to think about, instead, is what gets missed when certain stories get occluded.

Unlike the thorny debate about how to teach Columbus in history class, for example, choices regarding teaching material for English classes are less overtly loaded, but they are, like all curricular choices, loaded nonetheless. Whose voices are represented, whose identities validated are curricular flashpoints. To a certain extent, the centrality of textbook within curricula work to delimit meaty conversations about who is taught and why. Indeed, textbooks often work to render this debate invisible, in part because the tacking on of secondary narratives under the guide of “For Further Reading” gives the illusion of inclusion. (How many students have actually pursued these suggestions?) By relegating these other texts, authors, and histories to the bright, glosy boxes in the margin of a textbook page, the editors’ attitudes are clear: these are important to acknowledge, but not important enough to study. And when we disarticulate a 19th-century text from the literary and social historical contexts out of which the texts were born, we unwittingly decontextualize and simplify the texts we wish to complicate. The
inclusion or exclusion of texts indexes our attitude toward what is important and, as a result, informs our students of what is "true," "worthwhile," and "relevant." Their understanding of the "America" of their American literature courses is largely contingent on our curricular and pedagogical decisions. And this is no small thing.  

**Complicating the Canon with and for All Students**

One can approach complicating the canon in American literature in a multitude of ways, from a wholesale reframing of the curriculum, to the juxtaposition of contemporary and historical texts, to approaching chosen American literature units through the lens of literary and social history. When I taught this unit on mid-19th-century writers, I chose this last approach. I began by giving the survey on 19th-century reading tastes to the students to establish a starting point in terms of what they were expecting from their texts. After we discussed and compared their reading tastes to those of 19th-century readers, we went on to read excerpts of Moby Dick, discussing the ways in which they might approach a review of the text as well as the ways in which a 19th-century reader (as described by Baym) might have reacted to this text. I then used these reviews in conjunction with actual reviews of *Moby Dick* to illustrate a larger point about reading tastes: finding the text uncompelling or uninteresting might not simply be a matter of "not getting it." This activity allowed us to see that the students were not the only ones who found the book difficult to read and understand: their reviews matched, almost identically, some of the critiques of the book during Melville's life. Soon my students began to see that their struggle to understand Melville's psychologically and symbolically complicated language was not a reflection of their ability to read or their intelligence, but actually a result of many factors including their reading tastes.  

Next, we moved onto juxtaposing Hawthorne and Cummins, one of the "scribbling women" at whom Hawthorne directed his frustration. Because we had already spent a good deal of time reading and discussing *The Scarlet Letter*, the students were already familiar with the book's dense language and rich themes of sin and hypocrisy. Thus, after reviewing what we knew about Hawthorne and his writing, I distributed copied excerpts of two popular books written by 19th-century women: excerpts from Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* and copies of the first 35 pages of Cummins's book, *The Lamplighter*, to which I added Hawthorne's "scribbling women" quote at the top of the first chapter (the out-of-print book may be downloaded for free from http://www.girlebooks.com). Grounding ourselves once more in our comparative grid of reading tastes, we read and discussed Cummins's and Hall's work, paying particular attention to the many ways in which it differed from Hawthorne and Melville.  

Next, I brought Longfellow into the conversation, handing out Basbanes's article (see Sidebar) for students to read. While there was a genre shift from fiction to poetry, students found that the same basic principles applied to Longfellow's work: it was accessible and narrative-driven. Students worked in groups to pictorially represent some of the things they learned about Longfellow (from the Basbanes article), and we worked in literature circles to discuss the lesser-known poems, including his *Poems of Slavery*, which came out in 1842 but were never included in books sold in the South (to ensure a Southern audience). Finally, I juxtaposed excerpts of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* with Longfellow's poetry to catalyze a discussion about the differences in style and theme. Ultimately I hoped to discuss the ways in which Longfellow's poetry marked a shift that would later be capitalized on by the Modernists.  

By the end of the unit, my students were not only attuned to the basic debates and layers of the canon, but many walked away with a more three-dimensional vision of themselves as readers and English students. Not "getting" a difficult canonical American literature text was likely more complicated than they had initially thought and, most importantly, not a simple reflection of ability but rather a complicated interplay of reading tastes, my own pedagogical and curricular choices, and the students' access to the literary, historical, and social contexts from which the texts in question emerged.

My own approach to a more historically and culturally grounded approach to 19th-century literature is just one of many ways that we might think about reframing this unit in all levels of our American literature courses. For example, to think about
canon formation more broadly, try having students create and defend their own American literature canon. At the end of the Romanticism unit, students should choose the writers they feel best represent “American” literature. Most importantly, they should add the poems, songs, or books that they have read and that they would consider to be ideally “American.” This could easily be a summative assessment at the end of a quarter or semester, or even at the end of the year where, instead of focusing on the 19th century, students could choose an American literature canon that spans whatever years they see as logical parameters. The writing component could ask them to be explicit about their choices and should allow space for them to reflect on what the canon, as they see it playing out in school, misses. What they include would index these holes. How is their canon “American”? What values, beliefs, and ideas drove their choices? An extension of the written defense of the canon would be having students write and perform conversations or interactions between the various members of their “canon.” For example, if a student’s canon included Tupac, Poe, Longfellow, Lauryn Hill, Whitman, Wes Anderson, and Thoreau, the students could have these figures debating the merits of their work as American texts and defending their place in the canon.

Creating Space for Meaty Conversations

What would happen if we approached our American literature curriculum, at least in part, from a different vantage point and took seriously the social, historical, and literary contexts out of which these texts were born? If we can orient ourselves and our students toward what people in the 19th century were actually reading, thinking about the ways that these writers and their approaches interplayed with the writers who are so central in our classes today, then I believe we can open up real space for meaty conversations about reading tastes and canon formation.

Most importantly, by exposing students to literary history and allowing our students to weigh in on those conversations, we are making explicit the complex and subjective nature of canon formation: that the canon is the result of particular choices that reflect particular conceptions of what it means to be American, and how those identities inform and bleed into the texts that people write. When our students understand that what they read in their textbook is not a sacred and irrefutable narrative, but rather a series of choices driven by particular understandings of what is significant, relevant, and good, they can think more expansively about what an “American” story might look like at any particular historical moment, including their own. This kind of critical thinking could easily apply to other contexts. Whose faces are chosen to grace ads, for example? What music gets played where?

Finally, that many of our students often value the same qualities that made writers such as Longfellow and Cummins popular is an asset to be
leveraged, allowing us to better engage students in a more complicated and compelling study of 19th-century American literature. This is not to say that we should abandon texts that make us work hard to understand them. On the contrary. Not only would abandoning teaching canonical writers be a travesty from a literary perspective, but it would also be a disservice to our students as they head into college where the familiarity with these works is expected. To avoid teaching popular 19th-century writing just because it is more accessible not only denies students the opportunity to read something—gasp!—easier but also denies students a window into the reading tastes of actual 19th-century readers.

Notes
1. Arthur N. Applebee’s Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning and Gerald Graff’s Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education are two works that individually and collectively support the kind of approach to 19th-century American literature that I am advocating here.

2. For example, it might surprise students to know that in 1919, Fred Pate’s Century Readings for a Course in American Literature included hundreds of American writers identified as “major.” In 1959, at the height of New Criticism, Gordon Ray’s Masters of American Literature included 18 authors as “major” American authors. See Jane Tompkins’s “But Is It Any Good?: The Institutionalization of Literary Value” in Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Texts from the 19th century can have relevance to contemporary students’ lives, but unfamiliar contexts and problematic representations make engagement with these texts challenging. “Reaching Across Time: Scaffolded Engagements with a 19th-Century Text” incorporates collaborative drama, art, and technology to scaffold students’ reading of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.” Students develop their understanding of the setting through online research, accessing images and histories of several different ethnic communities in 1850s New York. They use this background knowledge to identify and address silences and gaps in the story, as well as to reflect on the meanings the story, characters, and themes hold for the 21st century. Guided by these multiple entry points, students read independently and develop an in-depth understanding of a complex 19th-century text, and they summarize their impressions by creating a collage using images found in their research and related quotes (from literary, informational, and student-created texts). http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/reaching-across-time-scaffolded-1179.html