May 2006

Experimenting with the Future of American Literary Study

Andrew Jewell

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, ajewell2@unl.edu

American Literature Association, May 2006
Digital Americanists Panel

Andrew Jewell

"Experimenting with the Future of American Literary Study"

       While a student at the University of Nebraska in the mid-1890s, Willa Cather took classes with the chair of the English department, Lucius Sherman. Sherman was the author of *Analytics of Literature* (1893), a book which articulated Sherman's system for the "objective study" of literary prose. This system, which, among other things, computed the "force-ratio" in passages, or the number of emphasized words in relation to the number of total words, involved a good deal of counting by Sherman and his students, and Sherman's methods inspired a healthy amount of ridicule. Cather, a young romantic, was thoroughly unimpressed with Sherman's attempts to scientifically analyze literature, and complained, "I was busy trying to find the least common multiple of *Hamlet* and the greatest common divisor of *Macbeth*."[1] I think most of us, upon looking into Sherman's book, would, like Cather, see a target of satire rather than a source of inspiration. How else can a book filled with sentences like this be understood by contemporary minds: "In the prose passage from Carlyle there is more than seventy per cent of emphasis, but the force-ratio of the present paragraph and the next is 25:45, or only fifty-five per cent"[2]?

       In many ways, I think Lucius Sherman would have loved digital research. Though few engaged in humanities computing would make claims to objectivity, all of them must deal, on a regular basis, with a dumb machine that is absolutely without subjective judgment, and therefore the tools and structures we use sometimes resemble

---

[1] Willa Cather, "When I Knew Stephen Crane" reprinted in *The World and the Parish*, ed. William Curtin. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 773.
[2] Lucius A. Sherman, *Analytics of Literature*. Boston: Ginn & Company, 1893. 18.

the late nineteenth-century strivings for scientific literary study. Take, for example, a current initiative of the *Willa Cather Archive*. Over the next year, my colleague Brian Pytlik Zillig and I will introduce a new textual analysis feature to the site, one that will allow users to detect language patterns in Cather's fiction, trace changes in word usage, visualize her text in new and pedagogically useful ways, alter methods of textual interaction in order to facilitate new ways of reading, and much more. Perhaps one could even find the least common multiple of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

The irony is thick. Though I think there are plenty of distinctions to be made between the scholarship of Lucius Sherman and the *Willa Cather Archive*, I also think Cather's rejection of Sherman's methods are narrow-minded—she even acknowledges that she "probably distorted the method."[3] Sherman was seeking to improve the teaching of literature, to make qualities in literature important to the criticism of his day more easily recognized, to produce "higher interpretation" to those "as have little normal bent towards letters" and to help "the better gifted to understand more definitely and confidently their own processes."[4] His experiments and methods were, essentially, for the same purposes that we articulate for our projects: we seek to make the materials we study--American literature and culture--more discernable and more accessible, to encourage better research, to provide new ways of seeing and understanding.

I think it is important at this point in the development of digital research—I believe we are barely out of the incunabula stage—that we actively experiment, even if those experiments might be a hard sell, and even if those experiments ultimately fail. I believe, for example, that most Cather scholars that I know will not immediately turn to a

---

[3] Cather, 773.
[4] Sherman, x.

text analysis tool when they research their next essay. And yet, I also know that Cather scholarship, like most literary scholarship, regularly constructs arguments based in part on the specific use of individual words, and a tool that allows for sophisticated analysis and visualizations of words makes perfect sense. To offer a very simple example, if a scholar was basing an argument on Cather's use of the word "national," wouldn't it be obviously valuable for that scholar to know every time Cather used that word in her fiction, and in what contexts? And yet I know some will feel that any quantitative analysis is an affront to their literature-loving sensibilities, much like Willa Cather did; it will seem too displaced from their research habits, too, well, too computer-y.

As digital Americanists, we are in the exciting but somewhat unfortunate position of having to give new ideas a try. Some of us will succeed and alter the paradigms of American literary scholarship; some of us will, like Lucius Sherman, one day look a little ridiculous. Though I think we can trust the value of some of our digital work, like making important but hard to find texts rigorously edited and fully accessible, we cannot finally predict which experiments will succeed and which will fail. As academics with tenure and review committees in our future, many of us do not feel that we have the luxury to fail, or, more appropriately, that we do not have the luxury to have our successes be unrecognizable to the wizened members of the committee. Therefore, it is important that we begin to make our work, and the digital work of our peers, more fully recognized by the profession. We need to offer one another the security to innovate, for digital media can be a new and powerful way to discover and articulate fresh ideas about American literature and culture.

The prospects for digital American literary study are, I think, quite good, but a true flowering of this work will only happen when digital projects are more securely supported by professional structures, when, for example, there are ample mechanisms for peer review, serious considerations of digital projects in the pages of established American literature journals, and tenure committees and departments fully supportive of non-print publications and of thoughtful risk-taking. We do not know what will ultimately be accepted as the most valuable kinds of digital scholarship, so we must help create a profession that allows interesting ideas to be pursued, even if there are no assurances for their success.