

"At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which confirms, the inward life which questions."

—Kate Chopin,  
from *The Awakening*

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# THE HEATH ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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*n e w s l e t t e r*

## Preface to Fourth Edition of THE HEATH ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Paul Lauter with the Editorial Board

When *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* first came out in 1989 it was both a symbol and a tool. It symbolized the desire among many teachers, critics, and students to study the full range of the literatures produced in America rather than the very limited number of works that had come to be known as the "literary canon." And it provided a tool, in the form of a diverse collection of literary works, for broadening our view of the authors and texts worth reading and thinking about. The *Heath*, as it has come to be called, challenged all of us to respond to earlier movements for social change that had asked of our classrooms, our curricula, our textbooks questions like "where are the minorities?" "where are the women?" And once these voices began to be heard, new questions arose, like "what differences did difference make?" and "how would our understanding of all American culture be transformed by their inclusion in the cultural conversation?"

In the years since, most anthologies of American literature followed our lead in diversifying the scope of what constituted "American literature," moving away from the idea that the culture of this nation could adequately be represented by eight or twelve or even forty American authors. And most courses in American literature today have come to include an expansive selection of writers that would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago. In many respects, then, the "question of the canon," as it came to be called, has

been resolved: it is now widely agreed that the writers and the works you will find in these volumes constitute meaningful parts of that vast panorama of mountains, hills, and valleys, baffling forests and dry arroyos, city boulevards and village lanes that we call "American literature."

That *was* the story of the *Heath*; what *is* its story today, in the second decade of its existence, as well as in a new century?

Today's *Heath* maintains its emphasis on the multiple origins and histories of the cultures of the United States and on the need to see literary works in relation to the particular historical circumstances in which they appeared, were circulated, and read. But we are increasingly interested in the ongoing conversations among these cultures; how they engage with and influence one another; whether (as Bartolomeo Vanzetti put it) some voices "must speak loudly to be heard" while others "have only to whisper and even be silent to be understood"; and just how these conversations have come to define America as plural, complex, heterogeneous—a chorus, perhaps, rather than a melting pot. We have reorganized much of volume I and added a number of texts (for example, those about Spanish America and the Southwest) in order to portray more fully the emergence of the varied cultures of the United States. Readers will find what we believe to be more historically coherent and usable presenta-

tions of the cultures of Native America, New Spain, New England, the Middle Atlantic and the South. At the same time, we have emphasized works that illustrate how the borders between these cultures were, and have remained, places of political and cultural tension but also permeable, open to interaction and change. We have striven not only to clarify regional and cultural differences but to offer more of a hemispheric view, while maintaining the focus necessary to most courses on the literatures of what is now the United States. We think these reconfigurations open opportunities to think differently about how national identities are constructed, not only in the past but in today's global city—national identities that have been constituted sometimes in ways that have engaged admiration and hope, sometimes by “designs of darkness to appall,” to ring a change on Frost's memorable line.

The new *Heath* also is fashioned to raise a number of questions increasingly on the agenda of literary and cultural study. These include the fundamental issue of what defines the “literary,” how, indeed whether, it might be distinguished from other forms of writing, what we mean when we talk of the *aesthetic* value of a work. We have therefore widened the range of genres included in the anthology, for example by adding novels (*The Scarlet Letter* in volume I and *The Awakening* in volume II), extending our inclusion of popular cultural forms like songs, and offering a full repertoire of the variety of compositions used to construct a “republic of letters,” especially during the first 400 years of the advent of European writing technologies in the Americas. We have also looked hard at works (as some of the alterations in volume II will illustrate) to ask about the changing ways in which certain literary texts challenge and attract readers' responses while others strike us as “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.”

To say this another way, the initial idea of the *Heath* was to promote and enable the inclusion in literature courses of the diverse voices of America and the variety of issues to which they

spoke. That goal, while not always implemented in practice has, in our view, been generally accepted in principle across the profession. It seems time, therefore, to listen more fully to the timbre and tone, the music and the dream of these voices themselves.

The construction of an anthology, like that of a syllabus is, of course, an ongoing struggle, a process of discussion, alteration, success, compromise, “visions and revisions” that many

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classroom moments will revise. We continue to invite the participation in these processes of all users of these books, students, teachers, critics—even the newspaper columnists who periodically pronounce upon the *Heath*. In the Preface to the first edition we quoted Emerson to the effect that “each new age requires a new confession.” Perhaps in a speeded-up electronic dispensation the phrase should be “each new year.” However that might be, these books will continue to change, continue to respond to altered cultural and aesthetic imperatives. Still, we remain committed to certain core values: preserving the complex connections between historical realities and the literary works that emerge within them; extending what remains the greatest diversity of coverage in any American literature textbook; and sustaining this work as a participatory and democratic experiment of a community of scholars, students, and teachers.

Some of the specific features of this, the 4th edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, are as follows:

#### **Colonial Period to 1700**

Changes in this section reflect the

growing interest among scholars of Early American and New World studies in literature not originally in English and its impact upon the predominantly English literatures of North America. These changes also reflect a growing consensus that while the literature and culture of New England and colonial English Puritanism were major influences in the shaping of American literature and of U.S. national identity, they were neither homogeneous nor the only influences that students should study. We have made our Native American offerings more broadly representative, and have carried forward the effort to place them more fully in relation to European-American literary texts and cultural movements.

The most significant change occurs in the section entitled “Cultures in Contact,” which has been reorganized along regional lines to suggest the development and facilitate the comparison, of *different* imperial agendas. This section now includes the formerly separate units of “Voices from Anglo-America.” In this arrangement, the new subsection on New Spain brings together all of the selections from Spanish expeditions and settlements across the continent, and now includes selections from the important mid-seventeenth century woman writer, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

The next new section, on New France, includes a selection from the Jesuit Relation of Father Isaac Jogues. A new section on the Chesapeake region highlights the exploration of the southeastern coast and includes material by Nathaniel Bacon, on the important popular rebellion of 1676, and a ballad by a young felon transported to Virginia, which gives more insight into the lives of the servant and criminal classes forced to supply much needed labor to the southern colonies.

The section on New England now includes additional material from Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative and some new texts—such as excerpts from Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography*—that suggest the diversity of genres and strains within New England Puritanism.

## **Eighteenth Century**

The selections in this part of the anthology have been reorganized to suggest a hemispheric, rather than strictly British American perspective on revolution and nationalism. We have also expanded the selections of important women writers in this period. The first new section, "Settlement and Religion," includes several writers new to the *Heath*: for example, Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan, one of the most influential chroniclers of New France and an important source of Native American ethnography for Anglo-American writers in this period. Francisco Palou has also been moved into this section, providing insight into the Spanish missionary movement in California. The selection of "Eighteenth-Century Poetry" has been expanded to include the important woman writer Susanna Wright, and selections from Margareta Bleecker Faugère's work that presages early nineteenth century poetic trends, new selections from William Dawson and Thomas Godfrey, including an excerpt from the first blank verse tragedy written in North America, and Canto One of Sarah Wentworth Morton's influential narrative poem *Ouâbi*.

The renamed section, "Voices of Revolution and Nation," includes selections from Handsome Lake on Native American movements, a new set of selections from the work of Mercy Otis Warren, including the complete version, fully annotated, of her satiric play, *The Group*, and excerpts from the political writing of Toussaint L'Overture. The final section in this period has been renamed "Contested Visions, American Voices," and includes expanded selections from St. Jean de Crèvecoeur and the addition of selections from Ann Eliza Bleecker, including excerpts from *The History of Maria Kittle*.

## **Early Nineteenth Century: 1800–1865**

The early 19th-century period has been largely reorganized. Major sections emphasize literary and social developments in the differing geographical and cultural communities

that came to constitute the United States: Native America, Spanish America, New England, and the South. Here we can see texts and writers in dialogue with one another as well as the somewhat differing social and political issues that help characterize these cultural communities. At the same time, we have retained sections that teachers found useful for the classroom, particularly those on "The Woman Question" and on the development of poetry.

*Major sections emphasize literary and social developments in the differing geographical and cultural communities that came to constitute the United States*

## **Late Nineteenth Century: 1865–1910**

Changes in this section reflect conceptual shifts that expand the literary scope of the *Heath Anthology* more effectively beyond New England. These changes emphasize the way the literature of the late nineteenth century participated in—and helped articulate—the productive ferment of the post-bellum national project of remaking America.

We have changed the name of the section on "Regional Voices, National Voices" to "Nation, Regions, Borders." The entire Late Nineteenth Century section now begins with this section rather than "Developments in Women's Writing." We've rearranged the former's contents to highlight work from the South (especially New Orleans) and to accentuate the issue of miscegenation, one central focus of the racial anxieties of the era. We've also included border literature, moving the *corridos* to this section and complementing them by the work of the "border" novelist, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton.

Keeping questions about the nation

and the debates that occurred around them in the foreground, we followed this section with "Critical Visions of Postbellum America" and then with "Developments in Women's Writing" Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" has been moved to Volume One, where it belongs in terms of chronology, genre, and style.

The last section, previously entitled "New Explorations of 'An American Self,'" is now called "The Making of 'Americans.'" The change in title and content reflects our understanding that "America" was in flux geographically as well as culturally and that its expansion was a matter of intense debate outside its borders as well as within and along them. We have moved José Martí's "Nuestra America/ Our America" to this section; it concludes the Late Nineteenth Century part of the *Heath*.

## **The Modern Period: 1910–1945**

The strength of the Modern Period selections is that the canonical authors and works—Eliot's "The Waste Land," Faulkner's fiction, Frost's poetry, and so forth—can be read alongside lesser known writers like Mencken, Randolph Bourne, Alain Locke (and others from the Harlem Renaissance, like Schulyer and Larsen). This has been one of the *Heath's* major innovations, and it is well exemplified in the Modern Period.

Thus the changes in the fourth edition have been relatively few. We substituted two Fitzgerald stories for the one we had; we changed the Faulkner selection somewhat, introducing one of his more artistically demanding stories. We added a selection from H. L. Mencken to better represent the South and one of the voices of anti-modernism, so to speak. The Gertrude Stein selection was recast to include both some of her more well-known and lesser-known work.

## **The Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present**

The variety, and therefore representativeness, of the contemporary section has been further increased by the addi-

tion of new authors. Among them are Dorothy Allison, Sherman Alexie, Jack Kerouac, Frank Chin, Jessica Hagedorn, Mario Suarez, Richard Rodriguez, Lawson Fusao Inada, Yusef Komunyakaa, James Merrill, Kimoko Hahn, and Yamashita.

New and existing selections have been reorganized and grouped into a “Beat” writers section, a “Black Arts” section that now includes Baraka’s *The Dutchman*, and a Viet Nam section, which includes fiction by Tim O’Brien and poetry by Robert Bly.

tions here, just pointing to tendencies. One can surely present the contexts for longer, more prominent literary works within a course devoted to a sequence or simply a collection of such literature. Indeed, one can now teach such works from most anthologies. Nor, on the other hand, does the alternative imply the exclusion or downplaying of our medium, language, nor even of that specialized form of it one finds in works of literature. And, as an editor, I can say that one is always trying to strike a balance between including in an anthology works of dominating literary value and other texts that remain interesting by virtue of their representative qualities or historical significance. All the same, the tendencies I am sketching are distinctive, if not absolute. To see why, it is useful to turn at last to my actual subject, teaching with anthologies.

## Teaching With Anthologies

by Paul Lauter

I was once embarrassed by using anthologies, much less creating them. I remembered e.e. cummings’ poetic joke at the expense of Louis Untermeyer:

mr u will not be missed  
who as an anthologist  
sold the many on the few  
not excluding mr u  
(1 X 1, #X1)

The usual rap against anthologies was that they were superficial: they offered a hop, skip, and jump through literary history instead of providing in-depth views of the truly great writers. There were too many authors, even in the most limited texts, those included were too uneven in quality, and the multitude of options distracted students from focusing on the true aesthetic value of literary texts. It was therefore, the argument ran, best to teach whole works of value rather than offering the kind of smorgesbörd, characteristic of even the best anthologies.

Now I have to acknowledge that in some courses I do, indeed, use whole works, novels, or story collections by individual authors. But more recently I have come not merely to stop apologizing for using anthologies but genuinely to value that practice. I want to say why.

I was brought up on the New Critical analysis of the “monuments of unaging intellect,” to use Yeats’ phrase for the “great books.” In curricular terms, this approach does imply complete books, usually novels or collections of poetry by a single author. The tendency of this

teaching strategy is to view works as isolated, aesthetic objects that relate, if they relate to anything, primarily to one another—with anxiety, perhaps, but intertextually, certainly. For in this view, the primary connections among works are those defined by the medium, language: words, images, sounds. T.S. Eliot’s poetry, notably “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land,” provide what are perhaps the paradigmatic examples for this understanding of literary works. His strategy of allusion, citation, quotation exemplifies one way of thinking about both the creation and the analysis and teaching of literature.

I’m not arguing that this approach necessarily excludes context and history. Only that they become relatively less significant than intertextual linguistic and aesthetic concerns if one emphasizes primarily literary monuments. But what if one wishes, especially in introductory classes to help students come to see literature as one form, albeit a distinctive and important one, of textual production. What if one wishes to emphasize the differences and similarities among texts, the processes of change that help to explain why this or that particular text takes its particular form in its particular historical moment? To observe change, to account for difference and similarity, to comprehend the conditions of textual production—all, it seems to me, lead us to a different strategy, lead us in fact, toward the comprehensive anthology, rather than to separate books by individual authors.

Before I say why, I want to make clear that I am not drawing absolute distinc-

I want to emphasize a number of considerations:

- The importance of viewing texts in relationships with one another, in time and of time, a.k.a. as literary and cultural history.
- The usefulness of seeing texts within the historical and social contexts in which they were first produced, distributed, and consumed.
- The desirability of examining the conditions of textual production at different moments, including our own.
- The need for widening the lens to include a richer selection of genres.

Obviously, these are not altogether separate categories, but I want to try sorting them out a bit because they suggest somewhat differing features of what teaching with anthologies today can provide. In order to do this, I will cite a number of instances from my own teaching.

To begin, then, with some revolutionary writers, Tom Paine, Alexander Hamilton, and, as will be seen, Judith Sargent Murray. At the beginning of “Common Sense,” Paine writes as follows:

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and

common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves: that he will put on, or rather than he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day. (*Heath*—third edition, I, 884)

The question the pamphlet poses is, then, what constitutes “the true character of a man,” what is true manly behavior? The essay is, in effect, an extended exhortation to stand up and be a true man, not weak, or self-interested, prejudiced, or even moderate. But then, what? How does a *man* behave? Paine answers that question in significant measure through a pattern of gendered imagery. Great Britain become in these terms a bad, indeed a monstrous mother. He then goes on in the following terms:

Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord is now broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries that nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the Continent forgive the murders of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the Guardians of his Image in our hearts. They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve, and justice be extirpated from the earth, or have only a casual existence were we callous to the touches of affection. The robber and the murderer would often escape unpunished, did not the injuries which our tempers sustain, provoke us into justice.

O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind. (*Heath*, I, 890)

Here Britain becomes a “ravisher” against whom the true, manly American must act to defend his mistress. And she is, in turn, defined in a way characteristic of late 18th- and early 19th-century texts, as Freedom, at once the muse and the lover of mankind.

By contrast, in Federalist 6, Hamilton

deploys historical women as agents of misrule, of Utopian and idle theory:

The influence which the bigotry of one female, the petulances of another, and the cabals of a third, had in the contemporary policy, ferments and pacifications of a considerable part of Europe are topics that have been too often descanted upon not to be generally known. (*Heath*, I, 1244)

To follow such women is, from Hamilton’s perspective, and from the perspective of many a social conservative since, to indulge in Utopian speculations, vain projections, sleepy reveries. Or as he writes:

From this summary of what has taken place in other countries, whose situations have borne the nearest resemblances to our own, what reason can we have to confide in those reveries, which would seduce us into an expectation of peace and cordiality between the members of the present confederacy, in a state of separation? Have we not already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses and evils incident to society in every shape? Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct, that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue? (*Heath*, I, 1247)

I do not wish to take the space to spin out the implications of these belief systems and the role that gender plays in constructing and maintaining them. But I think the contrast is effective pedagogically, especially in a literature or cultural studies classroom, in which we are concerned with rhetoric and what it is within us and within the culture to which political language, like President Reagan’s “evil empire” phrase, appeals. The belief systems contrast, indeed, in many ways. In another, however, both writers offer altogether limiting ideas of woman. She is either a victim of rape or the seducer of reasonable men. Turn now to Judith Sargent Murray’s 1790 essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes”:

Well, but the woman was the first in the transgression [in the Garden of Eden]. Strange how blind *self love* renders you men; were you not wholly absorbed in a partial admiration of your own abilities, you would long since have acknowledged the force of what I am now going to urge. It is true some ignoramuses have absurdly enough informed us, that the

beauteous fair of paradise, was seduced from her obedience, by a malignant demon, *in the guise of a baleful serpent*; but we, who are better informed, know that the fallen spirit presented himself to her view, *a shining angel still*; for thus, saith the critics in the Hebrew tongue, ought the word to be rendered. Let us examine the motive. Hark! the seraph declares that she shall attain a perfection of knowledge; for is there ought which is not comprehended under one or another of the terms *good* and *evil*. It doth not appear that she was governed by any one sensual appetite; but merely by a desire of adorning her mind; a laudable ambition fired her soul, and a thirst for knowledge impelled the predilection so fatal in its consequences. Adam could not plead the same deception; assuredly he was not deceived; nor ought we to admire his superior strength, or wonder at his sagacity, when we so often confess that example is much more influential than precept. His gentle partner stood before him, a melancholy instance of the direful effects of disobedience.... What mighty cause impelled him to sacrifice myriads of beings yet unborn, and by one impious act, which *he saw* would be productive of such fatal effects, entail undistinguished ruin upon a race of beings, which he was yet to produce. Blush, ye vaunters of fortitude; ye boasters of resolution; ye haughty lords of the creation; blush when ye remember that he was influenced by no other motive than a bare pusillanimous attachment to a woman! (*Heath*, I, 106364)

I love to quote this passage for obvious reasons, but also because it helps illustrate how a certain masculine common sense about gender, power, and politics was, even in the moment of America’s founding, deeply contested. It disrupts the easy circulation, then and now, perhaps, of that common sense and thus enables students better to *read* texts generally acknowledged as central to American political discourse. But it is impossible to teach in this way without the anthology.

To turn now to my second point, seeing texts in relation to the contexts in which they arise. I am using the term “contexts,” to borrow George Drake’s recent formulation, “as constitutive rather than simply background.” Perhaps because I teach in Hartford, where she lived and from which was derived the demeaning sobriquet by which she came to be known, “The Sweet Singer of Hartford,” I like to use some of Lydia Sigourney’s work. Often, to illustrate the politics of literature I put Sigourney’s poem “Indian Names” together with works by Philip Freneau, William Cullen Bryant, and

others about Native America. Freneau in "The Indian Burying Ground" (1787) and Bryant in "The Prairies" (1832) adopt the *ubi sunt* mode, first about the mound builders, then about the Indians:

Thus arise  
Races of living things, glorious in strength,  
And perish, as the quickening breath of God  
Fills them, or is withdrawn. The red man, too,  
Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long,  
And, nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought  
A wilder hunting-ground. (*Heath*, I, 2679)

Consider: this is published two years after the Indian Removal Act, and three years before the Treaty of New Echota, 1835, signed by some Cherokees under intense pressure from the Jackson administration. That treaty led directly to the Trail of Tears in the winter of 1838–39, the horror of which has become legendary.

Sigourney's 1838 poem "Indian Names" (see *Heath* I, 2692) is at once a response to Bryant and others, a cry of outrage and of frustration, and—as was true of many of her public writings in poetry and prose—an effort to intervene in the deadly federal policy being pursued.

Sigourney is, to be sure, speaking of names, but when I teach this poem one of my students generally points to the importance of naming in terms of social power and control—as, for example, in the Old Testament when Jacob wrestles with the angel and demands his name. Or, in the magic of epithets, or the names of cities, like Canton or Guangzhou, Petrograd or St. Petersburg.

These texts can, and should, be read with Elias Boudinot's 1828 "Address to the Whites"—an eloquent defense of Cherokee civilization—and with Chief Seattle's perhaps spurious speech that prophetically ends with the sentence "The white man will never be alone." My point here is to help students see the agency of literature—even texts as remote as these in time—poems as active players in particular struggles.

What, now, of the conditions of textual production? Here it is useful to think

about the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, certainly the best-known and arguably most influential black woman writer and orator of the nineteenth century. Harper was, in my view, an enormously gifted writer and, no doubt, speaker. She could, had she wished, composed complex, multilevel texts, as one of her better-known work, "Aunt Chloe's Politics," suggests (see *Heath*, II, 689.)

Harper's problem was this: she spoke many of her poems to her audiences, mainly black people, many former slaves. Many had learned to read, of course. But they would necessarily, like most people who come to reading a language late in life, be less sensitive to subtleties and demands of written texts. To lay on them a poem like, say, Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Carrion Comfort" would be to silence them. On the other hand, they were superb "readers" of voices, intonation, inflection, tone, evasion, demand. They had learned to be such expert readers to survive. Harper's poem, wonderfully modulated in its orality, speaks to such an audience.

Now this may seem an oblique way to get at the issue of the conditions of cultural production, much less the question of teaching with anthologies. But I want to suggest that the meaning of the phrase "conditions of cultural production," while it always involves

material conditions, needs to be understood as quite varied, not limited to matters of publishers and editors. Every text has a story to its production, including the anthology itself, and one advantage of the anthology is precisely the variety of such stories one necessarily engages.

As you can see, I've drawn my examples from the *Heath Anthology*, the book I obviously know best. My point in doing so has not so much been to promote my pride and joy. What I have primarily in mind is the fact that most of the works I've cited are, from a practical standpoint, only available in an anthology. Where else can one find as vast a collection of various literary forms: as chants, lyrics, sermons, narratives, dramas, chronicles, memoirs, tracts, songs, letters, political documents... one could go on.

Availability is not the only issue, to be sure: many texts can be copied, and many are. But I think the anthology form itself speaks, to the fact that the country of American literature is no neat, well-demarcated, grid-patterned town. It is full of awesome hills and impossible curves, dropoffs, unexpected dips, missing shoulders, some peaks, yes, but mainly the hills, valleys, and high rises, where most of us live, and the city streets, where we all shop and play.

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## Cane and its Discontents

by Reginald Dyck, Capital University

(reprinted from *Eureka Studies in the Teaching of Short Fiction*)

One of the most influential and imaginative works of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* provides a rich opportunity for students and teachers. Its experimental form and provocative social situations encourage careful reading, analysis and discussion, even if students are initially somewhat baffled. Race is central in teaching this work, yet I want students to see how the issue of race is enmeshed in a complex web of social relations that also include love, sex, gender, economics, and violence.

A good entry point is through two stories, "Blood-Burning Moon" (BBM) and "Box Seat" (BS). These two stories can also fruitfully be taught on their own. My teaching plan has three parts: an introductory discussion of common conflicts in the two stories; an analysis of their styles, which encourages students to see how the stories' similarities and differences are grounded in their language; and finally, an analysis of differences, the main discussion. Each part provides opportunities to explore the relationship between texts

and contexts. Along with situating these stories in the context of Toomer's own story and the cultural situation of African Americans North and South in the 1920s, I will also suggest how a consideration of modernist primitivism and Freud's ideas on the individual's relationship to society can provide frameworks for further analysis of the stories.

### I. Common Conflicts

Because the differences between the two stories are most striking, a good starting point is to ask students to list common topics or conflicts. This short discussion provides an introduction to the more detailed analysis that follows and creates a framework which can give a sense of order to a potentially complex discussion.

Both are stories about failed love although the reasons for the failures are quite different. Closely related to these failed loves is the violence that takes place in both, the causes for the violence being as different as the failures in love. In BS the fighting is a staged spectacle followed by love songs, a strange conjunction. At the end, a back alley fight nearly provides a dramatic concluding scene, but the protagonist fails to follow the crowd's expectations and walks away. This seemingly anti-climactic conclusion calls for explanation. The violence in BBM is also staged, but in a much different way. The lynching is scripted by social roles the characters have learned as participants in rural Southern culture.

These social roles are in part determined by race. Race is an overt topic in BBM, yet students need to see how race also shapes BS, where it is an absent presence because the setting is the segregated urban North. Gender, another common topic, also shapes social roles. Clearly Louisa and Muriel differ in their sense of what it means to be a woman, which is reflected in their attitudes toward sexuality. The male characters in the stories also define themselves in part through their sexuality. Violence erupts as both Tom Burwell and Bob Stone assert their male sexual authority over Louisa. Dan Moore in BS finds his sexuality,

like his general sense of self, frustrated because of social restrictions imposed on both him and Muriel. Their reactions, though, are quite different.

Economics is more overtly an issue in BS than in BBM but plays an important part in both. In BBM Bob Stone's reduced economic position affects his sexual relations while Tom Burwell asserts himself, disastrous as it is, in ways that would have been much less possible when Bob's father had mastery. In BS Muriel's need to maintain

*A good starting point is to ask students to list common topics or conflicts.*

*This short discussion provides an introduction to the more detailed analysis that follows and creates a framework which can give a sense of order to a potentially complex discussion.*

her middle-class respectability and Dan's status as unemployed is central to their conflict. If Dan has what blues singer Leadbelly called "The Bourgeois Blues" (which can provide a stimulating cross-media introduction to this lesson) it's because a black bourgeoisie had emerged among free Blacks in Northern urban areas.

Students should by now have in their notes a list, or better, a web that includes love, sexuality, violence, race, gender, and economics. Through a short discussion of these common topics, students can begin to see the complex web of relationships among them that Toomer has created. Through this web the identity of the characters and the conflicts of the stories emerge. It also situates characters in the specific historical situations Toomer represents. One doesn't need, however, to begin by providing contextual background, which can easily lead to self-contained history lectures with little bearing, in

students' minds, on their understanding of the works themselves. I find it more productive to explain unfamiliar contexts as the need arises during discussion. This provides students with a model of how to think dialectically, to continually shift their perspectives between the individual and the social, broadly speaking, and to resist interpretive moves that universalize their own particular cultural positions. This is not to say that students shouldn't be encouraged to do what we all do almost inevitably, make personal connections. Rather, students should find ways of adding complexity to the connections they usefully make between the stories and their own situations in the world.

### II. Style as a Way of World Watching

Attention to the stories' differing language gives readers a fuller sense of the worlds represented in them. A consideration of style can also keep students from too quickly seeing characters as people by showing how they, and the stories themselves, are constructed in language. By comparing three key passages from each story, we can see how Toomer uses style to evoke quite different worlds and characters.

Both stories open with a poetic, imagistic style. BBM opens with dusk rising out of the ruins of a pre-war factory. "[F]ired pine knots... Negro shanties.... The full moon.... [and] improvised songs against its spell" are nostalgically evocative of an almost feudal world distant from the urban, class-conscious society represented in BS. The reference, however, to "the rotting floor boards and solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory" alerts us to economic realities. BS also opens with the suggestive imagery of poetic description: houses become young girls, streets turn into a young black man, and a tree becomes a people, called from their houses so they can learn to dream. The languid tone of BBM's long opening sentences fit Louisa's dreaming while the equally imagistic yet imperative sentences of BS suggest an urgent need to capture what is evident in BBM's opening but has been lost in the world of BS.

Jean Toomer, having grown up in Washington DC, personally knew the world of BS. Sensitive students may recognize what critic Nellie McKay observes: the author “belongs to the world of the city and shares intimately in its shortcomings and failings” but “never fully becomes integrated into either the richness or the pain of Georgia” (88). Thus the nostalgic tone of Section One marks a longing for rather than fully experienced place or past.

However, “*Cane* is a promise-song, too,” John F. Callahan explains, “for Toomer breathes the spirit of the ancestral black South into his fiction. He seeks sensuous and spiritual nourishment from an unfamiliar landscape animate with his history and the history of the race” (64). This is embodied in Toomer’s style. The “spirit of the ancestral black South” intersected with Toomer’s modernism to provide him an evocative and mythic approach to Black folk culture, one that connected him to the modernist concept of primitivism. This primitivism had little direct relationship with early indigenous art, particularly because this art was not actually “primitive.” Nevertheless, its coming from a different tradition “frees the individual and so makes his desired return to a single underlying intensity that much easier” (Goldwater 252, 255). Toomer nostalgically uses rural Georgia as a place of cultural wholeness. BBM offers a poetic evocation of a world that contrasts, in idealized although not utopian ways, with the modern alienated world of BS.

The second comparison, between the fifth paragraph of BS (56) and BBM’s third (28), furthers the contrast as students explore the differing presentations of characters’ consciousness. In BS we have direct access to Dan’s highly self-conscious inner dialogue. The modernist stream-of-consciousness logic, short imperative sentences, and strong action verbs suggest Dan’s acute conflict. Rather than calling people out of their houses, as the opening (muse) does, Dan imagines himself violently breaking into and disrupting that world. Students should have little trouble picking out phrases that suggest his sense of alienation in the para-

graphs that follow. Behind that alienation is the question that Du Bois finds between himself and “the other world”: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (101). Because these Black houses are closely connected to that other White world even though they are segregated from it, Muriel sees Dan partly from a White perspective. In this indirect way, race permeates this story in spite of its seeming absence.

Dan’s resistance to this world is ham-

*Students should find ways of adding complexity to the connections they usefully make between the stories and their own situations in the world.*

pered, Hamlet-like, by his conflicting identities. The world of Northern urban houses makes him feel inept because his economic status as unemployed defines him. Yet Dan’s comment, “I was born in a canefield,” suggests something mysterious, powerful, “primitive,” even threatening about him that Muriel desires yet desperately resists. This power, associated with the pre-industrialized rural South, appeals to her repressed “animalism” (59).

In contrast to this description of Dan’s consciousness, Louisa’s sense of self is presented indirectly in the long, gentle, descriptive sentences of BBM’s third paragraph. She easily expresses her sexuality. Hers is a “strange stir” rather than a self-conscious struggle. Although her conflict is between Bob’s and Tom’s love, “they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon.” Meaning is evoked rather than stated as the style remains poetic. The emphasis is on visual imagery, not action. In this way the style creates her character. However, the paragraph’s tone shifts with the concluding song. A work chant harking back to slave times, it suggests an ominous conclu-

sion to the vaguely suggested conflict.

The third comparison, the stories’ endings, further emphasizes Toomer’s method of differentiating the two worlds of the stories through style. BBM concludes with the burning and then Louisa singing. The short, direct sentences of the first part of the last paragraph stir anger in the reader. It is dissipated, though, as we follow the yell that slips out and leads to Louisa: seemingly oblivious to what has happened, showered by the ominous moon, and ready to sing the final refrain. In this shift Toomer creates in us not cathartic anger but a haunted feeling that leaves us contemplating sin and sinners rather than crimes and injustice. Something has changed in the world of BBM; the short direct sentences that describe Tom’s murder insist on that. But the last word is the song to the moon, the poetic evocation of a world caught, as the language is, between static myth and the changing economics which affect culture as a whole.

BS, on the other hand, concludes with a naturalistic style: direct contextual description that suggests the trap Dan is in. While he’s no Bigger Thomas, he is surrounded by “the smell of garbage and wet trash.” Yet we return to the poetic imagery of the opening paragraph, the “[e]yes of houses, soft girl-eyes,” which prepares us for the tour de force of the final sentence. This story does not end in the expected violence. Like Louisa, but for much different reasons, he misses the final conflict. He “keeps going on” while BBM concludes with the refrain.

### III. Differences, Where the Meanings Are

Although this essay began with a consideration of similarities, we have continually shifted to differences, as Emily Dickinson’s speaker states, “where the meanings are” (“A certain slant of light”). With the list of common conflicts or topics and the discussion of style, students have a basis for considering differences in a more complex manner. This discussion will in part enlarge on issues raised earlier. In considering style, the frameworks of Toomer’s own story and modernist

primitivism were used. Here I add other frameworks to enrich student understanding: historical constructions of racial identity, Freudian explanations of the individual in society, and the contexts of Black cultures North and South.

My first step is to ask students for quotes that suggest central conflicts in the stories. For *BBM*, I find most telling Bob Stone's query, "Why nigger? Why not, just gal?" (32), questions that should generate considerable discussion about language and race. What is important for me about the quote is that Bob can imagine erasing race. His questions suggest that the concept of race is just that, a socially constructed concept rather than a biological fact. In exploring this idea, it may be useful to explain the author's attitudes toward race.

Jean Toomer was deeply concerned with and conflicted about his own identity; that he wrote seven autobiographies attests to this. "In all of his self-definitions, Toomer dwells intensely on his racial identity, which he specifically differentiates from the races now acknowledged and named in the public discourse of the United States. He names his own race, the 'American' race..." (Hutchinson 227). Because of his desire to transcend contemporary racial categories, Toomer resisted being identified as a Negro writer and was angry when his publisher presented him that way as part of *Cane's* sales promotion. In 1922, the year before its publication, Toomer wrote:

The Negro's curious position in this western civilization forces him into one or the other of two extremes: either he denies the Negro entirely (as much as he can) and seeks approximation to an Anglo-Saxon (white) ideal, or... he overemphasizes what is Negro. Both of these attitudes have in their source a feeling of (a desire not to feel) inferiority. I refer here, of course, to those whose consciousness and condition make them keenly aware of white dominance.... I feel that in time, in its social phase, my art will aid in giving the Negro to himself. (qtd. in Gates 196)

Toomer's goal is to create new ways of thinking about race, that is, new constructions that transcend the racial categories that trap, in quite unequal

ways, both Tom Burwell and Bob Stone in *BBM*. Tom's threatened Black manhood is expressed in his volatile, violent energy—energy that the white violence of lynching means to control but can never completely contain. It has led him to cut two black men already and now causes him to cross the color line in defense of his masculine, Black sense of self. Not surprisingly, Bob does not use his nascent understanding of the social construction of race to create new definitions of Black and White. To do so would

*Jean Toomer was deeply concerned with and conflicted about his own identity.*

threaten his sense of masculinity, which intersects with his sense of racial privilege. He is in competition for possession of Louisa's sexuality with a Black man. Thus, when "his mind became consciously a white man's" (31), Bob assumes, with a tinge of fear, his right to possess Louisa. In doing so he engages racial definitions that shape his society and lead to Tom Burwell's lynching. He conserves the status quo by recognizing that it is Louisa's blackness that makes her sexuality appealing to him. Her otherness or difference from himself allows him to act on desires not respectable within White, middle-class society.

Bob's constructed meaning of Louisa's blackness is one that the dominant culture commonly creates for women of many minorities: sexually uninhibited by white (and black) middle-class mores, in touch with their bodies, willing to give while expecting only small favors in return, easily dominated because lacking in self-consciousness. However, this sense of Louisa is contradicted for Bob by his having to sneak into the canefields to possess her.

Not only does his uneasy sense of masculinity disturb him. He is caught in a web of insecurities about race, gender and economic privilege. Because wealthy White families in the rural South had lost power in the post-Civil War era, race relations had changed. An exchange between Bob and Tom illustrates this. When Bob finds Tom and Louisa "huddled" together, Tom insolently asks, "Whats y want?" Bob responds, "I'm Bob Stone," as if this were enough to intimidate his Black competitor. Tom first offers, ironically I believe, a slave's response "Yassur" but then asserts equality with "an I'm Tom Burwell. Whats y want?" Bob's wounded masculine and racial pride force him into a fatal defense (33). His diminished role, reflected in this encounter, contrasts with the family's past when his father's racial, economic and sexual dominance was clear: "Ha! Those were the days" (32).

In Bob Stone's nostalgia for the past, he is incapable of imagining what students can be helped to see: that his own whiteness, its meaning for himself and others, is just as socially constructed as Louisa's blackness. In *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, Grace Elizabeth Hale states, "Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence. The denial of white as a racial identity, the denial that whiteness has a history, allows the quiet, the blankness, to stand as the norm" (xi). Bob and the townspeople's self-serving definition of blackness is dependent on their assumed or normative definition of whiteness. This definition is sustained by a Southern consensus that provides the psychological support a mob needs. Students should be able to see how this, compounded by the economic insecurity in the change from the Old to New South, leads to the lynching, that ultimate ritual of whiteness.

"The most dramatic and terrifying instrument in the repression of Blacks was lynching," states a 1919 report by the NAACP. Between 1889 and 1918, 2522 Black people were lynched (Robinson 105). As Toomer describes it

and as historical documents makes clear, there were often “[t]wo deaths for a godam nigger” (34), one by hanging and the other burning. Like all terrorism, lynching had a broad effect, creating a “circle of horror drawn around Black men, women and children.” “The news of lynching terrified Black communities through the country, sometimes thousands of miles from the event” (Robinson 105). *Without Sanctuary*, a recently published collection of photographs edited by James Allen, provides disturbing visual documentation of these events. Billy Holiday’s haunting blues rendition of “Strange Fruit” and Claude MacKay’s poem, “If We Must Die,” can also add effective cross-media support to the discussion. It would be useful to compare the tone of the last two with the scene depicted in *Cane*. Another comparison is with newspaper accounts. The July 16, 1921, article in the *Black Washington Eagle*, “The Burning Alive of John Henry Williams,” could easily be assigned. In class or on their own, students could compare the effect on readers of Toomer’s fictional account with a contemporary journalist’s report.

The web of relationships among love, sex, gender, race, economics, and violence that results in Tom Burwell’s murder has a much different configuration in BS, largely because of its setting. Here the sexual conflict concerns the repression necessary for Muriel to maintain her respectable status as a teacher and member of the Black bourgeoisie. The historical grounding of BS’s difference from BBM is important.

Historian Cedric T. Robinson explains, “By the second half of the nineteenth century, two alternative Black cultures had arisen, each nurtured by a particular Black experience” (96). The one that emerged out of slavery provides the setting for BBM. BS reflect “the assimilationist Black political culture that appropriated the values and objectives of the dominant American creed.... A liberal, bourgeois consciousness was nourished, packed with capitalist ambitions....” Segregation, however, stood in the way. “When assimilation seemed ill-conceived, the quiescent Black middle

stratum of wage laborers and professionals hunkered down, and a minority and renegade species of Black nationalist desires was enjoyed” (96). One might see Muriel as one of those who “hunkered down,” by not resisting the restrictions of segregation but rather maintaining assimilationist values in the face of them. On the other hand, Dan represents one of the “minority and renegade species” although Toomer gives him no “Black nationalist desires.”

*Students should also see that the economic situation for African Americans in the North offered at least some young women new power while at the same time creating new restrictions for them.*

Robinson further contrasts the political culture arising from slavery with that of Northern free Blacks: “Inventive rather than imitative, communitarian rather than individualistic, Afro-Christian rather than secular and materialist...” (97). In BS Toomer creates characters who imitate dominant social mores and do not gain a communitarian connectedness through their efforts. Like the box seats of the theater, the houses that permeate the first part of the story represent the restrictions and exclusions of insecure conformity rather than the security of social belonging.

For me a key quote of this story is Muriel’s admission, “... the town wont [sic] let me love you, Dan” (58). Like the quote from BBM, this one emphasizes society’s restrictions on love and sexuality. Students may see or the teacher may find it worthwhile to make connections between the nature of those restrictions and Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. Toomer’s focus on sexuality as a cen-

tral force within individuals, one that threatens to disrupt society, accords with Freud’s understanding. “[T]he momentous step into culture had come when the community took power, when individuals eschewed the right to take violence into their own hands” (Gay 546). BBM clearly illustrates Freud’s explanation of the conflict between sexual love and communal life (Freud 48, 55). The two violent killings result from this conflict, but their differences are significant. Tom Burwell resists an oppressive culture, motivated by his only partially sublimated sexuality, by taking violence into his own hands even though on some level he knows this means death for him. His knowing paralyzes him when the mob approaches, acting as representatives of the dominant Southern plantation class which nevertheless sees them as only poor white trash. By lynching Tom, the mob upholds white society’s power to control Black violence when it threatens them.

Freud observes that along with “[t]aboos, laws and customs [...] the economic structure of the society also influences the amount of sexual freedom that remains” (51). Both Tom Burwell and Bob Stone see their sexual relationship with Louisa, in part, as a property relationship to which they want to lay exclusive claim. Nevertheless, in the rural South as Toomer pictures it, sexual relationships have more fluidity and less repression than in the urban, segregated, class divided world of respectability depicted in BS. Behavior there is policed less through external force than by internalized social controls.

Using the above quote by Freud, students should also see that the economic situation for African Americans in the North offered at least some young women new power while at the same time creating new restrictions for them. A comparison of Dan and Muriel’s relationship with Tom and Louisa’s reveals different gender roles and social restraints. Louisa embodies her sexuality but she is given little self consciousness. We see her through men’s desires. Muriel represents repressed, middle-class sexuality, the

boredom and anxiety of a Prufrock, but she has consciousness and power that Louisa does not have. However, Toomer presents Muriel's power as originating more from her self-denial than her freedom. For Dan to succeed, he too must deny himself and follow Muriel's order "to work more and think less. That's [sic] the best way to get along" (59). Dan recognizes that from Muriel and her society's perspective, he is only a poor, unemployed Black man. If only Dan would sublimate his sexual and aggressive energy into work rather than rebellion, he would be able to achieve the success available for Blacks in a segregated society.

Mrs. Pribby is clearly an agent of external social control, but it is useful for students to consider the source and nature of her power over Muriel. Characters in this community have internalized social restrictions of sexuality and, through a strongly developed sense of guilt, have "a permanent internal unhappiness" (Freud 75). Because Muriel's "animalism" has not been completely repressed, Mrs. Pribby is necessary; however, she is as much an ally as an enemy in Muriel's conflicted relationship with Dan. As a result, "The aggressiveness of conscience keeps up the aggressiveness of the authority" (Freud 75). That Dan has also internalized the community's strictures is clear when he is compared with Tom Burwell in *BBM*. Rather than acting violently, he only imagines it as he approaches the house in the opening (56). The violent instincts that remain in this society are controlled through ritualization. Inside the theater and out, the crowd hungers for violence but never sacrifices its own security. On stage, the fixed fight apparently bursts its bounded script, and the crowd, caught up in this action, "roars" (64). However, when the fight is over, the crowd and the performer quickly adjust to the sentimental love song that follows (like TV viewers shifting from news stories of famine or murder to a Pepsi commercial). When the crowd, "tumultuously stirring," follows Dan and the man with corns out of the theater, its role will continue to be limited to spectating (67).

In the end, Dan forgets his antagonist and walks away. Explaining this action will challenge students' interpretive skills and imagination. Here is my (Freudian) suggestion. Violence can be threatening to social stability, but it also, as seen above, can support society's restrictions by channeling aggression into safely scripted means of expression. Dan, in forgetting and not just avoiding the fight, demonstrates his relative freedom from social constraint. In refusing his society's construction of masculinity which requires him to fight the man rather than The Man, he loses an opportunity to relieve his frustrations with society. However, fighting would have been ineffectual since it would have re-enforced rather than resisted society's restrictions.

Ending the story as he does, Toomer, like so many American authors, offers only a half answer to Dan's conflict with society, a critique without a solution. In the end Dan escapes, that mythical lighting out for the territory. The reader is given no sense of what future can be envisioned for a character like Dan in a segregated, Northern, urban society. One might ask, though, whether the fault is Toomer's or the culture within which he writes.

With similar caution, Freud concludes *Civilization* by stating that he does not have the courage to be a prophet (92). He does, though, offer at least a somewhat more specific response than escape. He earlier stated that economic structures influence the amount of sexual freedom a society allows its citizens (51). He rejects communism, not for its critique of capitalist economic relations, but because in utopian fashion it asserts that ending private property will end aggression, a perspective Freud sees as naive. However, he does go so far as to say that, more than ethical commands to stop bad behavior, "a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be more help in this direction..." (90). A change in economic relationships, Freud suggests, has some hope for increasing human happiness.

Toomer as a young man committed himself to socialism, a theory which

offered definite economic changes. However, he eventually found it unsatisfactory. In his search for a new "American race" that transcends the conflict of Black and White, Toomer looked for spiritual rather than material answers. Freud gave his critique of a spiritual solution in his analysis of religion, *The Future of an Illusion*. Toomer, though, seems to have continued searching for spiritual answers the rest of his life, apparently with no more success than he offers his characters.

#### IV. Creating a Conclusion

These two stories from *Cane* offer challenges to both students and teachers. Discussing race, sex, gender and the other aspects of the web of relationships explored in this discussion is not always easy. By looking carefully at these texts, one directly or indirectly engages students in their own personal and social contexts. In that world, answers or even next steps may be no easier to find than in the world of these two stories.

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