

**THE EVOLVING CANON:
CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS**

Dr. Tom Mack
University of South Carolina, Aiken

With each revision of any of the standard anthologies of American literature, some works are added and some deleted; and these decisions are often based on the relative popularity at any given time of certain critical approaches. Until the early-1970s, for example, the formalistic approach, particularly in its modern incarnation as the New Criticism, held sway, and works were judged to be of value because of such considerations as form and texture. Since then, however, other approaches, particularly those that fall under the general category of cultural criticism, have received the most attention, and the barriers between high and low culture have been breached as greater attention began to be paid to heretofore marginalized voices. Of necessity, contemporary students and teachers of American literature must grapple with the issue of the evolving canon, and it is for that reason that in the sophomore survey of American literature at the University of South Carolina Aiken, I have used a text that has become synonymous with contemporary attempts to encompass "the multiple origins and histories of the cultures of the United States" (*Anthology xxxv*).

I am referring, of course, to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Since its first publication in 1989, this text boasts the "greatest

diversity of coverage in any American literature textbook" (*Anthology xxxvi*). Indeed, all early critical responses to the first edition of this very influential anthology made reference to the enriched canon that it afforded. Some commentators, like Lillian Robinson writing for *The Nation* in 1990, had largely positive comments to make. "That all those voices are there and we never even knew it is the major revelation of *The Heath Anthology*," Robinson asserted. Yet even she wondered if the diet were "really enriched by the additions" or whether "Lauter and his co-editors cut out essential nutrients only to replace them with junk food" (22). Certainly, with their avowed desire to stretch the canon, Paul Lauter and the other editors of *The Heath*, as it is popularly known, have impelled a broader discussion regarding the very nature of what defines a literary work. A 1993 issue of the journal *American Literature*, for instance, devoted a substantial proportion of its pages to a forum on what comprises American literature and what role the Heath anthology has played in the ongoing debate between what some see as traditional aesthetic standards and what some commentators, including Richard Pressman in an essay published in 2000, called the Heath's aggressive role as a proponent of "literary Affirmative Action" (57).

My own less-than-scientific analysis of *The Heath's* latest incarnation, the fourth edition published in 2002, reveals a continuing struggle to find some balance between

what one might term the classics and those works that have been deemed in the last three decades to reflect what Paul Lauter calls "the multiplicity and contradiction" ("Revising" 330) inherent in the American experience. My own quick perusal of the first volume of this two-volume anthology leads me to claim that about half of the pages are devoted to those works that might be said to pass the formalist test, such as the metaphysical poetry of Edward Taylor and the richly textured fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, while the other half is devoted to works that were added after my undergraduate years in late 60s to speak to other concerns. The latter category reflects an intentional decision on the part of the editors of The Heath to incorporate more threads in the fabric of our national literature by "widening the range of genres" (Anthology xxxvi) to include works such as diaries, popular songs, anonymous poetry, letters, and essays on issues of social concern.

In an effort to determine where my own students might fall in the debate, I revised my fall, 2005 project in the first half of the sophomore survey to focus on this issue and, in particular, the question of what works deserve to be read and why. As a consequence, I asked each of my students to pick from the first volume of The Heath Anthology a work that we had not covered in class but one that is deserving of everyone's attention as an integral part of the American literary tradition. They then had to write a short paper to justify their choice by establishing the work's

value, either on aesthetic, historical, or cultural terms or by a combination of these standards. This article will outline the project assignment, provide examples of some of the student responses, and attempt to reach some very tentative conclusions regarding how contemporary undergraduates assess value in what they read. In so doing, this little study will undoubtedly pose more questions than provide answers.

From Volume One of The Heath Anthology, covering the American experience from its colonial beginnings to the Civil War, my students had nearly 160 writers and almost 700 selections from which to choose, including works by Native Americans and colonists of New Spain and New France as well as a wide range of English-language selections by authors of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Their final decisions were informative and, at times, unexpected.

I readily acknowledge that this study is based on a relatively small student sample, but if the choices of these particular USCA undergraduates are in any way representative of students at colleges and universities across the country, it is safe to say that cultural studies are alive and well in the literature classroom. It's not that my students have totally ignored aesthetic issues in justifying their choices, it's that the choices themselves tended to be based largely on the subject matter itself and that, furthermore, this material tended to reflect a social agenda.

Take, for example, the most popular author to emerge in this project assignment. Five students of varying abilities and backgrounds, including two English majors and three business majors, picked Thomas Paine, focusing on either The American Crisis or Common Sense as essential works of our national canon. Three of the five students tried to make a case for the value of these works on rhetorical grounds; one English major, in particular, argued that Paine had learned much from classical rhetoricians, particularly the Roman orator Cicero. Two of the five also wrote of each work's historical importance. One student referred to the fact that George Washington had read part of the first "Crisis" paper to his troops before the Battle of Trenton and another cited no less of an authority than Woodrow Wilson, in his pre-Presidential role as historian, when he asserted that Common Sense represented the voice of popular opinion at the time of the American Revolution. Regardless of these secondary reasons, however, the primary impetus for making this selection was patriotism. As one student put it, "to forget these works by Paine would be to turn our backs on the men and women who have bled and died to pay for our freedom."

Given the crisis of 9/11 and its aftermath, it is perhaps not surprising that a renewed nationalism should play such a large part in the lives of our students. Most of them would identify the current "war on terrorism" as the defining event of their generation. In

this regard, they may be responding to what might be called an abiding culture of crisis as evidenced by the color-coded advisories issued by the United States Department of Homeland Security. The frequent public announcements regarding national threat levels breeds a climate of agitated vigilance that makes many of our students echo Thomas Paine's contention that "these are the times that try men's souls."

Next to Paine, four writers tied in the popular vote, with at least two students selecting each one for special mention. All four of these authors focused on the theme of human rights. Works by two of these writers attracted student attention on purely feminist grounds: Sarah Moore Grimke's "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women" and Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century. The students who made these choices attempted to make a case that at least female readers of American literature needed to know something about what one student referred to as our "foremothers." It is certainly true that Sarah Grimke, impelled by her Quaker brand of spiritual exploration, and Margaret Fuller, informed by her philosophical stance based on the transcendental concept of spiritual oneness, argued for women's rights at a time when the idea that a woman might have a place outside the home was as radical as one could get. The students making these literary choices argued that the issues addressed by proto-feminists Grimke

and Fuller remain relevant a century and a half later.

Although I doubt that the students who chose the next work were aware of the full implications of that decision, it can be argued that Angelina Grimke's "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South" reflects the current expansion of feminist literary criticism to include more emphasis on multicultural matters. As most readers are aware, Sarah's sister Angelina Grimke made waves in both feminist and anti-slavery circles when she argued that her Southern "sisters" should break the laws, if necessary, to help bring about an end to slavery.

The fourth writer in this second tier was, at first blush, the most surprising to me. I would not have forecast the appeal of John Greenleaf Whittier to students in the early years of the twenty-first century. Yet, there is something that the poems "Massachusetts to Virginia" and "The Hunters of Men" have in common, and that is Whittier's ardent anti-slavery stance, informed by his Quaker belief that divine grace may move in any human being. Although both English majors who selected these poems tried to grapple with matters of technique (one student, for example, argued that Whittier's decision not to adhere to a tight formal structure gave freer rein to the passion of his poetic voice), both readers responded emotionally to the plight of the fugitive slave, the central image in each poem.

This brings us to the big question. Why did aesthetic merit, those values based on the shape and

texture of a work rather than its content, play such a relatively minor part in nearly all of these student papers? A partial answer may reside in the fact that relatively few of the student selections fit in the traditional categories of imaginative literature, particularly those genres, like poetry, that are most susceptible to a formalistic approach. After all, it can be argued that the value of a particular poem resides, in large part, in the use of literary devices, such as patterns of imagery or symbolism. In fact, only four students out of the twenty-two in this particular class selected poems. Besides the two Whittier poems already discussed, one student picked Longfellow's highly didactic "Psalm of Life" and another picked a poem by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Mexican nun who questioned the accepted gender roles in her culture and time. Yet, even these two poems were treated more as argument than artifact.

When all of the papers were finally submitted about a week before the end of the semester, I discovered that about three-fourths of the works selected by my students were pieces of expository prose and, furthermore, that most of these selections were either polemical or personal in nature. In the former category, that of argument, are the pieces already discussed, the selections by Paine, Fuller, and the Grimke sisters. Given the intrusion of advertising in all aspects of today's mass-produced, mass-disseminated, and mass-consumed culture and the

relatively recent media phenomena of all-talk radio and all-news television, with their frequent focus on the advancement of a particular political ideology, the propagandistic aspects of literature may very well resonate in the lives of our students. No strangers are they to prose that has a persuasive intention; they seem comfortable with the form of discourse that one student called "impassioned debate."

The other expository category of some appeal to my students was the personal narrative. One wrote about Jonathan Edwards's short spiritual autobiography; another was attracted to the volume entitled Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs; a third chose the journal of John Woolman. All of this interest in personal narrative may spring, in part, from the popularity of reader-oriented criticism in our nation's secondary schools. Not only are our students willing to presuppose authorial intention, but they also readily seek to identify with the writer. In fact, they insist on such identification. Thus, it is that one student praised Angelina Grimke as, above all else, a "concerned woman, whose voice remains powerful to this day" and another student focused on how Harriet Jacobs was able to reach a wide interracial audience of female readers by tapping into their universal sense of "sexual vulnerability." Without being necessarily conscious of this connection, these students who selected Grimke and Jacobs offered proof of what Norman Holland calls the "identity theme" in literary texts. Holland's

principal argument is that readers seek to replicate themselves in the texts that they read (130). Although not necessarily irrelevant to understanding a piece of expository prose, on the other hand, the textual elements that the New Critics focused upon, those sensuous and concrete aspects that can be analyzed separately from a work's intellectual content, don't seem to matter much to our students.

One lesson to be gleaned from this unpretentious little experiment is that those of us trained in textual analysis have a real challenge ahead of us. It is safe to say that if left to their own devices, most of my students would rather focus on what a work says than on how it says it. In their eagerness to skip over analysis and go right to interpretation, their focus is not, as M. H. Abrams would have wished, on the object itself; they are more than ready to discard the bottle in order to get to the message inside.

It should be noted that Paul Lauter himself admitted in 1993 that "the formalist strategies" that "constituted the intellectual and pedagogical core of our profession" for many decades are important in understanding our world. Still, he was quick to add, this very same modernist literary and critical framework "that grew in response to the complex, allusive, symbolic artistic practices of writers like T.S. Eliot" is more exclusive than inclusive ("Revising" 328). According to Lauter, our students need to be aware of writers who do not necessarily fit the modernist mode if they are going to be

able to read our world in all its "multiplicity and contradiction" (330). This is our challenge as teachers of literature, as the informed guides in the accepted use of literary anthologies: to achieve some balance between formalist and cultural concerns and, in so doing, help our students approach what they read from more than one perspective.

Finally, this assignment, which calls for students to self-select their own reading material, should prove to be a useful pedagogical tool in any introductory literature class. After all, the question of why we read what we read is of central importance in literary study. Both the teacher and the student can learn much about themselves and the reading experience when confronted with the task of explaining the value of their choices.

WORKS CITED

- Holland, Norman N. "Unity Identity Text Self." Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism. Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Lauter, Paul. "On Revising The Heath Anthology of American Literature." American Literature 65.2 (1993): 327-330.
- Lauter, Paul, et al, eds. The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Vol. 1. 4th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Pressman, Richard. "Is There a Future for the Heath Anthology in the Neo-Liberal State?" Symploke 8.1-2 (2000): 57.

Robinson, Lillian S. "The Heath Anthology of American Literature, 2 vols." The Nation 251.1 (July 2, 1990): 22-25.

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTE

In 2006, Dr. Tom Mack celebrates his thirtieth year as a member of the USCA Department of English. He has held the rank of Professor since 1986.

Since 1990 Tom Mack has written a weekly column for THE AIKEN STANDARD. Entitled "Arts and Humanities," the column, published every Friday, focuses on the regional arts scene, including literature, music, theatre, and the visual arts.

In 1998, Dr. Mack and Dr. Phebe Davidson co-founded THE OSWALD REVIEW, a national undergraduate journal of criticism and research in the discipline of English.

During his tenure at USCA, Dr. Mack has received many honors, including Amoco Foundation Outstanding Teaching Award for the USC System Four-Year Campuses (1980) and USCA Outstanding Teacher of the Year (1980).

Tom Mack is also Chair, USCA Department of English (1991-present) and Director of the James and Mary Oswald Distinguished Writers Series (1997-present); and Advisor to Broken Ink (1980-1992 and Spring, 2006).