

Mary Ann Rygiel

e-mail: [rygiema@auburn.edu](mailto:rygiema@auburn.edu)

## Using News and YouTube in American Lit I

Every literature teacher recognizes the famous beginning to “The Tell-Tale Heart”:

“True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been, and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute” (Poe 1843: 1589). Thus, also began my Thanksgiving vacation on November 18, 2011. Like many teachers, I was at the beginning of grading the second essay due in the sophomore core course, American Lit I. Perhaps also like some of you, we had just experienced a tornado two days before the start of the vacation.

On November 16, 2011, right around noon, a tornado tore a path through our town, striking Terrace Acres Drive and Green Street particularly hard. At the time of the tornado, I was home alone, settling down to watch Andrea Mitchell’s noontime news and political analysis show. The phone rang, but there was no voice on the other end. Within minutes, I heard the sound of a dull thud on the roof, and the sound of breaking glass down the hall. Having read about the Tuscaloosa tornado and how people protected themselves, I ran to the bathroom to sit in the tub. A verse from Luke came into my mind: “two women will be grinding corn together; one will be taken, the other left” (Luke 17:35). I thought this was my time to be

taken. But the tornado, so sudden, so intense, so violent, was also so fleeting. It passed over, and I had not been taken, then.

So, two days later, I was grading essays. Many were submitted on Poe. As I read student analyses of Poe's unreliable narrator, I listened to men walking on my roof, rebuilding rafters, hammering, hammering, installing roofing tiles, which involved a heavy rolling sound. One of the workmen who repainted the bedroom ceiling had a dulled eye, like the old man whose eye so bothered Poe's narrator.

The coming together of these experiences, unrelated in any literary survey but related in personal life, have led to this reflection on teaching American Lit I. The course provides challenges and rewards that are different from those of other sophomore literature survey courses at a large public university in the Bible Belt.

One challenge that comes with an expanded canon is to determine where to start the course. Should the teacher start with the Spanish, for whom Columbus sailed, or with the English, including naturalist Thomas Harriot and John Smith, a dispenser of tough love to the colonists with him, or with the Native Americans and their creation stories and trickster tales, or with the Separatist Puritans, led by William Bradford on the Mayflower, and followed not so very long after by non-Separatist John Winthrop on the Arabella? I have begun the course with the early English (Harriot and Smith, followed immediately by the Native Americans) and have also begun with the Puritans. Of these alternatives, I find the first way more complete, the second way more traditional, easier to shape into a narrative chronology, and easier to conform to the greater constraints of a Tuesday-Thursday rather than Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule. Either way, I determine the syllabus based on the fullest perspectives and on

possible essay topics. For example, Roger Williams's principles and beliefs about fair treatment of Native Americans can be examined in light of actual historical treatment, explicitly expressed by Pontiac, Logan (as filtered through Thomas Jefferson), Red Jacket, and Tecumseh, and through the facts of Samson Occam's life.

A second challenge is the nature of many of the early materials, in genre, language, and style. As a friend of mine who has taught an American Lit survey course at smaller liberal arts state university said with sympathetic laughter when she learned of my assignment, "Someone has to teach all those sermons and diaries." The director of undergraduate studies at my university has emphasized that for the American Lit I course, approximately equal time should be spent on the colonial period, represented by *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* Vol. A, beginnings to 1820, and then on the antebellum period, represented by *Norton* Vol. B, 1820-1865. Naturally, individual teachers can choose their own anthology, a required feature of the American Literature survey, and some like the *Bedford*, especially for its extensive illustrations and for its "Through a Modern Lens" feature. Other teachers may prefer the *Heath*; the introductions to each author contain interesting details, from which examples are mentioned below in comments about Royall Tyler and Harriet Jacobs. I find it helpful to encourage students to discuss the barriers between 2012 and 1630.

An illustration of the difficult language and challenging syntax that awaits the sophomore student is contained in this opening sentence of the sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," given on the *Arbella*: "God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection" (Winthrop 1630: 147). This

sentence contains potential traps for some readers in the words “providence,” “hath,” “disposed,” “eminent,” and “subjection.” And perhaps the most unfamiliar word meaning lurks beneath the seemingly innocent surface of the little word “mean.” The word as adjective is often used according to its seventh definition in the American Heritage Dictionary: “Lacking elevating human qualities, as kindness and good will: a. Reluctant to oblige or accommodate. B. Cruel; malicious; spiteful,” and much less often in its second definition: “Low in social status; of humble origin or rank.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is used as a word that describes someone who is “not nice.” I have developed a handout on reading earlier works in early modern American English, as opposed to the translations of World Literature ancient and medieval works that modernize the language, as an attempt to help students with this difficulty.

Winthrop’s sermon furnishes other instances of the difficulty of the early materials. It is a sermon, a genre most students are not accustomed to analyzing for literary features. Moreover, it is a long sermon, containing many allusions, mainly Biblical, but also some historical and legal. The style, although praised as a “precise style” (Introd. to Winthrop 2008, 154) in one anthology introduction, is nevertheless perceived by students as prolix. One student posed the problem this way: “It is hard to follow the hierarchy of ideas in this work. There are a lot of one’s and two’s in it.” Another barrier is the message itself—that the person who has material wealth must give to the person who lacks wealth, for the good of the community and as followers of Christ. Winthrop’s message from 1630 has in the intervening years from then to 2012 become detached from Christian mandates in a historical path that goes through Emerson, so that many students are perfectly comfortable in calling the message

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<sup>1</sup>*American Heritage Dictionary*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition.

overly idealistic, unattainable, and furthermore a message that will leave people unmotivated to work. Moreover, not all students are Christian, and some of these students are not comfortable with a religious text. In fact, such students may be made uneasy by the necessarily religious content of the work of many early authors: Bradford, Winthrop, Mary Rowlandson, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards. I use daily pre-reading notes that help students look for particular features of the text they are going to read before the next class. These notes can include special words, such as Winthrop's use of the word "mean," character lists for fiction or non-fiction narratives, and questions about key ideas. An example of the latter is asking students how Jonathan Edwards makes a reappearance in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Yet each of these authors mentioned above is important to America's early literary tradition. Each one allows for a thematic approach centered on a discussion of key ideas and compelling images that makes them more accessible to the wide range of students we encounter in the required literature survey course. Both Bradford and Winthrop give rise to questions about covenant and compact, ideal and reality, exceptionalism and one nation among many nations. For Bradford, asking students to visualize the difficulties of a voyage that lasted 65 days in which the colonists' coats had ice on them as they explored Cape Cod,<sup>2</sup> and at the end of which Bradford's wife went overboard (an accident? An act of despair?) is helpful in engaging students in his text. Winthrop's much admired and often-quoted vision of New England as a city on a hill gives rise to a many-layered discussion, including whether contemporary political appeals to American exceptionalism are persuasive to college students, and even the recognition that the image is still invoked, including by Walter Maddox, the Mayor

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<sup>2</sup> "The weather was very cold, and it froze so hard as the spray of the sea lighting on their coats, they were as if they had been glazed" (Bradford 1620: 118).

of Tuscaloosa, after the tornado there April 27, 2011. Mary Rowlandson's eleven-week captivity by Wampanoag Indians, with its intense and dramatic beginning, and its portrait of native American social structure, taboos, customs, foods, and bartering, lends itself very naturally to a discussion of her portrayal of Native Americans, and to a contrast between the way she depicts them and the way Roger Williams does in his *A Key into the Language of America*. Cotton Mather's defense of the testimony at the witchcraft trials gives rise to a discussion of evidence and standards of judgment. A brief digression to the nature of evidence in contemporary trials can assist students with Mather, as can a reference to Amanda Knox being labeled a "witch" at her trial in Italy, or a reference to the West Memphis Three and the fascination of one of the three with Cotton Mather before his trial, something that was used against him in his trial. Students from mainline Protestant and from Catholic backgrounds may be startled by Jonathan Edwards's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," prompting them to ask about Edwards's denomination, or about the reaction of the people at the time to his sermon. This question sent me to several sources, which allowed an answer in concentric circles surrounding Edwards—his congregation—then, and importantly, later, his uncle, aggressive itinerant ministers in Connecticut, his son, and later Boston ministers and later congregations. One of the most amusing responses came from someone in the eighteenth century audience for one of George Whitefield sermons, which was simply the report of the audience member feeling an intense thrill at the way Whitefield said, "Mesopotamia!"

In spite of the attempt through a discussion of key ideas to help students see the relevance of these early Puritan texts, there is a definite religious content to the early materials

in an honestly constructed American Lit survey. Students are more sensitive to this content than they are, say, to references to Greek mythology in Oedipus, The Oddysey, or Medea, or than they are to the Hindu framework assumed in Ramayana or in Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection. The sensitivity to religiously oriented early American materials can be positive or negative, depending on the student's personal beliefs and willingness to discuss them.

Students who responded positively to Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" may say they understood it because they are spiritual. Students who were negative about this work may not understand the progression in it, or, even more basically, what exactly Edwards was talking about. For such students, quiz questions about the doctrine Edwards said he found abhorrent at first, but gradually came to love and accept, or a quiz question about what Edwards and his father talked about on their walk in the field, or what consolation(s) Edwards felt after his inner conversion, are all difficult. For such students, it is important in a public university to make both quizzes and classroom discussion even-handed, objective and descriptive rather than spiritually intrusive.

The challenge to the teacher of constructing bridges to earlier materials can be met in a number of additional ways. Following a narrative thread in the early literature is one way to make Puritan texts more accessible. Even students who can't understand Edwards's "Personal Narrative" can readily understand the Norton's perspective on him as one of the tragic stories in American Literature. Edwards's eventual expulsion from his congregation by a vote of 200 to 20, after he insisted on members publicly expressing their conversion experience, and after he denounced the boys of prominent families from his pulpit when those boys had found a midwife's manual and used it to taunt girls in the community, may be seen as conviction, or as

an example of ministerial over-reaching and over-zealotry. Edwards's subsequent career, including missionary work among Native Americans and the presidency of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), with his life cut short as he tried to show the scientific soundness of getting a smallpox vaccination but instead died from it, can engender student sympathy for him.

Another instance of emphasizing the narrative element is to emphasize the stories contained in John Winthrop's diaries. The trial and expulsion of Anne Hutchinson from Boston for making religious assertions to an audience of men and women and in general for conducting Bible and religion study is one example. A second is the compelling story of Roger Williams, fleeing in the snow three days ahead of the magistrates coming to arrest him for his dangerous views (the King has no right to give patents to land—these must be negotiated with the Native Americans; nonbelievers should not be required to take an oath in court or to pray; the magistrate has “no jurisdiction over the soul” (Introd. to Williams 2007: 174); ministers must break from the Church of England). The language materials in Williams's Key are of interest because of his observations about word meanings and about the difficulty of pronunciation; his encounter with his old friend Wequash as the latter lay dying is moving and memorable. A third instance is found in the diaries of Samuel Sewall, as he attempts futilely to court Madame Winthrop. Although not all early texts have a heavy Puritan content, an emphasis on narrative is helpful even with texts where it is not needed for student interest.

Interesting narratives can be found in the biographical background of authors that help place the author into a literary historical framework, and that provide insight into the text itself. Jonathan Edwards has been cited above at some length. Royall Tyler's play, The Contrast, is a

comedy that contains the all-too-familiar idea of the cheating boyfriend and the noble outsider ready to rescue his unfortunate fiancée, whose friends are deceiving her and each other because of their own interest in her boyfriend. It also brings in the twist of arranged marriage, which likewise leads to insightful student comments. The Introduction to Royall Tyler's play in the *Heath* anthology contains an entertaining anecdote about his college days, when he sent "a fishing line out of a dormitory window in order to catch a pig from the yard below, only to hook the wig of Samuel Langdon, the school's President" (Introd. to Tyler 2006: 1291). Like his character Billy Dimple, he squandered money; like his more noble character Col. Manly, he served in the Continental Army. He also had a failed courtship of the daughter of John and Abigail Adams. John Adams wryly had said he was not interested in a Poet or a Professor as a spouse for his daughter.

Some early American reading material has intrinsic interest for students. *Charlotte Temple*, the tale of a young woman's seduction, pregnancy, and abandonment, by a soldier, is an example of such material. Some see Charlotte as a typical fifteen-year old girl. They are intrigued to learn that there were other novels by Susanna Rowson which followed up on the fate of Charlotte's seducer. Students may find passages from the book personally illuminating, or may even identify a poem or song lyrics they have come across as similar to the situation in *Charlotte Temple*. Both Tyler's play, *The Contrast*, and Rowson's novel are profitably approached by talking about the tradition of realistic fiction, as opposed to dark romance. The features M. H. Abrams stresses in his definition of literary realism – clear hero, clear social status, many characters, realistic situations encountered in daily life, can be shown via materials on YouTube. One instance is the showing of just two segments of the 2005 filming of

*Pride and Prejudice* starring Keira Knightley, Parts 9 and 10, which may take about 18 minutes, preceded by a student or a teacher summary of plot elements up to the elopement of Lydia with Wickham, and emphasizing the disgrace to the family of Lydia's elopement and the lessening of the other girls' marriageability, as a relevant parallel.

Beyond narrative, other topically oriented ways to connect earlier literature with our own day can come up in surprising ways. For example, vaccines occur in a number of contexts in early American Literature. Besides Jonathan Edwards's fatal experience with a vaccine, Ben Franklin's son died from Franklin not inoculating him. The Adamses were both inoculated, as were their children. David McCullough offers a fascinating glimpse into the way vaccines were done. Learned from a slave of Cotton Mather's named Onesimus, the method involved making a cut in the arm and inserting into it "'pus from the ripe pustules' of a smallpox patient into the open cut" (McCullough 2001: 142). Anne Bradstreet speaks of her bout with smallpox as a needed correction from God. Smallpox is mentioned in Charlotte Temple, and is one of the textual elements the text's editor, Marion Rust, and her students found appropriate to footnote (Rust 2011: xxix and 24 fn. 3). Just as references to witches did not die with the Salem witch trials, references to vaccines have not died with the eighteenth century. In fact, several political candidates in the Republican debates over the course of the summer and fall have discussed the issue of requiring vaccines for twelve-year old girls, before they become sexually active.

Students who find the religious assumptions of the early Puritan works unfamiliar may find the outlooks of Franklin and Jefferson more culturally and personally recognizable. Franklin talks of his avoidance of church services in his youth when he was out from under the

control of his father and apprenticed to his brother. He also talks of his need to get out of Boston because he was being singled out as an atheist. His self-improvement project is a character development project that stands in contrast to Jonathan Edwards's spiritual focus. He includes a statement of his beliefs in his *Autobiography* that is recognizably Deist rather than Christian. In the section entitled Query XVII. Religion in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* can be found his classic stance on the limit of government with regard to the imposition of religion on citizens: "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (1787: 662). It also includes his statement of the way in which individual consciences should be formed: "Reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion, by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation" (1787: 662).

A turning point in the amount of attention to religion in canonical American literature works is reached with late colonial and early Republic works, including Franklin, Jefferson, and Royall Tyler, whose play contains a comment by yet another Charlotte making fun of church-going and even Susanna Rowson's novel, whose work contains a few religious reflections, but is primarily practically oriented to the sentimental education of young female readers.

A variety of materials available on YouTube and in daily national news accounts provide bridges to writers from the American Renaissance. Frederick Douglass speaks movingly in his [Narrative of the Life](#) of the deep emotions expressed in the slave songs sung on plantations. Sam Cooke's singing of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" is a richly melodic example of

the sorrow expressed by the slaves, easily accessible on YouTube. Listening to this song, listening to a version of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," providing students with lyrics, and discussing the lyrics' combination of religious consolation and coded messages about freedom, the slave master, and escape help students to understand the Douglass's point: the falsity of the interpretation at the time that the songs were an indication of the slaves' happiness.

Readings of varying quality of Whitman's "Song of Myself" are available on YouTube. Excellent readings of section 1 are available, including one which may be a reading by Whitman himself. A dramatization of section 15, the catalog of occupations, is very well done. It is directed by Zach Pasteris and Tomek Dobrzanski and is part of the "Go Forth" Levi Commercial Series. I have used Johnny Cash's "I've Been Everywhere Man" to suggest that flavor of section 16, a catalog of places and identities based on place. For an essay topic included below on logic and scientific reasoning involving Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and Poe's "The Purloined Letter," I have shown the heated exchange between Dr. Richard Besser, medical consultant to ABC News, and Dr. Mehmet Oz, well-known through many television appearances and magazine articles, on the question of whether there are excessive levels of arsenic in apple juice. Their exchange lasts for approximately five minutes. I immediately follow it up with a discussion of science, the scientific method, and reasoning, and ask students, particularly science students, to comment and to apply the discussion to the science, reasoning, and logic on display in the two stories. Students relate very well to Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." This past semester, they became animated over the following question: Should college students engage in civil disobedience over issues of campus-wide significance? When I made the application to the actions of various divided student factions of the Penn State campus on the evening of Joe Paterno's firing, the

discussion took off. I would like to stress that each of these excursions on a bridge between past and present were brief, pointed, and relevant. The discussion of the Penn State issue was hands down the liveliest excursion, but also presented and framed as an application of Thoreau's thinking. Student comments were mature and insightful. They distinguished legal compliance from ethical behavior, referred to the importance of adults setting good examples for them, urged that schools separate their academic interests from a choking entanglement with football, said that academic institutions are larger than the coach, that the method of the firing wasn't good but the firing had to happen, and that a mob mentality entered into students who were ill-informed about the facts surrounding the scandal. National commentator Fareed Zakaria has made the point that American schools encourage critical thinking, judgment, and challenging of received opinions. I believe this conversation fit those descriptors.

Hazlitt's comment from 1830 is well-known as an observation on American literature: "The fault of American literature (when not a mere vapid imitation of ours) was, that it ran too much into dry, minute, literal description; or if it made an effort to rise above this ground of matter-of-fact, it was forced and exaggerated, 'horrors accumulating on horror's head'" (Manning 1997: xxxii). I have tried above to suggest some ways to avoid students having this response to the early literature. I have aimed for them to see the dramatic potential and the relevance of early American literature, rather than seeing it as a university-level variation of the DBQ on texts encountered in high school AP American history courses. Likewise, in spite of the fact that critics raise questions about Poe's literary stature and although Hazlitt's comment preceded Poe's stories, students do not find his unreliable narrators to be "forced and

exaggerated,” nor his plots to be “horrors upon horrors” and therefore unreadable. Rather, students are fascinated by Poe.

In fact, when we did a small group discussion activity in which students are given a few minutes to come to consensus in their small group about which of four or five answers is the best answer to the question posed and then defend their group’s choice to the whole class, student response to the following question was extremely revealing of their assessment of the current state of American popular culture. The question was as follows:

The work and thought of which writer has entered most strongly into American mainstream culture?

1. Emerson’s emphasis on self-reliance
2. Poe’s gothic fiction and popular culture movies and t.v. programs
3. Hawthorne’s emphasis on hidden sin and guilt
4. Tyler’s emphasis on patriotism and American exceptionalism

Students chose #2 overwhelmingly. They feel that Poe has left a strong imprint on contemporary American culture, reflected in the emphasis on psychologically strange characters in movies and in television. They conceded that there was some basis for choosing #1 and #3, but expressed the idea about #3 that “Nothing is hidden any more. Everything is out in the open.” The statement they rejected as not characteristic of contemporary America was #4. They also said they have heard that America is isolated in the world, with many enemies, and have heard talk of an America in decline.

Student interest in Poe is shown by their choice of essay topic for the second essay. When given five choices, indicated below, two-thirds chose the topic on obsession. Topics such as the first and last one are difficult topics for students to work with. I have received very few, but

also very good papers on the first topic. The writers are usually engineering majors. I have also received good essays on female roles, topic #4.

1. Writers of romance expressed an interest in and at times concerns about science and scientific/logical reasoning. In an analysis of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and Poe's "The Purloined Letter," discuss whether each writer is giving a warning or expressing confidence in human reasoning. Consider how each writer characterizes reasoning and the advantages and limitations of rationality.
2. Both Hawthorne and Poe explore the idea of obsession. In an analysis of Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" and of EITHER Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" OR "The Tell Tale Heart," discuss the contrast in how each writer portrays obsession. Consider whether each writer approaches it from the same starting point, and whether each reaches the same conclusions about the nature, origin, and results of obsession.
3. Both Susanna Rowson and Royall Tyler offer a portrayal of a protagonist or significant character who is a soldier. In an analysis of Rowson's Charlotte Temple and Tyler's The Contrast, discuss the contrast in how each writer presents the soldier. Consider how each writer presents the social role of the soldier and the scope for action.
4. The story of Hannah Dustin's capture by Indians and her response to her captivity challenged female gender roles in the late seventeenth century. In an analysis of Poe's "The Black Cat" and EITHER Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" OR "Rappaccini's Daughter," discuss the nature of female roles as envisioned in the 1840s. Consider whether the roles allow scope for female agency, and if so, what the limits are.
5. While works in the tradition of British realistic fiction often center on a marriage plot, American romance frequently features an isolated protagonist. In an analysis, contrast the central character in Tyler's The Contrast with the protagonist of a Hawthorne or Poe short story.

This survey course is important. It introduces students to a variety of genres and topics. It shows the dedication of the Puritans to their cause. It also shows the negative side to religious extremism in the witchcraft trials. It includes portraits of people who thought only with their time—Samuel Sewall's participation in the witchcraft trials—and people who thought ahead of their time—Samuel Sewall's "The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial," his 1700 A.D. argument against slavery. It includes the classic portrait of the American entrepreneurial spirit,

in Benjamin Franklin, and the classic portrait of self-help literature, also in Franklin. It includes the political wisdom of the Founders, in the work of Jefferson and in the Federalist papers, and in the political concerns for the future of democracy expressed by John and Abigail Adams in their correspondence. A study of these texts would improve our national political discourse by making it deeper, truer, and more historically accurate. It would make our students more informed citizens, and it would give them texts to return to later and reflect upon. It includes the point of view of selected Native Americans and in black slaves. It also includes the works of the great writers of the American Renaissance—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—plus Poe plus Dickinson, if you are inclined to David Reynolds’s more expansive view of the Renaissance. Like any good survey course, it should result in each student’s deepened appreciation for and understanding of literary artistry. It invites thinking about the canon of literature and how the canon is formed in different historical periods and nations. Each student can become like Poe’s detective Dupin, finding literary gems hidden in plain sight.

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