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Pedagogical Introduction

Those of you familiar with the first three editions of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* will find the basic format of this instructor's guide to be the same: the contributing editors have written teaching suggestions to accompany the texts in *The Heath Anthology*. As with the previous editions, the entries in the instructor's guide are organized into the following categories:

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Original Audience

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Bibliography

New entries appear for the material added to the fourth edition, while many other entries have been revised.

The central pedagogical belief informing the instructor's guide remains the same: that revising the canon of American literature and developing multicultural curricula, of which *The Heath Anthology* is a part, represent not just a rethinking of what texts to include on a syllabus, or the simple replacement of one group of privileged texts with another, but a fundamental re-examination of the purposes and practices of literary study as a whole and of American literature in particular. This need for a continuing analysis and transformation of teaching theory and practice is even more critical in the light of the challenges and opportunities presented by the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web. While we wish to preserve the diversity of pedagogical

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approaches found in the various contributors' entries, we feel it is useful and necessary to include material that provides a theoretical context for these approaches, material that addresses general strategies for class planning and the teaching of texts that cover a wide range of cultural perspectives, artistic forms, and rhetorical situations.

Overall, the instructor's guide is based on three main pedagogical assumptions: (1) the reading experience of students should be the focus of class discussion and analysis, (2) classification systems—whether formations of historical periods, cultural movements, or canons of literary value— influence and shape those reading experiences in crucial ways, and (3) the production, reception, and interpretation of texts is an active process of cultural negotiation, opposition, assimilation, and transformation, a process that is centered on the reading experiences of the students.

This process-oriented approach, stressing the importance of social context in understanding the form and structure of particular acts of writing and reading, should sound familiar to composition teachers and theorists who remind students that in order to figure out what and how to write, a writer needs to ask why and to whom she is writing. Borrowing a term from composition studies, then, we might describe the pedagogical focus of this guide as the study of cultural rhetoric: the analysis of literary texts as complex and purposeful transactions between speaking/writing/reading subjects and the culture that both institutes those subjects and acts as medium and object of that transaction.¹ In Jane Tompkins's words,

instead of seeing . . . novels as mere entertainment, or as works of art interpretable apart from their context . . . I see them as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation. . . . I see their plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts and recommending solutions (200).

The pedagogical aim of this approach is to encourage students to consider themselves as just such speaking/writing/reading subjects and to see themselves as active participants in the process of cultural definition and transformation through their interpretation of and response to the texts in this anthology as well as through their participation in the institutionalized study of culture—in other words, to see the literature class itself as a kind of cultural work. In so doing, cultural rhetoric

¹The term “transaction” is borrowed from Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response model of literature pedagogy.

deliberately models itself on the work of the late composition theorist and educator James Berlin, who argued for a merging of literature and writing classes within the general context of the study of “signifying practices,” which are “always at the center of conflict and contention” (82).

In operation, the cultural rhetoric approach is more inductive than deductive, more centrifugal than centripetal. It takes as its pedagogical starting point the variety of American cultural expression and readers’ equally varied responses to those expressions, rather than beginning with predetermined criteria about what “American Literature” is and seeing how well particular texts do or don’t fit these criteria. Providing a definition of “The American Renaissance” or “Transcendentalism” before approaching the literature of the 1840s and 1850s does give students a means of organizing and understanding that literature, but it also limits both the meaning and scope of the works being considered by moving the focus of the class from the creative activity of reading to the acquisition and preservation of those definitions.

By warning against relying too heavily on reductive historical for-mulas, however, I am not endorsing a Romantic—or New Critical—belief that we can abandon all such preconceptions and classification systems in order to embrace “the text itself” in some kind of ahistorical purity. Indeed, generalization and classification are central to the learning process, as new information can only be assimilated in terms of preexisting ways of knowing and thinking. In any case, even if instructors could prevent somehow “contaminating” the students’ first experience of a text by avoiding general-izations about historical periods or intellectual trends, students will always bring with them just such large-scale conceptions, generalizations, myths, and beliefs about American cultural history. While “American Renaissance” may only resonate with a small group of students, terms like “slavery,” “abolition,” “the Civil War,” “Manifest Destiny,” and “the North and the South” will call forth a wide range of associations, assumptions, and generalizations. These assumptions do not merely influence the reading experience; they are intrinsic to it, and the rhetorical approach to literary study recognizes that it is just as

important for students to think about why and how they came to hold these assumptions as it is to question the historical validity of these assumptions. As Berlin puts it, “In the effort to name experience, different groups [and, I would add, the individuals in and constituted by those groups] constantly vie for supremacy, for ownership and control of terms and their meanings in any discourse situation” (82–83).

In other words, the cultural rhetoric approach in particular and multicultural pedagogy in general, is not about replacing “false consciousness” with “true consciousness,” or an old-fashioned and rigid classification system with an updated but equally rigid classification system. Instead, the focus on literature as an active strategic cultural process recognizes the pedagogical importance of what Paul Lauter has referred to as “starting points”—the basic frameworks and assumptions readers bring to texts and instructors bring to the class in the form of syllabus design and teaching practices. As a result, many of the pedagogical introductions suggest that study of the texts in this anthology should begin by exploring the assumptions, biases, and historical consciousnesses that students—and instructors—bring to a class. The point of these exercises is not to undertake the impossible task of freeing students from the influence of classification systems (particularly theories of interpretation or versions of cultural development) but to study how different assumptions, mind-sets, and beliefs affect the reading experience, where these assumptions come from, and, perhaps most important to any rhetorical approach, what and whose interests they serve.

This approach implies that a strategic maneuvering for social power, influence, and authority is intrinsic to literary activity, including the reception and discussion of that activity in the classroom. If teaching the new canon means foregrounding discussions about the workings of cultural authority and power, that discussion must also include the classroom and institutional context of instruction as well, in order for students to become aware of and reflect critically upon the part they play in arguments about cultural identity and values.

The teaching approaches outlined in this instructor’s guide do not require completely abandoning the pedagogical

techniques many of us experienced as students and now use in our classes. If anything, a cultural rhetoric approach demands an ever-closer “close reading,” but a close reading that includes the cultural context of the reading experience; a close reading that indeed problematizes the boundary between text and context in order to get at the strategic questions of the kinds of cultural work engaged in by the creators of the texts in the anthology, the students in the classroom, and the teacher in the class.