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Chapter 7

Writing about History and Culture from a New Historical Perspective

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Examine methods that scholars use to write about literature as a historical text.
2. Apply New Historical theory to works of literature.
3. Research and synthesize primary and secondary sources for a historical research paper.
4. Review and evaluate the research and writing process of a peer writer.
5. Draft and revise a historical critique of a literary work.

7.1 Literary Snapshot: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll, as we found out in previous chapters, is most famous for two books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). These books follow the adventures of a seven-year-old, Alice, who tumbles down a rabbit hole (*Wonderland*) and enters a magic mirror (*Looking-Glass*), entering a nonsensical world of the imagination. If you have not already read these classic books—or wish to reread them—you can access them at the following links:

http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html

http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarGlas.html

Once Alice tumbles down the rabbit-hole in *Wonderland*, she encounters a topsy-turvy world that is disconnected from the real Victorian world she is from. She forgets the lessons she learns in her world quickly and drinks from a bottle that is marked "DRINK ME," which shuts her "up like a telescope."Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 1, http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html. Undaunted, she then eats from a cake in a box marked "EAT ME," which as you can guess, makes her quite large—nine feet tall, to be exact—which is so large that when she gets upset over her predicament and starts to cry, she creates an enormous pool of tears. As she starts swimming, having now shrunk to about two feet in height, she finds herself paddling with an odd menagerie of animals—a mouse, a duck, a lory, an eaglet, and even an extinct dodo bird.

Needless to say, the animals don't like being so wet. How to dry off? Let's listen in on the plans:

They were indeed a queer-looking party that assembled on the bank—the birds with draggled feathers, the animals with their fur clinging close to them, and all dripping wet, cross, and uncomfortable.

The first question of course was, how to get dry again: they had a consultation about this, and after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them, as if she had known them all her life. Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, "I am older than you, and must know better"; and this Alice would not allow

without knowing how old it was, and, as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said.

At last the Mouse, who seemed to be a person of authority among them, called out, "Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! *I'll* soon make you dry enough!" They all sat down at once, in a large ring, with the Mouse in the middle. Alice kept her eyes anxiously fixed on it, for she felt sure she would catch a bad cold if she did not get dry very soon.

"Ahem!" said the Mouse with an important air, "are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please! 'William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—'"

"Ugh!" said the Lory, with a shiver.

"I beg your pardon!" said the Mouse, frowning, but very politely: "Did you speak?"

"Not I!" said the Lory hastily.

"I thought you did," said the Mouse. "—I proceed. 'Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for him: and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable–'"

"Found *what*?" said the Duck.

"Found *it*," the Mouse replied rather crossly: "of course you know what '*it*' means."

"I know what '*it*' means well enough, when *I* find a thing," said the Duck: "it's generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?"

The Mouse did not notice this question, but hurriedly went on, "'—found it advisable to go with Edgar Atheling to meet William and offer him the crown. William's conduct at first was moderate. But the insolence of his Normans—' How are you getting on now, my dear?" it continued, turning to Alice as it spoke.

"As wet as ever," said Alice in a melancholy tone: "it doesn't seem to dry me at all."Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John*

Tenniel (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 3, http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html.

The mouse believes that by telling a "dry" tale, he will dry off his companions. And what better dry tale to tell than one involving a history lesson, one about William the Conqueror (of the eleventh century). Carroll, of course, is having fun with the perception that history is boring, particularly when history becomes a series of factual dates that require memorization. In fact, much of *Wonderland*—as well as the sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*—finds Carroll satirizing various Victorian social issues, including the notion of the child (and gender roles), the purpose of literature for children, the debate over Darwinian evolution, the discussion over linguistic development, the controversy over religious debate (Lewis Carroll, whose real name was Charles Dodgson, was a professor and clergyman at Oxford University), and the most productive educational methods. And we are only scratching the surface here.

In other words, if we read *Wonderland* as a historical text that illuminates the age in which Carroll wrote, then history is certainly not dry, nor is literature dry, for the two speak in dialogue with one another. Just as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, you will be asked in this unit to enter the wonderland that is called New Historical criticism. Instead of being dry, we hope that we whet your appetite for writing about literature focusing on history and culture.

YOUR PROCESS

1. Has your experience studying history been similar to Alice's? Or have you enjoyed studying history? Jot down your thoughts about studying history.
2. Have you ever read a work of literature that made you think about a particular historical event or period? Describe this work and its connection to that historical moment.

7.2 New Historical Criticism: An Overview

Early scholars of literature thought of history as a progression: events and ideas built on each other in a linear and causal way. History, consequently, could be understood objectively, as a series of dates, people, facts, and events. Once known, history became a static entity. We can see this in the previous example from *Wonderland*. The Mouse notes that the "driest thing" he knows is that "William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—" I think we would all agree to moan "Ugh!" In other words, the Mouse sees history as a list of great dead people that must be remembered and recited, a list that refers only to the so-called great events of history: battles, rebellions, and the rise and fall of leaders. Corresponding to this view, literature was thought to directly or indirectly mirror historical reality. Scholars believed that history shaped literature, but literature didn't shape history.

While this view of history as a static amalgamation of facts is still considered important, other scholars in the movement called **New Historicism**[1] see the relationship between history and literature quite differently. Today, most literary scholars think of history as a dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces. They don't necessarily concentrate solely on kings and nobles, or battles and coronations. In addition, they also focus on the smaller details of history, including the plight of the common person, popular songs and art, periodicals and advertisements—and, of course, literature. New Historical scholarship, it follows, is **interdisciplinary**[2], drawing on materials from a number of academic fields that were once thought to be separate or distinct from one another: history, religious studies, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and even the natural sciences. In fact, New Historicism is also called **cultural materialism**[3] since a text—whether it's a piece of literature, a religious tract, a political polemic, or a scientific discovery—is seen as an artifact of history, a material entity that reflects larger cultural issues.

1. New Historicism situates literary texts in their historical contexts, reading literary works as dynamic interplays of cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces.

2. Interdisciplinary scholarship draws on insights from a range of academic fields.

3. Cultural materialism views all texts—for example, literature, religious tracts, political polemics, or scientific discoveries—as artifacts of history that reflect larger cultural issues.

YOUR PROCESS

1. How have you learned to connect literature and history? Jot down two or three examples from previous classes.

Sometimes it's obvious the way history can help us understand a piece of literature. When reading William Butler Yeats's poem "Easter 1916" (which you can read online at http://www.poetryfoundation .org/poem/172061), for instance, readers immediately wonder how the date named in the poem's title shapes the poem's meaning."Easter 1916 by William Butler Yeats," The Atlantic Online, http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/poetry/soundings/easter.htm. Curious readers might quickly look up that Easter date and discover that leaders of the Irish independence movement staged a short-lived revolt against British rule during Easter week in 1916. The rebellion was quickly ended by British forces, and the rebel leaders were tried and executed. Those curious readers might then understand the allusions that Yeats makes to each of the executed Irish leaders in his poem and gain a better sense of what Yeats hopes to convey about Ireland's past and future through his poem's symbols and language. Many writers, like Yeats, use their art to directly address social, political, military, or economic debates in their cultures. These writers enter into the social **discourse**[4] of their time, this discourse being formed by the cultural conditions that define the age. Furthermore, this discourse reflects the **ideology**[5] of the society at the time, which is the collective ideas—including political, economic, and religious ideas—that guide the way a culture views and talks about itself. This cultural ideology, in turn, reflects the **power structures**[6] that control—or attempt to control—the discourse of a society and often control the way literature is published, read, and interpreted. Literature, then, as a societal discourse comments on and is influenced by the other cultural discourses, which reflect or resist the ideology that is based on the power structures of society.

Let's turn to another example to illuminate these issues. One of the most influential books in American history was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which Stowe wrote to protest slavery in the South before the Civil War."*Uncle Tom's Cabin* & American Culture," University of Virginia, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an instant bestseller that did much to popularize the abolitionist movement in the northern United States. Legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe during the Civil War, he greeted her, by saying "So you're the little woman that wrote the book that started this great war." In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, it's clear that understanding the histories of slavery, abolitionism, and antebellum regional tensions can help us make sense of Stowe's novel.

But history informs literature in less direct ways, as well. In fact, many literary scholars—in particular, New Historical scholars—would insist that every work of literature, whether it explicitly mentions a historical event or not, is shaped by the moment of its composition (and that works of literature shape their moment of composition in turn). The American history of the Vietnam war is a great example, for we continue to interpret and revise that history, and literature (including

4. The way that language represents or reinforces the ways of knowing and thinking in a society, community, or group.

5. The collective ideas—including political, economic, and religious ideas—that guide the way a culture views and talks about itself.

6. The political, religious, educational, or social institutions that control or attempt to control the discourse of a society and often control the way literature is published, read, and interpreted.

memoirs) is a key material product that influences that revision: think of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977); Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977); Bobbie Anne Mason's *In Country* (1985); Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990); Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992); and, most recently, Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn* (2010).Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage, 1977); Philip Carputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine, 1977); Bobbie Anne Mason, *In Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner, 2009); Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: Stories* (New York: Holt, 1992); Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2010).

YOUR PROCESS

1. Pick something you've read or watched recently. It doesn't matter what you choose: the Harry Potter series, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, even *Jersey Shore* or *American Idol*. Now reflect on what that book, movie, or television show tells you about your culture. What discourses or ideologies (values, priorities, concerns) does your cultural artifact reveal? Jot down your thoughts.

As you can see, authors influence their cultures and they, in turn, are influenced by the social, political, military, and economic concerns of their cultures. To review the connection between literature and history, let's look at one final example, "London" (http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.b.illbk.36&java=yes), written by the poet William Blake in 1794.

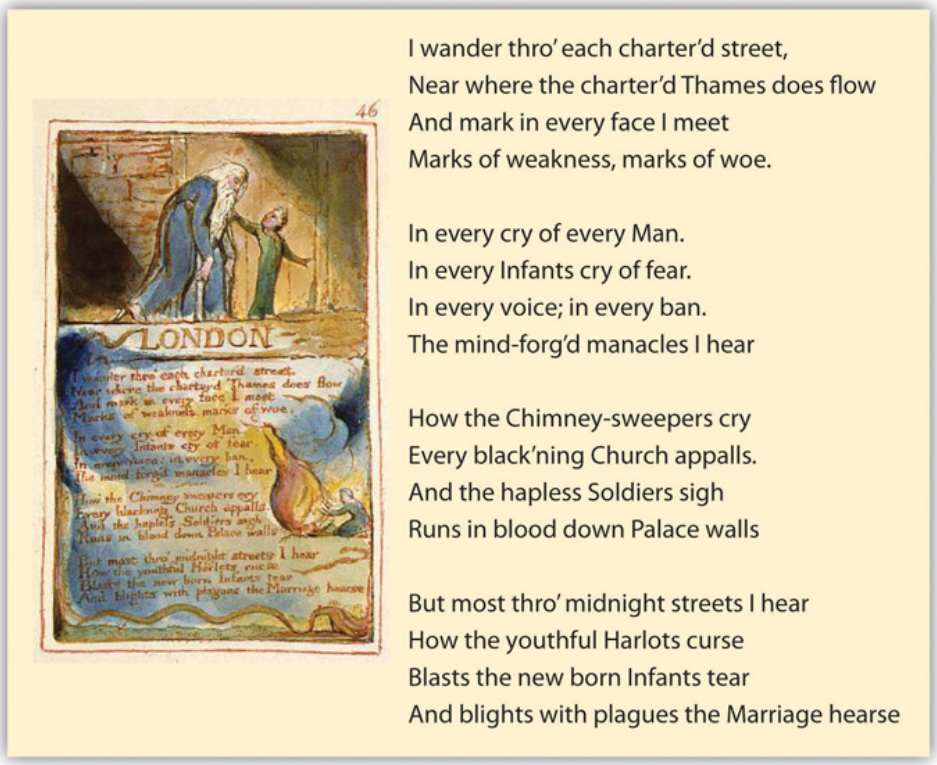

Illustration by William Blake for "London" from his Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794).

Unlike Yeats or Stowe, Blake does not refer directly to specific events or people from the late eighteenth century. Yet this poem directly confronts many of the most pressing social issues of Blake's day. The first stanza, for example, refers to the "charter'd streets" and "charter'd Thames." If we look up the meaning of the word "charter," we find that the word has several meanings.*Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "charter," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charter. "Charter" can refer to a deed or a contract. When Blake refers to "charter'd" streets, he might be alluding to the growing importance of London as a center of industry and commerce. A "charter" also defines boundaries and control. When Blake refers to "charter'd Thames," then, he implies that nature—the Thames is the river that runs through London—has been constricted by modern society. If you look through the rest of the poem, you can see many other historical issues that a scholar might be interested in exploring: the plight of child laborers ("the Chimney-sweepers cry"); the role of the Church ("Every black'ning Church"), the monarchy ("down Palace walls"), or the military ("the hapless Soldiers sigh") in English society; or even the problem of sexually transmitted disease ("blights with plagues the Marriage hearse"). You will also notice that Blake provided an etching for this poem and the poems that compose *The Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *The Songs of Experience* (in which "London" was published), so Blake is also engaging in the artistic movement

of his day and the very production of bookmaking itself. And we would be remiss if we did not mention that Blake wrote these poems during the French Revolution (1789–99), where he initially hoped that the revolution would bring freedom to all individuals but soon recognized the brutality of the movement. That's a lot to ask of a sixteen-line poem! But each of these topics is ripe for further investigation that might lead to an engaging critical paper.

When scholars dig into one historical aspect of a literary work, we call that process **parallel reading**[7]. Parallel reading involves examining the literary text in light of other contemporary texts: newspaper articles, religious pamphlets, economic reports, political documents, and so on. These different types of texts, considered equally, help scholars construct a richer understanding of history. Scholars learn not only what happened but also how people understood what happened. By reading historical and literary texts in parallel, scholars create, to use a phrase from anthropology, a **thick description**[8] that centers the literary text as both a product and a contributor to its historical moment. A story might respond to a particular historical reality, for example, and then the story might help shape society's attitude toward that reality, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sparked a national movement to abolish slavery in the United States. To help us think through these ideas further, let's look at a student's research and writing process.

7. Parallel reading involves examining the literary text in light of other contemporary texts such as newspaper articles, religious pamphlets, economic reports, political documents, and so on.

8. A thick description focuses on very specific textual details and explains those details by showing how they reflect, demonstrate, or challenge the text's culture.

7.3 Finding a Historical Topic: Paige Caulum's Melville's "Benito Cereno"

Paige is a student in an Introduction to Literature class. She's preparing to write her final research paper for the class, and she's interested in writing about Herman Melville's short story "Benito Cereno," which she read earlier in the semester.Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," *Putnam's Monthly* 6, no. 34 (October 1855): 353–67, Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;rgn=full%20text;idno=putn0006-4;didno=putn0006-4;view=image;seq=0359;nodeputn0006-4%253A4.

YOUR PROCESS

1. As we've suggested throughout this text, these process descriptions will make more sense if you've read the literary work under discussion. For this section, you should read Herman Melville's 1855 short story, "Benito Cereno." Our discussion of student research and writing will reveal important plot details that you may want to discover on your own first. Melville first published the story serially, in three parts, in *Putnam's Monthly*. You can read it just as Melville's readers did via the following links:
    - Part one: http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;rgn=fulltext;idno=putn0006-4;didno=putn0006-4;view=image;seq=0359;node=putn0006-4%3A4.
    - Part two: http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;rgn=fulltext;idno=putn0006-5;didno=putn0006-5;view=image;seq=0465;node=putn0006-5%3A3.
    - Part three: http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;rgn=full text;idno=putn0006-6;didno=putn0006-6;view=image;seq=0639;node=putn0006-6%3A18.
2. As you read, make note of anything that seems historically interesting: references to names, dates, events, customs, and so forth.

Though written in 1855, "Benito Cereno" is set in 1799. The story focuses on Captain Amasa Delano, whose ship, the *Bachelor's Delight*, encounters the Spanish slave ship *San Dominick* near an island off the coast of Chile. The story is, in many ways, a detective story, as Captain Delano attempts to decipher the strange behavior of the *San Dominick*'s crew, the enslaved Africans, and the ship's captain, Benito Cereno. The story culminates in a dramatic moment of violence that reveals to Delano that the Africans are actually in charge of the ship. The Spanish sailors, Delano realizes, have been acting their "rightful" parts on threat of death from the former slaves, who hope Delano will leave while still unaware of their mutiny. Let's look at Paige's process to see how she develops a **working thesis**[9]—an early idea about what she might use as her claim for the essay—about Melville's story.

PAIGE'S PROCESS

1. Paige knows that the publication date of the story is important, so she does some preliminary research to identify the important issues that were confronting America specifically and the world generally during the 1850s. In other words, Paige considers that "Benito Cereno" may be engaging in some form of cultural debate or discussion.
2. Paige then does a background investigation of Herman Melville; she finds biographical material helpful.
3. After her initial inquiries, Paige thinks that her paper will focus on the historical issue of slavery in the story, for "Benito Cereno" can be read as a meditation on slavery's injustices. Paige discovers that Melville was an abolitionist and that critics interpret "Benito Cereno" as Melville's warning to his fellow citizens about the devastating—and potentially bloody—consequences that could follow should the United States continue to allow slavery. Many scholars, Paige uncovers, believe that Melville based his story on the Amistad case (http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad), settled in 1841 by the United States Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the Africans who rebelled against and killed their captors."Teaching with Documents: The Amistad Case," United States National Archives, http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad. On the other hand, in Melville's story the rebel slaves are not vindicated; in fact, they are executed for their actions against the crew of the *San Dominick*.
4. Paige is interested in exploring these tensions further. She hopes that some historical research can help her understand the complex messages about race and slavery in Melville's "Benito Cereno."
5. Before doing significant research, however, Paige develops a working thesis that will help her make sense of her early research:

9. A thesis is the major claim of your paper: a specific, debatable point that you seek to demonstrate about the work you are studying. Your working thesis is part of the writing process; it's your initial hunch about the work that allows you to begin the process of research and writing. The working thesis is usually revised and refined through the writing process.

Working Thesis

Melville's 'Benito Cereno' can be understood as a political commentary on the potential consequences of slavery for the United States.

This working claim is very broad: a reader would certainly ask, "Understood by whom?" "What potential consequences?" and "What kind of commentary?" However, this broad claim gives Paige a starting point. She has isolated a few key terms that she will use as she begins to research the topic further.

7.4 Finding Historical Evidence: Melville's "Benito Cereno"

Now that Paige has a topic, she needs to begin researching it to find **evidence**[10] that she can use to develop and support her claims. Most historical claims require two kinds of evidence. **Primary sources**[11] are texts—literary or nonliterary—from the historical period being studied. When you're writing about literature, your literary texts are usually primary sources. Paige is writing about American culture just before the Civil War, and so she can consider "Benito Cereno"—which was written in 1855—a primary text. Paige knows that she needs more primary texts to help her understand the complex treatment of slavery in "Benito Cereno." She must read the short story in parallel with contemporary texts that discuss similar subjects. She decides to look for other texts about slavery in several digital archives. A good researcher, however, will make certain that he or she has investigated what other scholars have written on a particular topic. In order to help her make better sense of her primary sources, she next turns to the ideas of other modern scholars. Books and articles written by scholars about a particular literary work, historical period, or other academic topic are referred to as **secondary sources**[12].

Archival research[13] involves visiting collections of primary texts. Sometimes these collections are stored physically in libraries. Scholars interested in these materials must travel to the archives that hold them. If you're a student in California and are interested in William Faulkner, for instance, you'd have to travel to the University of Mississippi or the University of Virginia to see many of Faulkner's papers. Though special collections like these are accessible only to a small group of faculty and students (mostly those at larger research universities), this type of research has been the basis of most historical literary criticism. Increasingly, however, primary sources can be found in extensive—and often freely available—**digital archives**[14]. Today, literary scholars and students at all types of schools have access to a wealth of primary historical sources, including magazines, newspapers, out-of-print novels, artworks, and much more.

10. Evidence consists of incontestable facts (at least for the purposes of your argument) that lend concrete support for your thesis and claims. In literary studies, evidence often consists of quotations from primary and secondary texts.
11. Primary sources are literary or nonliterary texts from the period under study. In literary studies, stories, poems, and plays are primary sources, as are other historical documents such as letters, essays, sermons, and autobiographies.
12. Secondary sources are books and articles written by scholars about a particular literary work, historical period, or other academic topic.
13. Archival research involves visiting collections of primary texts stored either physically in libraries or online in digital archives.
14. Digital archives are collections of primary or secondary sources stored in electronic databases.

PAIGE'S PROCESS

1. Paige begins her research centered on her working thesis claim. She first wants to see what other literary critics have written about "Benito Cereno," so she uses the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*. She finds that there are 270 entries for her story; when she restricts the search to "Benito Cereno" and "slavery," she finds that there are thirty-seven entries. She suspects that her idea is a common one.

2. As she continues her research, she is especially interested in digital archives. She finds an important research source: Cornell University's Making of America Collection (http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa), a free archive of primary materials from the nineteenth century.Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa. When she first visits the collection, she searches for "slave." This search returns 21,319 matches: far too many for Paige to investigate for this paper. Searching in digital archives can be tricky. When a search term is too broad, like Paige's, then it will result in too many primary sources. If a scholar's search terms are too precise, she might not find anything using them. When Paige searches Making of America for the term "slave revolt," for instance, nothing matches. This isn't because none of the sources there discuss slaves rebelling against their masters, but because none happen to use that exact term to describe those rebellions.

   Good historical research requires a mixture of precise and broad inquiries. When "slave" returned 21,319 hits, Paige knew she needed to hone her search terms. When "slave revolt" returned none, she also knew to try other combinations, to keep experimenting until she found a set of results she could manage. Good historical research also requires scholarly flexibility. Often claims must be reconsidered, adjusted, or entirely revised in light of the primary evidence the scholar uncovers. Writing well about history requires that a scholar's claims follow from the evidence; historical criticism suffers when scholars pick and choose only the evidence that fits the claims they want to make.

3. Paige's initial idea on slavery seems simultaneously too common and too large, so she begins to rethink her topic. How about approaching the story from a different perspective? As she looks through the Making of

America Collection, she finds an article, titled "Cuba," in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* from January of 1853 (http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root)."Cuba," *Putnam's Monthly* 14, no. 5 (January 1853): 3–16, Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root. While this article does briefly mention Americans' fears of "the rising of a fierce black population"—what she hoped to read about—she becomes more and more interested in the way that the author compares the American "race" and the Spanish "race." The author, no doubt a white American, consistently describes white Americans in glowing, positive terms, while describing the Spanish rulers of Cuba in less flattering ways. Paige sees two connections as she reads. First, the comparisons between the Americans and Spanish in the article remind her of the ways that Melville contrasts Captains Delano and Cereno in "Benito Cereno." Second, the article reminds her of "Manifest Destiny" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_Destiny), a nineteenth-century idea that her teacher discussed in class. Basically, proponents of Manifest Destiny believed that the United States had the right—even the duty—to expand across North America. They saw American ideals as transcendent and believed that Americans had a moral duty to spread them to other people.

4. Paige returns to the *MLA International Bibliography* and finds only two entries on "Benito Cereno" and "Manifest Destiny," which suggests that she has chosen a more original idea than her initial one.
5. Paige then returns to the digital archive. As Paige thinks about "Benito Cereno" in relationship to Manifest Destiny, more and more correspondences become evident. Because "Cuba" was published in the same magazine that published "Benito Cereno," Paige can safely assume that Melville's historical readers would have been familiar with the ideas and sentiments expressed in "Cuba." Paige decides that this new topic will prove more fruitful than her original one, and so she returns to the Making of America Collection with a new set of search terms to explore. She can search far more precisely when looking for articles related to Manifest Destiny than she could when searching for articles about slavery, and she finds several potentially interesting primary sources. These include "The Great Nation of Futurity," from the *Democratic Review* in November of 1839 (http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-

idx?c=usde;cc=usde;g=moagrp;xc=1;q1=futurity;rgn=full%20text;cite1=futurity;cite1restrict=title;idno=usde0006-4;didno=usde0006-4;node=usde0006-4%253A6;view=image;seq=0350). Many scholars see this article as one of the earliest expressions of the ideas that would later become known as "Manifest Destiny." (In fact, the author of "The Great Nation of Futurity," John L. O'Sullivan, coined the term "Manifest Destiny" in an 1845 article titled "Annexation."John L. O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426–30, Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=usde;cc=usde;rgn=full%20text;idno=usde0017-1;didno=usde0017-1;view=image;seq=0013;node=usde0017-1%3A3. Between "Cuba" and "The Great Nation of Futurity," Paige has ample historical evidence with which she can begin interpreting the ways that "Benito Cereno" reflects contemporary ideas about Manifest Destiny.

Revised Working Thesis

An examination of the American attitude of Manifest Destiny during the 1850s and the factual event that Melville based his story after allows for an understanding of "Benito Cereno" as a political commentary on the effects of America's perceptions of itself on its relationship with other nations.

Working Outline

1. Introduction with Thesis
2. Manifest Destiny: History of events: How Delano embodies this idea (historically and in the text)
3. Views of Spain: How Delano reflects this idea
4. How these views affect relationships, Delano's desires, etc.
5. Melville's commentary

7.5 Testing and Refining Your Historical Claim

Paige now has an interesting idea for her paper. But she also realizes that she needs some feedback from her instructor as this stage. She submits her revised thesis and outline and receives positive comments about the topic, but a more specific challenge: "Your working claim seems too descriptive of your topic. What kind of 'political commentary' was Melville making in the story? What do you mean by America's perceptions of itself? Of other nations? In other words, you can make a more critical claim about Melville's political commentary."

Revised Working Thesis 2: The Introductory Paragraph

Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, published in 1855, offers a profound look into the political consciousness of the 1850s. While most critics regard Benito Cereno as a political text mostly for its satirical perspective on America's use of black slaves, Melville's story also presents a profound insight into 1850s American self-image in relation to the rest of the world. Specifically, Melville's construction of the characters of American Captain Amasa Delano and Spanish Don Benito Cereno, and the relationship between them, acts as a way to reflect and comment upon American society of the 1850s. Furthermore, Melville's adaptation of the plot and characters of Benito Cereno from an actual event demonstrates his interest in current events and politics as motivation for his writing. Without an understanding of the historical events and attitudes of 1850s America, particularly the American belief in Manifest Destiny, readers may miss the chance to read Melville's work as a political commentary on American society. As a result, it is important to understand the historical events and American attitudes surrounding the publication of Benito Cereno in order to understand Melville's analysis of American society within his text. An examination of the American attitude of Manifest Destiny during the 1850s and the factual event that Melville based his story on allows for an understanding of Melville's Benito Cereno as a political commentary on the hypocrisy of America's domestic and foreign policies.

Paige now turns from her research and back toward her paper. She expands her working claim just a bit, but enough to make a claim that requires demonstration (see Chapter 1 "Introduction: What Is Literary Theory and Why Should I Care?" for more on thesis claims and introductory paragraphs). She will argue that Melville depicts the hypocrisy of America's attitudes toward Manifest Destiny in light of its

continued practice of slavery. She now is ready to begin more intensive research and begin drafting her paper.

By combining the insights of scholars with primary historical evidence, Paige can begin to build a thick description of Manifest Destiny in "Benito Cereno." "Thick description" is a term historicist literary scholars adopted from anthropology. A thick description focuses on very specific textual details and explains those details by showing how they reflect, demonstrate, or challenge the text's culture. A good thick description juxtaposes religious, social, political, or other historical texts with quotes from the literary text and shows how the literary text being studied can be understood within the larger web of its historical moment. In many ways, a thick description is a close reading with a twist: historical details, rather than the writer's own ideas alone, are used to understand the text. In Paige's case, she focuses on textual moments that speak to the idea of American exceptionalism, and she contextualizes those literary details by juxtaposing them with the political essays she found in *Putnam's Magazine* and the *Democratic Review*. Her final paper convincingly describes some of the social ideas that underlay the political ideology of "Benito Cereno" and gives readers a new way to think about the text—a way, coincidentally, that expands our understanding of the story's political message beyond the binaries of slavery and abolition.

7.6 Student Sample Paper: Paige Caulum's "Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno': A Political Commentary on Manifest Destiny"

You can read Paige's final paper here.

Paige Caulum

Professor Karlyn Crowley

Introduction to Literature

May 1, 20—

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno": A Political Commentary on Manifest Destiny

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," published in 1855, offers a profound look into the political consciousness of the 1850s. While most critics regard "Benito Cereno" as a political text mostly for its satirical perspective on America's use of black slaves, Melville's story also presents a profound insight into 1850s American self-image in relation to the rest of the world. Specifically, Melville's construction of the characters of American Captain Amasa Delano and Spanish Don Benito Cereno, and the relationship between them, acts as a way to reflect and comment upon American society of the 1850s. Furthermore, Melville's adaptation of the plot and characters of "Benito Cereno" from an actual event demonstrates his interest in current events and politics as motivation for his writing. Without an understanding of the historical events and attitudes of 1850s America, particularly the American belief in Manifest Destiny, readers may miss the chance to read Melville's work as a political commentary on American society. As a result, it is important to understand the historical events and American attitudes surrounding the publication of "Benito Cereno" in order to understand Melville's analysis of American society within his text. An examination of the American attitude of Manifest Destiny during the 1850s and the factual event that Melville based his story on allows for an understanding of Melville's "Benito Cereno" as a political commentary on the hypocrisy of America's domestic and foreign policies.

The American belief in Manifest Destiny governed how Americans dealt with foreign and domestic affairs during the 19th century. "Manifest Destiny" became the popular term to describe the American belief that Americans were of an "elect nation, destined by Providence to govern the globe" (Emery 49) after the publication of John O'Sullivan's article "The Great Nation of Futurity"

in *The United States Democratic Review* in 1839. In his article, O'Sullivan describes the popular sentiments of the American people:

We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission—to the entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause of effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth and moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen.... Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity? (O'Sullivan 430)

The concept of America as the chosen nation to spread its ideal republic throughout the world and to liberate oppressed people was accompanied by an increase of American territory westward and the national revolutions of the European colonies in Latin America. To abolitionists such as Melville, this statement stands in stark contrast to the legality of slavery in the Southern half of the United States. The tension between the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the existence of slavery in America would eventually play a role in the destruction of the Union and the start of the Civil War, as "[t]he commitment of both major parties to Manifest Destiny only raised the question of slavery, the question that American nationalism was supposed to bury" (Rogin 103).

The Napoleonic Wars in Europe during the early part of the 19th century caused Spain to lose its hold on its colonies abroad. As a result, many Spanish colonies in Latin America attempted to gain independence and establish their own governments throughout the 19th century. America supported the struggles of the Latin American natives, as they believed "it is neither to be expected nor desired that the people [of Latin America], far from the reach of the oppressors of Spain, should submit to be governed by them" ("Cuba" 12). In addition, the idea of Manifest Destiny led most Americans to believe that it was America's duty to help oppressed nations and extend their republican form of government, as they believed in "the philanthropic mission of their country to extend the same [commercial freedoms] throughout the hemisphere" ("Cuba" 15). Americans also believed in spreading their republican institutions westward. Shortly after O'Sullivan's speech on Manifest Destiny, the United States annexed Texas and signed the Treaty of Guadalupe—Hidalgo, in which the United States gained 525,000 square miles from Mexico. The belief that the

American form of government and way of life was "the loftiest developments of human wisdom" ("The Spanish-American Republics" 339) had a profound impact on how Americans were perceived by the rest of the world and governed the ways America interacted with other nations. From Melville's perspective, however, America's condemnation of European colonialism conflicted with its enthusiasm for westward expansion. Melville criticizes this hypocrisy through his characterization of Captain Amasa Delano as a self-righteous American and Delano's description of Don Benito Cereno as a contemptible European. Furthermore, Melville revealed his criticism that these self-important attitudes made America vulnerable to failure by illustrating how Delano's arrogant attitude leads to his inability to detect the actual situation aboard the ship and his near destruction at the hands of the slaves.

First published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1855, "Benito Cereno" reflects the conventional American attitudes of Manifest Destiny and anti-Spanish colonialism. Melville's characterization of American Captain Amasa Delano, along with Delano's description of the Spaniard Don Benito, illustrates the concept of the self-important American critical of Europeans. For example, while Delano is depicted as "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature" (2406), Don Benito is described by Delano as a "of unfriendly indifference" (2410) and "anything but dignified" (2419). In the article "Cuba," published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in January of 1853, similar attitudes of American and Spanish dispositions are expressed. The author of "Cuba" describes Americans as "an enlightened, progressive race" (16), while the Spaniards are "the extreme reverse" (14). Furthermore, Delano repeatedly praises his "charity" (2410) and "benevolent interest" (2412) towards the passengers of the *San Dominick*, reflecting the American tendency to "feel a lively sympathy for the oppressed everywhere" ("Cuba" 3). The idea that Americans felt they were superior to other nationalities is illustrated in Delano's claim, "How unlike we are made! What to me ... would have been a solemn satisfaction, the bare suggestion, even, terrifies the Spaniard into this trance" (2417). In addition, Delano attributes his success of saving the *San Dominick* to "the ever-watchful Providence above" (2445), reflecting the belief that America was "under the guidance of a manifest and beneficent Providence" (para. 5), as stated in President Franklin Pierce's inauguration speech in 1853. These historical events and documents reveal the motivation behind Melville's characterization of Delano and Don Benito.

The paradox of the belief that Americans were "a great friend of humanity ... very anxious to fight for the liberation of enslaved nations and colonies" (Rogin

73) and the use of millions of African slaves in southern America and America's own westward imperialism was difficult for many Americans, including Melville, to accept. Melville, an abolitionist, used "Benito Cereno" to examine "the false claims and confidences of Manifest Destiny" (Emery 50). Melville comments on the failures of the belief in Manifest Destiny through Captain Delano's extreme distrust of Don Benito, which causes him to miss the actual situation aboard the *San Dominick*. While Delano struggles with misgivings against Don Benito, as he "he began to feel a ghostly dread of Don Benito" (2422), and felt Don Benito and Babo had "the air of conspirators" (2421), his sympathy for the blacks never wavers, as he "took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (2435). More than anything, Delano's suspicions of Don Benito are based on his prejudices against European colonizers as a result of the sentiments of American Manifest Destiny. At the time, American's were suspicious of Spain's colonial policies, describing them as "hoary with abuses, and blackened with corruption" ("The Spanish-American Republics" 339). Delano comments that "[b]ut as a nation—continued he in his reveries—these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it" (2431). Melville's reference to Guy Fawkes signals how "fears of 'the Spaniard' hand tenanted the minds of Anglo-Saxons since the days of the Gunpowder plot" (Emery 52). Furthermore, Delano attributes the "sad disrepair" (2407) and the "noisy confusion" (2411) of the ship to the "debility ... bodily and mental, of the Spanish captain" (2410) and the "sullen inefficiency of the whites" (2410). By blaming Don Benito for the disorder of the ship, "Delano takes a second expansionist tack" (Emery 52) and projects his prejudice of the "pandemonium, enervation, and tyranny" (Emery 53) of the Spanish government onto Don Benito.

Delano's tendency to blame the Spaniard for his unease aboard the *San Dominick* causes him to overlook the inherent tensions aboard the ship. In this sense, Delano's inability to perceive the actual problems of the *San Dominick* because of his preoccupation with his suspicions of Don Benito reflects the faults of Manifest Destiny, as America was "too busy glancing abroad to notice local friction" (Emery 50). Melville's political commentary on American values and attitudes is established in the faults of Captain Delano himself. Captain Delano fails to understand the actual situation aboard the ship as a result of his focus on Don Benito, as he "began to regard the stranger's conduct something in the light of an intentional affront" (2419). An understanding of Melville's familiarization of the historical event and documents reveals that he based Delano's missed interpretation of the situation on the ship on what actually happened. According to statements made by Delano, Cereno, and Babo, "[u]p to

and including the time of Delano's departure from the *Trial*, Babo's plan was brilliantly achieved, with Delano, on leaving, knowing little more than he did before boarding" (Stuckey and Leslie 265–66). In addition, the documents reveal that the "developments on the *Trial* remained so impenetrable to [Delano] that he thought Benito Cereno might be his enemy" (Stuckey and Leslie 266). The fact that Delano's misunderstanding about the situation aboard the ship was factual gives credit to Melville's use of the story to criticize the delusions created by Manifest Destiny, "for at the same time when national forces, in the fullness of a very genuine vigor, were achieving an external triumph, the very triumph itself was subjecting their nationalism to internal stresses which ... would bring the nation to a supreme crisis" (Rogin 102).

Although the 1850s marked the golden age of American westward expansion, "The Spanish-American Republics" expresses the American disdain for Spanish colonialism, claiming Spanish colonialism is "impelled by ambition and avarice, sustained by the proudest monarch in the world, enjoying the full sunshine of royal favor, followed and cheered on by the enthusiasts of a proselyting faith, inflamed by the wildest dreams of conquest, and striking for the dominion of the world" ("The Spanish-American Republics" 338). While Spanish colonialism was "the pursuit of robbery and plunder" ("Cuba" 6), American expansionism, marked by the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Treaty of Guadalupe—Hidalgo of 1848, was a "noble enterprise" ("Cuba" 10), the result of the "irrepressible desire of states to become united to each other by the 'New Law of Annexation'" ("Cuba" 10). In the same sense, Delano justifies his plan to take over the *San Dominick* from Don Benito's rule, as he claims, "There was a difference between the idea of Don Benito's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's" (2424). Delano's ability to delusion himself into believing that there is a difference between his plot to take the *San Dominick* and Don Benito's supposed plan to pirate Delano's ship reflects America's tendency to justify its actions in the same way.

Melville establishes Delano's justifications for his taking of the *San Dominick* in order to reveal and criticize the same type of hypocrisy practiced by the Americans in their justification of westward expansion, yet condemnation of European colonialism. It is important to note Melville's familiarization with the character of the historical Captain Delano, which he discovered through reading Delano's recordings of his life in *Voyages*, to understand how Melville structures his commentary on American values. Melville harbored an extreme dislike for Captain Delano as he represented the hypocrisy of American society.

For example, although Delano condemns European exploitation of Latin American natives and resources, he also "sees New Guinea, Ceram, Goram, and other isle in their vicinity as places from which great treasures might be secured in exchange for the least costly items" (Stuckey and Leslie, 269). In addition, Captain Delano's piratical motivations for helping Benito Cereno are revealed in his demands for "half of the 'Trial' and all on board her for taking the ship and bringing her safe into port.... This promise [he] made [on assurance] from the Spanish captain of the 'Trial'" (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Melville uses the duplicity of Delano's statements in his letters to the Spanish kings in his text to "depict Manifest Destiny as the rhetorical camouflage for a largely 'piratical' enterprise" (Emery 54). In more than one letter to the Spanish government, Delano claims, "the services rendered off the island St. Maria were from pure motives of humanity" (Stuckey and Leslie 275), while simultaneously "refus[ing] to accept ... 'three thousand dollars by way of gratification' from Benito Cereno ... instead demand[ing] a larger reward" (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Delano's insistence on compensation reveals the contradiction between American statements of ideology and the desire to acquire more wealth and property.

Even Benito Cereno comments on American hypocrisy, as he claims, "no one takes more advantage of our alliance and friendship than the Anglo-Americans; they enter our ports frequently, finding protection and assistance which surpasses the limits of hospitality ... but it is not surprising that the most generous nation should produce a monster who, deluded by ambition, should choose to ignore the public well-being" (277). Melville's creation of sympathy for Benito Cereno as a character reveals Melville's similar attitude towards American policy. In Melville's story, Delano's justification for his plan to "with[draw] the command from [Benito Cereno]" and "send her to Conception, in charge of his second mate" (2424) as his desire to redeem the oppressed represents the "interventionism of mid-century Americans" (Emery 53). Furthermore, Melville's presentation of the contradiction between Delano's reasoning for his actions as benevolent and his underlying desire to expand his wealth "invalidates the distinction ... between American expansionism and the 'corrupt' colonialism of European nations" (Emery 55). In addition, Delano's underlying desire to take command of the ship rather than save the oppressed is revealed by his decision to chase the *San Dominick* after the Spaniards had escaped, claiming "But to kill or maim the negroes was not the object. To take them, with the ship, was the object" (2449). The fact that Delano plans on keeping the negroes, who would have been considered valuable cargo, showcases that Delano did not go after the ship to save the other Spaniards still aboard the *San Dominick* or to bring the negroes to justice. Furthermore, despite

Don Benito's urge to Delano to "not give chase" (2448), Delano encourages his sailors to join in the capture of the ship because "[the ship] and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons" (2448). Again, Melville extracted the basis of this scene from the historical statements made by Benito Cereno and Captain Delano, further supporting the concept of Melville's text as a commentary on American practices. For example, although Delano "observed that Don Benito was 'frightened at his own shadow'" (Stuckey and Leslie 266) during the chase of the *Trial*, Delano continues to pursue the ship, as he even "ordered the cannons on the *Perseverance* to be run out of port holes and fired at the *Trial*" (Stuckey and Leslie 266). In addition, Melville's description of Delano promising his crew monetary rewards for capturing the ship is based on the factual events, as Delano claimed in one of his letters, "I promised to my people one half of the 'Trial' and all on board her for taking the ship and bringing her safe into port" (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Melville used his text as a way to showcase the greed of the American people and the ultimate failures of the American ideal of Manifest Destiny.

Melville's exposure of the hypocrisy of Manifest Destiny also functions, finally, as a criticism of slavery in America. The contradiction Melville establishes between Delano's proclamations of sympathy towards the negroes and his simultaneous treatment of them as slaves exposes Melville's criticism on America's condemnation of European use of slavery and its concurrent policy of legal slavery in the South. Melville again uses his characterization of Delano to represent these American views, as Delano's attempt to liberate Atufal, claiming, "in view of his general docility, as well as in some natural respect for his spirit, remit him his penalty" (2418) is shortly followed by his claim, "'I should like to have [Babo] here myself—what will you take for him?'" (2424). Americans believed they were supposed to aid the oppressed, as revealed in President Franklin's inauguration speech as he said, "our country has, in my judgment, thus far fulfilled its highest duty to suffering humanity. It has spoken and will continue to speak, not only by its words, but by its acts, the language of sympathy, encouragement, and hope to those who earnestly listen to tones which pronounce for the largest rational liberty" (Pierce para. 4). However, Melville recognized that the existence of slavery in America was not consistent with these claims of sympathy toward the oppressed. A reading of Melville's text as a criticism of slavery is validated by the existence of similar hypocritical attitudes toward slavery in the factual Captain Delano. For example, Delano criticizes European enslavement of Latin American natives, as he claims "the natives manifested no hostility toward [the Europeans].... 'But the Europeans seized and carried them away as slaves, in a most treacherous way'" (Stuckey

and Leslie 268). However, according to his writings in *Voyages,* "Delano had occasion to sail with slaves without evincing the slightest concern" and Delano expressed his views that slaves "were commodities of exchange ... and should be exploited as such" (Stuckey and Leslie, 269). Melville used the character of Captain Delano as representative of the American people, who often claimed to be the refuge for oppressed souls, yet engaged in one of the most oppressive human rights abuses themselves.

A close look into the history behind Melville's *Benito Cereno* allows us to understand the motivations behind the text and his construction of the characters and plot. Specifically, the hypocrisy of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny alongside America's criticisms of European colonialism and use of oppression on America's slaves was the focus of Melville's commentary on American society. The fact that Melville based his story on an actual event and his characters on actual people makes his criticisms against the American policy of Manifest Destiny even more poignant. In this sense, an examination of historical documents to understand the political and social culture of America in the 1850s is imperative for an understanding of Melville's construction of characters and plot as a way to criticize American contradictory policies.

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7.7 Writing about History and Culture: A Process Approach

To review, New Historicism provides us with a particular lens to use when we read and interpret works of literature. Such reading and interpreting, however, never happens after just a first reading; in fact, all critics reread works multiple times before venturing an interpretation. You can see, then, the connection between reading and writing: as Chapter 1 "Introduction: What Is Literary Theory and Why Should I Care?" indicates, writers create multiple drafts before settling for a finished product. The writing process, in turn, is dependent on the multiple rereadings you have performed to gather evidence for your essay. It's important that you integrate the reading and writing process together. As a model, use the following ten-step plan as you write using a new historical approach:

1. Carefully *read the work* you will analyze.
2. *Formulate a general question* after your initial reading that identifies a problem—a tension—related to a historical or cultural issue.
3. *Reread the work*, paying particular attention to the question you posed. Take notes, which should be focused on your central question. *Write an exploratory journal entry* or *blog post* that allows you to play with ideas.
4. *Construct a working thesis* that makes a claim about the work and accounts for the following:
    a. What does the work mean?
    b. How does the work demonstrate the theme you've identified using a new historical approach?
    c. "So what" is significant about the work? That is, why is it important for you to write about this work? What will readers learn from reading your interpretation? How does the theory you apply illuminate the work's meaning?
5. *Reread the text to gather textual evidence* for support.
6. *Construct an informal outline* that demonstrates how you will support your interpretation.
7. *Write a first draft.*
8. *Receive feedback* from peers and your instructor via *peer review* and *conferencing* with your instructor (if possible).
9. *Revise the paper*, which will include revising your original thesis statement and restructuring your paper to best support the thesis. Note: You probably will revise many times, so it is important to receive feedback at every draft stage if possible.
10. *Edit and proofread* for correctness, clarity, and style.

We recommend that you follow this process for every paper that you write from this textbook. Of course, these steps can be modified to fit your writing process, but the plan does ensure that you will engage in a thorough reading of the text as you work through the writing process, which demands that you allow plenty of time for reading, reflecting, writing, reviewing, and revising.

Peer Reviewing

A central stage in the writing process is the feedback stage, in which you receive revision suggestions from classmates and your instructor. By receiving feedback on your paper, you will be able to make more intelligent revision decisions. Furthermore, by reading and responding to your peers' papers, you become a more astute reader, which will help when you revise your own papers. In Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets", you will find peer-review sheets for each chapter.

7.8 Student Sample Paper: Stefanie Jochman's "'Words of Lead': Emily Dickinson's Poetry and the Grief of the Civil War"

The following sample paper by Stefanie engages New Historicism and applies to Emily Dickinson (1830–86), now considered one of the greatest poets in American literature. But Dickinson was an unknown writer during her life: she wrote around eighteen thousand poems, but only eleven were printed during her lifetime, and those were published anonymously. She lived her entire life in her family's home in Amherst, Massachusetts (you can tour her home today), never married, and was seen as a recluse spinster by the townspeople. Yet she had fruitful relationships with friends by corresponding with them via letters.

Today, some might assume that readers have always had access to her poetry; however, that is a common misconception. The first volume of her poems was published in 1890, four years after her death; moreover, the editor chose to change her erratic and unusual spelling, punctuation, and wording to conform to the accepted English of the late 1800s. Not until 1955 did readers have a reliable edition of her poetry: Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1955). In 1958 Johnson and Theodora Ward published *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1958). In 1998 R. W. Franklin revised Johnson's edition to create what is now considered the most accurate edition: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Varorium Edition*.Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

We provide this brief overview of Dickinson's publications since she seems an unlikely candidate for a New Historical paper—she appears to have secluded herself from society, not interested in engaging with that society. In addition, since she only published a select few of her poem anonymously, one might suppose that she could not have entered into a dialogue with the issues of her day. Stefanie makes a compelling case against such assumptions. More important, Stefanie's paper demonstrates how literature—even when not published—is engaged in the time period in which it was written. Additionally, her paper shows us how literature can inform our contemporary view of a past event (in this case the Civil War). In other words, her paper reflects the power of a New Historical reading.

Please note: Stefanie provides the poems in an appendix to her paper since these are rarely anthologized (if at all) and therefore may be unfamiliar to readers. You

can also read Dickinson's poetry at Poets.org."Emily Dickinson," Poets.org, http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/155.

Stefanie Jochman

Professor John Neary

Introduction to Literature

April 9, 20—

“Words of Lead”: Emily Dickinson’s Poetry and the Grief of the Civil War

In a letter to her friend and advisor Thomas W. Higginson, a colonel in the Union army, Emily Dickinson confessed: “War feels to me an oblique place” (letter 280). For many years, that quotation, in combination with the rarity of Dickinson’s reference to the war in other manuscripts, was misinterpreted as indifference or confusion towards the Civil War. However, Dickinson’s interpretation of the war as “oblique” is the best way to describe the nation-dividing conflict that took place on American soil from 1861–65. The Civil War divided families, friendships, and political parties. Arguably a battle for honor (most of the Confederate soldiers, contrary to popular myth, were not fighting in favor of slavery—they were not wealthy enough to own slaves) the Civil War was a conflict of blurred lines. Union supporters were in favor of preserving the Union, but not all of them were passionate about the abolition of slavery; Confederates, most notably General Robert E. Lee, mourned the idea of dissolving the union, but considered their first loyalty to be to their states. Emily Dickinson was not the only person to whom the war seemed oblique; like any period of wartime, feelings of confusion and sorrow pierced the hearts of those on the home front.

An understanding of the mixed feelings shared by many during the Civil War warrants another examination of Dickinson’s life and work during the war years, her most productive period. An investigation into her family’s connection to the war yields evidence of her father’s intriguing opinion of the conflict (he supported the Union but was disgusted by radical abolitionists), as well as Austin Dickinson’s ability to monetarily “dodge” the draft. Dickinson’s correspondence with Thomas Higginson, who secretly worked with John Brown and was later the commander of one of the Union army’s first black regiments, questions her view of slavery. Also, Dickinson’s willingness to publish several poems in a Union fundraiser suggests that she, though quite silent about

politics in her letters, supported the North and its troops. However, the strongest argument for Dickinson's investment in the "oblique" War Between the States is her own poetry, which frequently focuses on the deaths of soldiers that she and her family had once hosted in their home. Poems like "When I was small, a Woman died" (poem # 596); "It feels a shame to be alive" (# 444); and "Fate slew Him, but He did not drop" (# 1031) reflect Dickinson's emotional connection to the Civil War, as well as her fascination with the glorified deaths of soldiers. Given the charged atmosphere surrounding Emily Dickinson during the war years—her father's political activism, Amherst's installation of a telegraph that transmitted news of the war, Thomas Higginson's military pursuits, and the loss of dear friends like Frazer Stearn—it is impossible to deny Emily Dickinson's connection to and knowledge of the Civil War. For Dickinson, the war may have been "oblique," but her poetry provides clarity for readers trying to grasp a citizen's reaction to the Civil War.

The popular myth promoting Emily Dickinson's distance from both Amherst society and the Civil War can be partially attributed to the political and social climate of small-town New England during the middle of the 19th century. In *The American Civil War*, Peter Parish notes that those living in the North were at an advantage because the majority of the war was fought on southern soil. "Small town ... New England ... followed its familiar pattern, and local news was only occasionally overshadowed by momentous events far away," writes Parish (374). In fact, the North, despite the loss of its troops, actually benefited technologically and financially from the war. "Northern industry had a growth that was almost explosive ... [such that] the North had little trouble in financing the war," reports Bruce Catton (444–46). Therefore, Emily Dickinson, a single woman in the North with no immediate family fighting in the war, could easily be detached from the day-to-day drain of wartime in a way that most Southerners could not. Furthermore, Amherst was a relatively secluded town. As Millicent Todd Bingham, daughter of Dickinson's first editor points out: "Until December, 1861, there was no telegraph.... Indeed Amherst was hardly more than a cluster of farms" (65). The war began with the firing of Fort Sumter in April of 1861, and while the Amherst community did receive its news from the *Springfield Republican* and locally printed *Hampshire and Franklin Express* (Bingham 121), it is quite likely that, until the telegraph arrived in 1861, immediate and accurate news of the war was rare.

However, the war news that did reach Amherst affected Dickinson and her poetry. A letter to family friend and editor of the *Republican*, Samuel Bowles, dated March 1862, offers the poem "Victory comes late" (# 690), in which

Dickinson writes: "Victory comes late, /And is held low to freezing lips / Too rapt with frost / To mind it!" (letter 257).[1] In his notes on the letter, Thomas Johnson questions the dating of the poem, but also suggests that, had the poem actually been written in 1862, it may have coincided with the death of Bowles and the Dickinsons' mutual friend, Frazer Stearns (*Letters* 400). Given the national news surrounding the date of publication, it is even more likely that the poem was written in 1862. An article in the *Republican* on February 20, 1862, celebrated the Northern victory at Fort Donelson, Tennessee: "The news of the capture ... reached town about 1 p.m. The bells were rung, and more tin horns brought into requisition by the students than the priests blew around the walls of Jericho" (Leyda 46). While not a well-known battle, John Y. Simon writes in *The Civil War Battlefield Guide* that "Fort Donelson ... became the site of the first major Confederate defeat in the Civil War. Victory at Donelson started Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant on his road to Appomattox" (17). After a year of solid defeats like that of the first Battle of Bull Run, where Lee's forces solidly trounced the Union army, the North needed to boost its quickly falling spirits. Fort Donelson helped northerners to re-envision a Union victory in the war. Surely news of the South's nearly unstoppable forces had reached Amherst and dampened its citizens' spirits, therefore making the victory at Fort Donelson a cause to celebrate wildly. Dickinson's "Victory comes late" reflects the feelings of her neighbors at the news of Fort Donelson. The lines regarding "freezing lips/ Too rapt with frost" (2–3) describe the conditions of the soldiers fighting in Tennessee, where "both armies froze when overnight temperatures unexpectedly fell to twelve degrees" (Simon 18). However, both those injuries felt by both the frozen soldiers and their families at home were, like Dickinson writes, "Too rapt with frost!" (3) to be concerned with the lateness of victory. At the very least, a solid Union victory had finally arrived.

As mentioned in the *Republican*, the students at Amherst Academy were actively involved in the Amherst community. Though secluded, the town of Amherst was a place of superior educational repute, thanks to the college. Emily's father, Edward Dickinson, was treasurer of Amherst Academy for nearly forty years. The Dickinsons were a prominent, powerful Massachusetts family, and patriarch Edward's political involvement during the war kept the family financially secure. In fact, the Dickinsons' wealth allowed them to distance themselves from the battlefield. In 1864, an article appeared in the *Republican* reporting that Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother, was drafted into the army, but he quickly paid $500 for a substitute to serve in his place (Leyda 88). Austin and Emily's father could have assisted in the procuring and purchasing of the substitute, as he was a powerful man in the community and sometimes took part in recruitment programs.[2] Edward Dickinson was very involved in the

Whig party, the precursor to Abraham Lincoln's Republican party. In 1850, when battles over slavery were reaching a fever-pitch, the Whig party maintained a membership of northern and southern politicians. However, this combination would eventually lead to the party's destruction. As northerners drifted closer and closer to slavery-intolerant abolitionism, the northern Whigs demanded similar policies within their political party. The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 permitted the spread of slavery to the West and enraged northern Whigs such that they formed the Republican party with a platform that abruptly halted the spread of slavery. Both the Constitutional Unionist and Republican parties offered prominent positions to Edward Dickinson, but he rejected them in favor of his own political leanings. As Alfred Habegger points out in *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*, "Edward kept clear of all parties, [but] he vigorously backed the northern war effort, offering bounties to volunteers and ... condemning not just the South but the spectrum of northern political opinion" (402). He disapproved of radical and outspoken abolitionists who were riling southern tempers, thereby encouraging war.

What Emily Dickinson thought of her father's political efforts is unclear, although Habegger, quoting one of her letters, notes that Dickinson did not look well upon being thrust into the public eye as a politician's daughter: "'I hear they wish to make me Lieutenant-Governor's daughter. Were they cats I would pull their tails, but as they are only patriots, I must forego the bliss.' Her odd mixture of disdain and respect resembles her father's mixed signals" (401). In 1864, however, Dickinson approved three poems for publication in *Drum Beat*, "a fund-raising paper ... to raise money for the United States Sanitary Commission" (Dandurand 18).[3] Dickinson's pro bono publication in *Drum Beat* is significant because it displays a political sectionalism previously unbeknownst to Dickinson scholars. "The poems published ... must be seen as her contribution to the Union cause," asserts Karen Dandurand (22). Dickinson was not a successful poet while she was alive, therefore her donation of the poems during a time when she could rarely publish them for profit suggests that she was sympathetic to the Union. It is interesting to note that the paper raised funds for the Sanitary Commission, especially since, in a letter to Mrs. Samuel Bowles, she admitted that she would not "weave Blankets or Boots" (letter 235) like other women who crafted such items for the Sanitary Commission (Habegger 402).

Perhaps Dickinson was spurred into political action by the threat of Austin's call to war in the draft of 1864. Perhaps the poems for *Drum Beat* were

Dickinson's way of healing her good friend Colonel Thomas Higginson's war wound. Dickinson wrote anxiously to Higginson after learning of his injury: "Are you in danger—I did not know that you were hurt.... I am surprised and anxious, since receiving your note" (letter 290). In the same letter, Dickinson offers Higginson a bit of poetry that reflects both her anxiety over his injury as well as the toll the war was taking on the country. She writes: "The only News I know/ Is Bulletins all day/ From Immortality" (1–3). Far from the telegraph-less confines of secluded Amherst, the opening stanza to "The Only News I know" (# 827) expresses the exhaustion she felt after hearing three years' worth of war news and surviving the deaths of her Aunts Lavinia and Lamira (Habegger 400). Also present in the letter is a fear that another of her beloved friends will die. In one of the stanzas Dickinson omitted from her letter to Higginson, she writes: "The Only One I meet/ Is God—The Only Street— / Existence—This traversed" (7–9). Death surrounded Emily Dickinson such that she felt she communicated with God as though she herself were dead. The "Bulletins.... From Immortality" that she mentions to Higginson are death notices, which, in Amherst, had already been delivered to several of the college trustees' families, including that of President Stearns, whose son Frazer died at the battle of Newbern in North Carolina. The death of Frazer Stearns inspired some of Emily Dickinson's most emotional writings about the war. She writes about Stearn at length in several of her letters to her cousins Louise and Francis Norcross, saying "brave Frazer—'killed at Newbern,' darlings. His big heart shot away by a 'minie ball.' I had read of those—I didn't think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him" (letter 255). As Thomas Johnson suggests, "Victory comes late" may have expressed bitterness over Frazer's death (*Letters* 400), but another poem, "It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did" (# 426), struggles to put into words the pain that Dickinson observed in her brother Austin when he learned of Frazer Stearns' death:

It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did—

I run it over—"Dead," brain, "Dead."

.....

Turn it, a little—full in the face

A Trouble looks bitterest—

Shift it—just—

Say "When Tomorrow comes this way—

I shall have waded down one Day." (1–2, 5–9)

Dickinson expressed concern for Austin in a letter to Samuel Bowles, saying, "Austin is chilled—by Frazer's murder—He says—his Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed'.... Two or three words of lead—that dropped so deep, they keep weighing" (letter 256). Dickinson's words fall like the "words of lead" she wrote about to Samuel Bowles; her speaker—presumably Austin—is so sad and desperate in search of comfort for his grief. The poet's concern could be extended to the rest of the United States. "It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did" makes tears speak, and it accurately describes the disbelief most Americans were feeling during the second year of the Civil War. When the South first fired on Fort Sumter, people on both sides of the conflict believed that the war would last only months. Instead, the war lasted four long and weary years. Citizens in the North and South did their best to "shift" the pain of war so they could cope. Nevertheless, the deaths of Frazer Stearns and other soldiers came as a terrible surprise to their families and the nation. Months after Stearns's death, Emily Dickinson wrote another letter to Samuel Bowles in which she described an encounter with a Union soldier who had asked for "a nosegay" before leaving for battle. She confesses to Bowles "It is easier to look behind at a pain, than to see it coming" (letter 272), so she turned the soldier away, knowing that the pain of befriending another potentially dead man would be too much for her.

The traumatic deaths of Union and Confederate soldiers left the nation feeling survivors' guilt. The poem, "It feels a shame to be Alive" (# 444), suggests that Dickinson herself felt guilty to be alive in Amherst when men like Frazer Stearns were dying; she also envies the significance of a military life. She writes:

It feels a shame to be Alive—

When Men so brave—are dead

One envies the Distinguished Dust—

Permitted—such a Head—...

The price is great—Sublimely paid—

Do we deserve—a Thing—

That lives—like Dollars—must be piled

Before we may obtain?...

Dickinson's speaker "envies the Distinguished Dust," indicating her own fascination with the glorified deaths of soldiers. Death is a frequent topic of Dickinson's poetry, but she attributes a special significance to the death of a soldier, whose ashes are not simply ashes, but "Distinguished Dust." Further evidence of Dickinson's fascination with military death is available in her letters. When she describes the homecoming of Frazer Stearns's body, she tells the Norcross cousins, "Nobody here could look on Frazer—not even his father. The doctors would not allow it ... we will mind ourselves of this young crusader—too brave that he could fear to die" (letter 255). Dickinson's mention of Stearns's closed casket implies that she would have liked to see the dead body, and her desire to keep Frazer alive in memory suggests a reverence toward his sacrifice.

Dickinson scholar Leigh-Anne Urbanowicz Marcellin discusses the poet's obsession with soldiers' deaths as a relation of opposites: "She is both fascinated with and repulsed by the fallen men; they are at once beautiful and hideous and their deaths noble and meaningless" (65). The deaths of those in "It feels a shame to be Alive" were certainly noble and meaningful, as is the death of a soldier in another poem of the Civil War period, "When I was small, a Woman died" (# 596). This poem describes the death of an orphaned son who "Went up from the Potomac / His face all Victory" (3–4). Dickinson celebrates a battlefield death and sees it as an opportunity for a reunion of souls, "proud in Apparition / That Woman and her Boy" (13–14). Here, battle is the soldier's

vehicle of salvation and happiness. Perhaps the poem is Dickinson's own effort to "shift" the pain of grief. By attributing a higher purpose to death, Dickinson can console herself about the magnitude of casualties. In 1862 alone, the North faced two of its most devastating conflicts: the battle of Antietam, where more American men were lost in one day than any other day of combat in the nation's history, and the battle of Fredericksburg, where the mistakes of General Burnside cost 12,600 Union lives (Simon 103). The blood and souls of the Civil War demanded Dickinson's attention and showcased themselves in her work.

As the war progressed, Dickinson stepped away from the deaths of soldiers and narrowed her focus to death itself. Nevertheless, her poetry continued to reflect the events of the war and the emotions surrounding them. Throughout the war, the wounded were sent home to recuperate or be permanently released from their army contracts. However, these soldiers would not return home the same bright-eyed, eager young men they once were. In "Dying! To be afraid of thee" (# 831), Dickinson surmises what the psyche of a war veteran would say to death. To be afraid of death, Dickinson's speaker suggests, "One must to thine Artillery/ Have left exposed a Friend" (2–3); only one who has seen death can fear it. Men on the battlefield witnessed death in the instant decapitation of cannon fire or a bullet's swift piercing of the heart. At the poem's conclusion, Dickinson's speaker describes "Two Armies, Love and Certainty/ And Love and the Reverse" (11–12). Here, the armies are Heaven and Hell, and the prospect of Hell—or "Love and the Reverse"—is what strikes fear into the hearts of those who have seen death. Dickinson raises a still religiously taboo question: when is killing not a sin? Is one who kills in war destined for Hell? Such questions must have plagued the minds of the hollowed-eyed surviving soldiers of the Civil War.

By 1865, the nation was, not surprisingly, exhausted by war. Similarly, Dickinson's poetry during the final years is short, sparse, and skeletal. Many of the 1865 poems are only four lines long. Alfred Habegger suggests: "War gave [Dickinson] a powerful vehicle with which to parse her own extremity" (404). One poem, "Fate slew Him, but He did not drop" (# 1031), is an example of Dickinson's combination of themes. The poem is a description of Christ, "Impaled ... on fiercest stakes– / He neutralized them all" (3–4), who overcomes the obstacles thrown by Fate, which, in this poem represents the opposite of God, thereby showcasing Dickinson's penchant for religious imagery. However, the poem also includes military language. Dickinson writes: "She [Fate] stung him—sapped His firm Advance" (5), implying that Christ was a soldier, or that

soldiers were Christ-like in their sacrifice. Christ the Soldier is then, at the poem's conclusion, "Acknowledged ... a Man" (8). The final line presents some trouble, given that Christians believe Christ proclaimed his divinity in the resurrection; however, the concept of Christ the soldier works well with the poem's conclusion. Young boys left for war with the hopes of becoming men. By using the Christ/soldier imagery, Dickinson questions whether or not the thousands who volunteered for military service accomplished such a feat. Here, Dickinson also criticizes how male-dominated society forced the war upon its young men with the draft. Should they have endured a pain that could be likened to Christ's on the cross? In her later, death-centered poetry Dickinson presents herself as an objector to the war. She may have supported the goals of the Union forces, but the grief she experienced—even as one so detached from actual battle—made her question the necessity, as well as the methods, of war.

Endnotes

1. Please see the Appendix to read "Victory comes late" and other referenced poems in their entirety.
2. In *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, Jay Leyda includes documentation of both Austin's use of a substitute and Edward Dickinson's involvement in recruitment.

   An excerpt from the *Hampshire and Franklin Express*, dated July 18, 1862 reads:

   Meeting of the Citizens of Amherst. $100 Bounty Offered to Each Volunteer. ...On motion of W.A. Dickinson it was voted, That...the town should pay $100 dollars bounty in addition to what the U.S. and State governments pay...It was here announced by Hon. Edward Dickinson that Mr. William Stearns...had offered a bounty of $25 to every Soldier who should enlist from Amherst not exceeding 36...The following persons guaranteed $100 in case town did not appropriate. (63—the omissions are Leyda's)

   A record of enlistment for May, 1864, states: "Complete Record of the Names of all the Soldiers and Officers...from Amherst, Mass. During the Rebellion begun in 1861...Names of men who were drafted from Amherst...who furnished substitutes May 1864 Dickinson Wm Austin Paid for substitute 500" (89; the omissions are Leyda's).

3. Karen Dandurand writes: "'Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple,' titled 'Sunset,' appeared in the *Drum Beat* on 29 February; 'Flowers—Well—if anybody'...titled 'Flowers' on 2 March; and 'These are the days when Birds come back'...titled 'October,' on 11 March" (18). None of these poems have a direct reference to war, soldiering, or death; however, both "Flowers—well, if anybody" and "These are the days when Birds come back" are tonally melancholy and desperate. In "Flowers—well, if anybody," Dickinson describes the flowers as having "Too much pathos in their faces," a sentiment that could easily be transferred to returning soldiers (9). Nevertheless, the actual publication of the *Drum Beat* poems is more important than their content when discussing Dickinson's relationship to the war.

Appendix

To provide the reader with a better understanding of Dickinson's war poetry, all poems referenced within the essay are printed here in their entirety. All poems, except "Victory comes late," are taken from Thomas H. Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. "Victory comes late" appears as it was written in Dickinson's letter to Samuel Bowles, March 1862.

Victory comes late,

And is held low to freezing lips

Too rapt with frost

To mind it!

How sweet it would have tasted!

Just a drop!

Was God so economical?

His table's spread too high

Except we dine on tiptoe!

Crumbs fit such little mouths—

Cherries—suit *Robins*—

The Eagle's golden breakfast—*dazzles them*!

God keep his vow to *"Sparrows,"*

Who of little love—know how to starve!

426

It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did—

I run it over—"Dead", "Brain", "Dead"

Put it in Latin—left of my school—

Seems it don't shriek so—under rule.

Turn it, a little—full in the face

A Trouble looks bitterest—

Shift it—just—

Say “When Tomorrow comes this way—

I shall have waded down one Day.”

I suppose it will interrupt me some

Till I get accustomed—but then the Tomb

Like other new Things—shows largest—then—

And smaller, by Habit—

It’s shrewder then

Put the Thought in advance—a Year—

How like “a fit”—then—

Murder—wear!

444

It feels a shame to be Alive—

When Men so brave—are dead-

One envies the Distinguished Dust—

Permitted—such a Head—

The Stone—that tells defending Whom

This Spartan put away

What little of Him we—possessed

In Pawn for Liberty

The price is great—Sublimely paid—

Do we deserve—a Thing—

That lives—like Dollars—must be piled

Before we may obtain?

Are we that wait—sufficient worth—

That such Enormous Pearl

As life—dissolved be—for Us—

In Battle's—horrid Bowl?

It may be—a Renown to live—

I think a Man who die—

Those unsustained—Saviors—

Present Divinity—

596

When I was small, a Woman died—

Today—her Only Boy

Went up from the Potomac—

His face all Victory

To look at her—How slowly

The seasons must have turned

Till Bullets clipt an Angle

And He passed quickly round

If pride shall be in Paradise—

Ourself cannot decide—

Of their imperial Conduct—

No person testified—

But, proud in Apparition—

That Woman and her Boy

Pass back and forth, before my Brain

As even in the sky—

I'm confident that Bravoes

Perpetual break abroad

For Braveries, remote as this

In Scarlet Maryland—

827

The Only News I know

Is Bulletins all Day

From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see—

Tomorrow and Today—

Perchance Eternity

The Only One I meet

Is God—The Only Street—

Existence—This traversed

If Other News there be—

Or Admirabler Show—

I'll tell it You—

831

Dying! To be afraid of thee

One must to thine Artillery

Have left exposed a Friend—

Than thine old Arrow is a Shot

Delivered straighter to the Heart

The leaving Love behind.

Not for itself, the Dust is shy,

But, enemy, Beloved be

Thy Batteries divorce.

Fight sternly in a Dying eye.

Two Armies, Love and Certainty

And Love and the Reverse.

1031

Fate slew Him, but He did not drop—

She felled—He did not fall—

Impaled Him on Her fiercest stakes—

He neutralized them all—

She stung Him—sapped His firm Advance—

But when Her Worst was done

And He—unmoved regarded Her—

Acknowledged Him a Man.

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7.9 Strategies for Starting Your New Historical Paper

We have just seen how Paige's research and writing process led to a New Historical paper centered on Melville's "Benito Cereno" and the American notion of Manifest Destiny. We also looked at Stefanie's analysis of Emily Dickinson and the Civil War. In both cases, the writers' processes were complex ones—developed as they got further and further into their projects. This complexity of research and writing is natural—all writers engage in this process. The difficulty of "doing" historical criticism, however, seems to be that you must have a base knowledge that most students in an introductory literature class don't yet have. But let us assure you that students can write an involving New Historical paper if they are diligent about conducting research, which will eventually lead to a working topic that will lead to a critical claim.

While Paige's and Stefanie's researching and writing processes were recursive ones (see Chapter 1 "Introduction: What Is Literary Theory and Why Should I Care?" for a review of recursive processes), we can chart a strategy that will help you as you undertake a writing project that uses New Historical theory. A general key is that you need to approach such an assignment by surrounding your topic; that is, you need to examine your author and work from a variety of perspectives, which includes a parallel reading of multiple texts that leads to a thick description of your subject. Be guided by the following general steps to get you started on an exciting New Historical paper:

1. Situate the author and his or her work in its specific historical time period. What were some of the key concerns of the day? A valuable way to do this is to examine the other historical and cultural texts that appeared around the time of the work's publication: newspapers of the day, to get a feel for the key issues of the day, are a great starting point. Also examine the other social documents of the time period: religious and political pamphlets, economic discussions, and so forth. In addition, you'll want to look at any biographies or autobiographies of your author, which will often engage in historical issues. This kind of research has been made much easier with the advent of digital archives, which will help you find primary sources related to your topic.
2. Focus on the author and his or her intentions. Examine the letters, the journals, and the interviews of the author to glean information. Authorial intention is a complex issue, but it is important to see what the writer was hoping to accomplish, regardless of whether he or she was successful.

3. Examine the work's reception. How did the critics receive the work? Positively? Negatively? A mixture? Often a work's reception will transform over time, which is called reception theory (see Chapter 6 "Writing about Readers: Applying Reader-Response Theory", which focuses on reader-response theory for a definition of this concept). You have learned about canon formation in this text, and it is valuable to explore how a work's reception has transformed over time, not only the reception by academic scholars but the reception by popular readers too.
4. Connect the work you are analyzing to the other major works of literature that were written during this time. Do these works suggest some larger concerns that your writer is exploring? Make certain that your research is transnational—that is, don't be limited by geography or nation. One example of such a timeline can be found at http://www.socsdteachers.org/tzenglish/literature_timeline.htm."Literature Timeline," Dept. of English, Tappan Zee High School, http://www.socsdteachers.org/tzenglish/literature_timeline.htm.
5. Consider the implications of the literary work on today's culture and anticipate the effects it might have on the future. Why is reading and discussing your author and work important today? Why might your author and work be important to the future?

Once you have conducted your initial research using the following steps, you'll be in a position to start making more concrete working claims about your project. Keep in mind that writing a paper on literature using New Historicism allows you to speculate more than when applying other literary theories. We don't know for certain, for example, if Melville was aware that in "Benito Cereno" he was critiquing the notion of Manifest Destiny. But Paige makes a persuasive argument that opens up the story to further discussion.

7.10 End-of-Chapter Assessment

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Literature both reflects and influences its historical moment. You should consider literary texts in light of the cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces surrounding their creation.
- You can understand a literary text's historical influences by reading alongside nonliterary texts: for example, newspapers, sermons, political pamphlets, and scientific treatises.
- When writing about literature from a New Historical perspective, you should use a combination of primary and secondary sources as evidence to support your thesis and claims.
- Historical research is a process: your thesis and claims should evolve as you investigate primary and secondary sources and as you begin writing your paper.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Freewriting exercise. Choose an author that interests you. On a sheet of paper—or on your computer—start writing about what you know about your author, focusing on the historical connections you see related to your author and work. After writing for a short while, create a list of possible ideas that you might want to pursue. Now you are ready to start conducting research.
2. Once you have an author that you are considering writing a new historical paper about, start doing some initial research to see the historical connections that may lead to fruitful investigations. Begin by examining archives and websites that are related to your author. An interesting example that may help you see these connections can be found on the Victorian Web: http://www.victorianweb.org.George P. Landlow, The Victorian Web, http://www.victorianweb.org.

INSTRUCTOR SUPPLEMENT: CLASS EXERCISES

1. Begin the class in which you plan to discuss Paige's "Manifest Destiny" paper by projecting John Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:American_progress.JPG).John Gast, *American Progress* (1872), painting, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:American_progress.JPG. Alternatively, you could print copies out for your students. Tell your students that you'll be compiling a "close reading" of the painting and then give them several minutes to look over the image. You might suggest that they jot down details that they find interesting or telling. After they've had some time, ask them to share what details they noticed. As they suggest details ("The Native Americans are all in the dark on the left side of the painting"; "Lady Liberty is stringing telegraph wire as she glides west"), press them to suggest theories about the significance of those details ("The artist wants to represent native people as unenlightened or even evil"; "The artist wants to show America as technologically advanced"). Compile these ideas on the board, or ask one of your students to record them. Finally, ask your students to relate these details to the ideas about Manifest Destiny that they read in Paige's paper.

2. Workshop Paige's paper in class. Divide your class into groups of three to four students. Distribute photocopies of Paige's paper so that they can write on it. Ask each group to read the paper with an eye toward how it could be further developed or improved. You might provide them with a list of questions to guide their discussion. We've provided a few such questions, but there are certainly more you could ask.

    a. Underline the main claim or the paper. Is the claim specific? Debatable? Reasonable? How might Paige revise the claim to make it more engaging?
    b. Mark the primary evidence that Paige uses with brackets. Mark the secondary evidence Paige uses with parentheses. Where does the paper include enough evidence to convince you? Are there any sections where more evidence is warranted? What kind of evidence (primary or secondary) is needed to make those sections more convincing?
    c. Read each paragraph with an eye toward clarity. Are there any sections where you lose track of the argument? How might Paige revise those sections to better guide readers toward her main points?

INSTRUCTOR SUPPLEMENT: CLASS PEER REVIEW

1. Have students conduct peer review on one of the sample papers using the organizational peer-review guide found in Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets", Section 10.6 "Chapter 7: New Historical":

    a. Place students in groups of three to four and have them reread the paper for peer review and fill out the guide sheet
    b. Have students discuss their feedback responses to the sample paper.
    c. Have students list the major feedback they discussed.
    d. Put the major issues on the blackboard or whiteboard.
    e. Discuss these responses. Make certain that you let students know that any paper can be improved.

2. Plan to have your students conduct peer review on the drafts of their papers that they are writing in your class. Use the peer-review guide from Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets", Section 10.6 "Chapter 7: New Historical" and have them work in groups of three and do the following:

    a. Bring two hard copies of their paper so that each member can read the paper, OR work in a computer lab where students can share their papers on line. You may want to use the educational software that your campus supports—for example, Blackboard or Moodle—or you can have students use Google Drive to set up their peer-review groups.
    b. Have two students focus on the first paper in the group. While these students are reading, have the other student read the other two student papers.
    c. The two students should quickly fill out the peer-review sheet and then have a brief conversation about the strengths of the paper and ways the paper could be improved.
    d. Move to the next student and follow the same process. Depending on the length of your class, you may have to reduce the peer-review groups to two students.
    e. If time permits, ask the students to provide general comments—or ask questions—about the specific papers or the assignment overall.

f. You may want to use peer review for each paper in your class.

7.11 Suggestions for Further Reading

Sources on New Historical Criticism

Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.

Colebrook, Claire. *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Cox, Jeffrey N., and Larry J. Reynolds, eds. *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Spargo, Tamsin, ed. *Reading the Past: Literature and History*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Veeser, H. Aram, ed. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

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