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ENGL 320 Sonya Lancaster
Final

Question Three: Mather, Hawthorne, Franklin

Early Americans attempted to understand the spiritual by interpreting it through scientific forms. These attempts mark this time period as one of transition between a spiritual world and an empirical one, and note the awkward places where these worlds interact.

In his autobiography, Franklin describes his spiritual journey, starting at the claim "I soon became a thorough Deist," and eventually culminating in a list of personal rules and precepts by which to live. This view retains the spiritual mystery that is God, but it seeks to derive logical conclusions from and analyses of its existence more similar to the manner of scientists.

In *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, Cotton Mather gives the account of a witness at a witch trial who "could thrust a knitting needle into his wound four inches deep; but presently after her being seized, he was thoroughly healed." The use of something as miraculous as this in something as mundane as a human trial, and the assumption that metaphysical crimes can be treated indistinguishably from human ones, indicates both the attempt of analytical rationality and the lingering superstition associated with fear of witches.

Hawthorne, in *The Birthmark*, depicts divine perfection as something which can, with adequate earthly scientific knowledge, be achieved: "[A]s... that sole token of human imperfection faded from her cheek... the now perfect woman... took its heavenward flight." Hawthorne implies that the miraculous and the scientific are not merely compatible, but are actually one in the same, with the latter enabling the former.

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Question Four: Samuel Sewall, Jefferson, Melville

Texts themselves serve as examples of interaction between cultures, in that members of one culture will evaluate another. Though it is easy to categorize these interactions as being colored by either open-mindedness or bigotry, more frequently texts will exhibit traits of both.

In describing the Native Americans, Jefferson stated that they are “neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female.” In so saying, he refutes the notion that the Natives are inherently inferior to Whites. However, he then goes on to say “the women are submitted to unjust drudgery. This I believe is the case with every barbarous people.” His use of the word “barbarous” indicates a lack of empathy for Native culture, and a clear prejudice.

Though it is a fictional story, Melville's *Benito Cereno* conveys the author's opinions of the slave trade and Black-White relations. Babo, Black ring-leader of the slaves on the San Dominick, is very strong and clever, the book's ending lines “Benito Cereno follow[ed] his master” portraying him as a dominant character- unusual for a Black in early American literature. However, this depiction is also blood-thirsty, as Babo's reign has resulted in multiple deaths and threats. Though Melville's Africans are clever, they are vicious as well.

In Sewall's *The Selling of Joseph*, “the outward Estate of all and every of their Children, remains the same,” implying equality between Blacks and Whites. Yet he states “they can seldom use their freedom well,” thus devaluing the importance of the slaves' liberty itself.

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Question Five: Truth, Emerson, Morton

Americans tend to subvert authority by emphasizing similarity, thus debasing the notion of exceptionalism that authority requires.

“Ain't I a woman?” reminds the listener that Sojourner Truth shares with them the basic essences of humanity and femininity. “I could work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it,” she says. She states that she is as capable as a man, and subtly points out the inequality in their rations.

Morton would repeatedly praise the character of the Native Americans and note their similarities to Europeans. “They are not altogether without the knowledge of God,” he says, implying a similarity between the two cultures on a fundamental point. He then goes on to state that “hee might be taught to reade” in regards to a Native boy, implying respect for the Native's intelligence and right to be educated similarly to whites.

Whitman in song of myself recalls “A child said, What is the grass?... How could I answer the child?... I do not know what it is any more than he... Or I guess the grass is itself a child.” With these words, he establishes not only the similarity between himself (a grown man) and a young boy, but their mutual similarity to the grass. Simultaneously he strikes down any authority he would have over the boy, stating that he does not know any better himself. In this vision all creatures are similar, and none are superior to any other.

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Question Six: Foster, Jacobs, Dickinson

Women lacked romantic freedom early in American history. Due to the surrounding structure of sexual and religious mores they were frequently oppressed by the romantic relationships they found themselves in, and a woman was not expected to choose a romantic partner for herself.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs laments "O, ye happy women who have been free to choose the objects of your affection!" in reference to her master's insistence upon building a cottage for the two of them, against her will. Because she is a female slave, she has no say in the matter.

Eliza Wharton of Foster's *The Coquette* is trapped in a loveless marriage, coerced against her own romantic instincts, twice rejected and eventually slain by the product of her own "infidelity." The subtext is clear- if you are a woman and you have "sinful" sex, you will die. This notion offers few romantic options to women.

In one of her poem's, Dickinson writes of a woman who "rose to His Requirement- dropt The Playthings of Her Life to take the honorable Work of Woman and of Wife." In so doing she paints a picture of romantic interaction that places the woman in a submissive role, forcing her to give up her prior concerns for those of the man. Though nothing is said of the woman's freedom in initiating romance, once it begins Dickinson implies that she loses all agency in determining it or her life's course.

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Q Eight: Sojourner Truth, "Changing Woman and the Hero Twins," De Vaca

No literature exists in a vacuum- every work is influenced by the subconscious of the creator and the context it appears in. By analyzing works from other cultures, students gain an understanding of this relationship due to the distance between their culture and that in which the work was intended to exist. Many works come from cultures without written English, so transcriptions or translations are required, and serve to emphasize the text-context relationship.

De Vaca's notes to the king of Spain illustrate how important this relationship can be from the first line of "Holy, Imperial, Catholic Majesty." From this line we can ascertain the importance of religion and the monarchy to De Vaca's culture. We may also ascertain the importance of this particular letter, given its intended audience's station.

From transcriptions of Truth's speeches, we see how the audience interpreted her manner of speaking. Her "a'n't I a woman" speech is filled with phonetic spelling, informing us that the listener of said speech wanted to make note of how Truth spoke their mutual language, thus emphasizing the fact that Truth gave her speech to a culture in which she was an outsider.

"Changing Woman and the Hero Twins," the translated transcription of an oral story in a non-English language, bears many of the idiosyncrasies of oral traditions in its detail descriptions and repetition, which help the audience pay attention and remember the story. Unfamiliar names like "Teelget" remind the reader that with European conquest, this story now exists in the context of a culture that's unfamiliar to its surrounding culture.

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Question Ten: Rowlandson, Foster, Bradstreet

Sadly, the most immediately effective strategy for early American female writers was compliance. By reinforcing societal norms in their writing, these writers helped minimize criticism against them, allowing society to adapt more easily to the idea of female writers.

Bradstreet wrote, "Men can do best, and women know it well... Yet grand some small acknowledgement of ours." Thus, she argues that men need not be intimidated by female writers, while still acquiescing to masculine superiority. Further, many of her poems regard her children, rather than any subjects that may have been "dangerous" for females to contemplate.

Though Foster's depiction of the sexually liberated Eliza Wharton could have seemed scandalous by the standards of the time, Foster is careful to show that Wharton's lust brings her only ruin and death by childbirth. She sneaks in the thrill of something steamy by wrapping it in punitive Puritanism. Her punishment of the "wanton woman" is so extreme, and so in line with Puritanical gender roles, as to almost serve as a distraction from her own "sin" of writing.

Similarly, Rowlandson describes the horrors of her experience as a captive, such as when she saw a man "stript naked, and split open his bowels." Yet, she caters to prejudices against the Natives (or "those Barbarous creatures") and references the bible repeatedly, so as to remind the reader that though she writes thick nastiness, she does so with a good Christian heart.

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