

1971/200

Final Exam
American Literature 1
Engl320
S.Lancaster

Question 2:

The necessity of life writing to be truthful depends on the genre and purpose of the account. Particular accounts, in order to have the desired affect, may need the experience depicted to be credible. However, in this case it is more important that 'truth' coincides with what the audience believes to be true about such an experience, rather than the account be completely factual. Jacob's depiction of the treatment of slaves coincides with what is already perceived to be 'true' regarding their experience. It also works on concepts of motherhood that the audience believes to be true, thus giving credibility to Jacob's abolition argument. Notions of what is true, in this case, are used to ensure her narrative has more of an impact upon her audience, while the precise 'incidents' may not be completely factual. By depicting what they already believe to be true, whatever she then goes on to state about her experience gains credibility. With regards to texts which are produced largely for entertainment purposes, the importance of truth diminishes. In Knight's travel narrative, for example, the primary purpose is to depict *her perception* of the places she visits. For this purpose, her humorous account serves very well and truth matters little. In the end, a single piece of writing can not be completely factual because it will always be manipulated by the perceptions of the individual. This point is highlighted best by Bradford who believes unfortunate instances to be the work of God. Someone who is not religious would give a completely different account of events, which may be equally as factual *in their perception*. For this reason, it is the genre and purpose which ultimately influences the importance of how truthful a life narrative is.

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Q3. Brown, Hawthorne and Mather all present a developing view regarding the use of empirical evidence and the conflicts this entailed. Cotton Mather represents an age in which the world-view endorsed notions that the 'spiritual and the earthly realms overlapped' (507). He does not use empirical evidence in condemning women of which craft, but instead relies on concepts regarding temporal spirits which supposedly plagued victims, raising intense questions about moral justification in the process. In his world, empirical evidence was disregarded or simply did not exist and instead strong religious beliefs, as well as beliefs in the supernatural, were used as justification for events. Hawthorne and Brown represent an era when the supernatural beliefs, such as those relied on in Cotton Mather's account, came into conflict with the world of science. In Brown's 'Somnambulist', a blatant attack on the empirical world can be seen; all reliance on reasoning and logic are downgraded when the crazed happenings which (appear to the author in a dream) prove true. Furthermore, Miss Davis, a character who's strong will and reasoning power can allow her to be visualised as an embodiment of empirical views, is the only victim to succumb to the attacks of a beast which reason cannot be used to definitely determine the identity of. This account appears to out rightly condemn empirical evidence, while Mather's text exists in ignorance of them. A conflict is raised

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by the two texts: is it safer for people to believe the supernatural or trust the empirical? Hawthorne's text represents this conflict raised by the other two texts. In 'The Birthmark', the use of empirical science is used to rectify a natural birth mark, killing Georgina in the process. While this text does represent the greatness which can be achieved through science, Aylmer's status as a great scientist being idolised by his wife, the text can be viewed as a caution against complete trust in empiricism. It suggests that, in essence, attempts to play God with the use of science will not end well. Humanity's natural imperfection is underlined, along with the notion that some things should be left untouched by the new scientific world, forever unknown and unresolved.

Q4: Paul Gilroy states that during cultural encounters, groups fall back upon cultural nationalism to emphasise immutable, ethnic differences which ultimately provide a definite break in the experiences of "black" and "white" peoples and render them 'sealed off hermetically' from one another. This trait is evident in the text of Mary Rowlandson. Throughout her narrative she places emphasis on her identity as a mother and domestic figure. However, she is unable to allow this identity to overstretch cultural lines and instead regards the motherhood of her mistress as a wholly different experience. This is exemplified by her lack of sympathy when her mistress's child dies. Melville highlights the dangers associated with such ignorance. In Benito Cereno, Captain Delano is incapable of viewing African Americans as capable of organisation, but instead falls back on notions of savagery and inaptitude which define their experience and capabilities as wholly different and inferior to his own. For this reason he is ignorant to what has happened and places himself, Captain Benito Cereno, and his crew in danger. Rather than view such experiences as wholly separate, Gilroy expresses the need to view encounters in terms of hybridity in which interactions 'continue to influence developing identities in the Americas' (134). Such an identity is evident in the narrative of Equiano. By the end of his narrative, despite his (apparent) birth in Africa, and identification as an African slave, overcomes 'racial discourse' to provide an account of his experience in Christian terms. His identity can be seen developing throughout his discourse, until it becomes a hybrid between his African birth and English cultural experience.

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Q7: By choosing to approach social issues through particular literary genres, authors can advance the potential of their cause by allowing the audience to recognise particular assumptions, naiveties, or corruptions within themselves, rather than point to particular traits in an aggressive fashion. Melville, by approaching his topic in fiction, can draw attention to the ignorance of particular individuals regarding cultural and racial absolutism. The suspense in the tale, and the recognition of Captain Delano's ignorance, assists the reader in deciphering whether they apply the same assumptions regarding race. The same technique is applied by Stoddard in 'Lemorne vs Huell'. Again the reader is encouraged to question the extent of their own naivety regarding 'romance' stereotypes, by recognising the faults of Margaret who narrates the tale. This approach however, would not be successful for all topics. With regards to slave narratives, in order to connect the audience with abolitionist sentiments, it is important to connect them with a 'true' experience rather than a fictional character. Douglass, by presenting his case for abolition in a non-fiction narrative account, tries to establish a connection between his experience and his audience which would not perhaps be possible should he approach the

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topic through fiction. He appeals to his readers on the basis of universal definitions of what it is to be a man. In this representation the notion that slavery compromises his identity is central to his argument. This would perhaps be a point less well made if the narrative was fictional.

Q8: Such texts should be studied in an American literature class because, although some extent of their affect may be lost, they still embody American ideologies. Although the impact and influence of Sojourner Truth's character is difficult to represent in her speeches, it is still important that they are studied. Her words document a powerful resistance to slavery. More so, they raise important issues regarding race and sex, for example, the suppression of women's voice in the public sphere. This is a theme consistent with other works such as Rowlandson's narrative. However, conflict is raised by the fact that her texts have been transcribed. Questions regarding accuracy and credibility become relevant. Once again notions of truth come into play. The same issue occurs with regards to the texts by Native Americans. Not only is a large extent of the story's impact lost by the fact it is not being performed, but particular meanings contained within that performance may be lost or edited, thus compromising the credibility of the text's message. A further issue is raised with regards to the extent a text's message is distorted, with regards to the Zuni tale 'Talk Concerning the First Beginning'. This tale is complex and difficult to understand. Confusion often emerges with regards to who is talking or who is being referred to. Such confusion could be eliminated by a performance involving distinct characters. However, in a written text influence on contemporary audiences can be compromised by such ambiguity. However, once again, it is the text's purpose, as well as the context in which it is studied, which are the most important factors in deciding if transcriptions should be studied. The story, 'Creation of the Whites' can be studied in relation to cultural encounters, providing an interesting change of cultural perception.

Q9: To American's, the wilderness represents many different things ranging from the frightening, unknown and uncivilized, to the free; whether it is freedom from a polluted capitalist economy, or the burdens of family responsibility. Irving uses the wilderness to embody themes of escapism. Rip van Winkle, unable to succeed in a capitalist society, finds his escape in the wilderness the release into a world of the future that does not require him to work. Furthermore, largely antifeminist sentiments work to show the wilderness as a release from the confines of women, marriage, and family which further restrain men. He awakes to find that his wife has passed away while the wilderness has protected him from harm. Even when represented as the unknown and uncivilized, the wilderness continues to embody freedom from the constraints of western society and ideology. After being lost in the wilderness for a long period, de Vaca becomes unrecognisable by European standards: when he encounters Spanish traders, they refuse to believe that he is a Spaniard. Even though, in this case, his departure from the civilized is not necessarily a good thing, the wilderness continues to be represented as an escape from western notions of civilization which manipulate the American imagination. In the end, the foreign land forces a merging of cultures and undermines notions of ethnocentricity. In this respect it can be said that the wilderness creates a new 'American' self, manipulated by nature to depart from notions governed by Old world Europe. Thoreau offers conclusion to such concepts. He uses stark binaries to underline the

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artificiality of the new urban, capitalist, America. In this account, the wilderness represents something in need of being re discovered in an attempt to recognise one's true, American, self which is in tune with nature and its potential to enlighten the soul. Again escape from capitalism and western notions of civilization are represented, presenting the wilderness as the antithesis of constraint.

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question choice: 18