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ENGL 320, American Lit I  
Professor Sonya Lancaster  
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Final Exam

#1

It's difficult to talk about "American authors reacting to European traditions and authors," without a selection of European traditions and authors to compare and contrast to. Without those, one has to fall back on trying to establish what the American traditions might have been, or developed as, as well as how they contrast to European traditions. So what is the American tradition? What of the European? Watching values change through time is most easily achieved by looking at the authors as they go through time. Smith's writings were concise and impersonal; he was a business man as much as a colonist and adventurer. His writings were for trying to entice people from Europe to the new world; writings from an American for Europe, rather than writings from an American author.

It's only with the change of the American continent that this is able to change; Crevecoeur for example writes not just about what is in America, but also about what America makes him feel, about the changes in it, the differences. Where Smith chose to simply write what he saw for Europeans, Crevecoeur wrote about America and what America meant to him, in many cases how America was different. Thoreau rounds it out by writing for an American audience. More than that, because he was able to build on almost two hundred years of tradition, of writing that had slowly but surely been shifting from the European. Rather than trying to distance himself from Europe, he had already done so with an established tradition.

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#2

The simple fact that the genre is referred to as Life Writing as opposed to Autobiography should be enough to illustrate immediately that there are differences. Granted, Franklin's work is explicitly called "The Autobiography," but the fact remains that life-writing as a genre is only in part about reporting someone's life. Every writer in this semester who gave an account of their life is known not just because of who they were or what they did, but because of how their life was considered to be representative of a genre, of how it had to do with a great many more people.

Knight's journal is often described as being 'larger than life,' of depicting a character as much as it is to be taken as account. It is also an in-depth view of the culture and life-style of the people of the New England countryside. Franklin for example was already well-known by the time of his writing, but his Autobiography can be taken to be a representative text of the American ideal; namely the self-made man. Additionally, he was at that time already an inventor, a philosopher, and a politician; a self-made man of the upper crust. The tone of his autobiography proved that the upper crust were people to, humanizing them in the face of the aristocracy in Europe. Others, such as Equiano were outright tools, well-known not necessarily for being good prose, but for telling a story that abolitionists could use for their own ends.

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#3

People think with what they're given; they have an inherent desire to try to explain the way that the world works. Whether that is given in terms of science or superstition has little if any significance; it's simply a matter of what works best at the time. The earliest American texts, such as Mather, deal with the world in religious, superstitious terms. Is this quintessentially American? Not particularly; it was simply the way the world worked. They were written at a time when religion was the only real, acceptable way to explain how the world worked, by people who were extraordinarily devout. It was just how they saw the world.

With the change of times however, with the realization that while religion might have its place, that science had the potential to change and revolutionize the world in ways that faith couldn't, it is not perhaps all that surprising that science would show more in writing than faith or superstition. Poe for example, as well as Hawthorne both took science into writing, developing what could well be considered some of the earliest science fiction in the world. There are differences however; Poe for example was able to reconcile science and superstition, incorporating both into his works, at times the same work. Hawthorne on the other hand, not only incorporated science into his work, but showed just how much damage it could do to not consider superstition as well.

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#6

Romance is an ideal more than a reality; it's something that we read about more than we find in real life, which is likely why it's more important to analyze it's characteristics in written works than in reality. It's also entirely possible that many of the representations of romance in the body of literature we handled this semester came from people who sought romantic love and failed to find it, or who had experienced romantic love and found it lacking.

While Hawthorne's humorous works ("Rip Van Winkle" or "Sleepy Hollow") include relationships, neither can be considered romantic; Rip Van Winkle's, main character loses his wife after sleeping for twenty years, and couldn't be happier, while in "Sleepy Hollow," the main relationship seems motivated by competition and greed more than love. This alone is indicative, but even more so is the role played by love where it really exists, in "Rappacinni's Daughter" and "The Birthmark;" both stories ending in tragedy. Tragic romance also shows itself in Foster's "The Coquette" where unreasoning love from the young lady for a man who openly states he is a philanderer bring her abandonment, death, and being forgotten.

Irony?

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Perhaps ironically, it was Dickinson, who lived an unmarried shut-in, that was able to write any genuinely romantic sentiments; "Wild Nights" and "The Soul has Bandaged Moments" both share romantic sentiments, and while there is tragedy even in Dickinson, the romance and love remain in spite of, or perhaps because there is something tragic in it.

#8

Changing the medium of a text is always going to have an effect on it; when first written, the author has a certain effect in mind, an effect which is often most effective, if not only effective in the medium it was written for. Many of Sojourner Truth's speeches are, initially, not particularly powerful. The obvious reason for that is that we can't get everything from them. When first written, when the speech would have been first read, there would have been a huge amount more waiting for the person hearing it; the hubbub of the crowd hearing it, the nuances and cadences of the speaker, the visual impact of the speaker (and in Truth's case, a black woman on stage at the time would have been a powerful image)...it adds up.

By a similar token, changing the language of a work such as De Vaca's also has a profound change on it. There is poetry in written and spoken languages, which could easily be lost if not handled properly. More than that, it's always a risk that something of the meaning will be lost when translated, as the translator struggles to try to put a sentiment which works perfectly in the native tongue might mean next to nothing in the new. Given the magnitude of change when dealing only with the medium OR language, one can't help but imagine how much is lost when both are changed; what was lost when the "Creation of the Whites" was put in written English?

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#10

For the most part, women authors seemed to adopt one of two different tactics when arguing for their right to write; they either attempted to justify their writing as something else entirely, something other than a literary career, or openly fought back. Rowlandson in particular took the former; despite being one of the first American best-sellers in history, she was not inherently a writer. The difficulties that she had in coming to terms with writing were in no small part assuaged by both the religious and patriotic effects of her writing; her tale of perseverance in the face of adversity, particularly in the form of a religious testament, gave her a degree of legitimacy and acceptability that would have otherwise been difficult for her to achieve.

By contrast, other female writers such as Bradstreet and Stoddard chose to fight back (so to speak) in their writings. Bradstreet's In Honour of ...Queen Elizabeth in particular is a carefully composed, subtle stab against any kind of marginalization of women in any role; denigrating women in general requires one to denigrate Queen Elizabeth in particular, and at the time, that would have been both unwise and potentially treasonous. Stoddard also chose to fight back in her own subtle way, largely by portraying women in a carefully intellectual light, as well as illustrating the kind of alternative life they might have been able to expect, as either a pawn or an unknowing tool.

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