

**1a. The first three readings for this unit are some of the first commercially successful works of literature to originate in the United States, and all three of them use setting to separate the present-day nineteenth century of their publication from the old-fashioned seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Explain how Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe, use setting in these stories to show of the nineteenth century (and the place of the United States in it) is going to be different from the past.**

Setting, like any component of good fiction, can well be utilized by writers to make or reinforce some point. Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe certainly made use of setting in building value for their stories, time and place being of immense importance; more significantly, however, the historical context of these stories in connection with the chosen time and place of the setting hugely affected the message delivered by these writers and the method(s) of delivery, no matter the different writing styles employed by the three men.

In the first story, Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving, the transition of the Americas between the 18th and 19th centuries is accomplished in a nearly literal fashion, as the titular character sleeps for 20 years and wakes up on the cusp of the 19th century, bearing witness to the first Presidential election of the newly-born United States of America. Going back a bit, the setting of the first half of the story is important, as it illustrates the nature of the 18th century, or at least, the nature of the 18th century as Irving intends it to be perceived, and Rip Van Winkle's lifestyle embodies this nature. Presented as a historical account compiled by one Diedrich Knickerbocker, we the readers see the town at the foot of the Catskill mountains in New York to be a rather idle, unproductive one, and no one in the town is more unproductive and idle than Rip Van Winkle, who intentionally seeks frequent escape from responsibility. His preferred refuge, the local inn, is a place of vapid gossip and discussion of matters of seemingly little value. This contrasts with the town that Van Winkle returns to after he journeys into the mountains and falls asleep; upon his return, the town has become acutely productive and active, its denizens having gone on to new industrious careers, like the former innkeeper Derrick Van Bummel. Irving uses the contrasting identities of the town in the distinctly 'British' 18th century and the transition to what would become the 'American' 19th century to drive home the point that the new century will be one dominated by a new American culture separate from its European history, separate from idleness. Van Winkle is the vessel by which we the readers experience this transition, bear witness to it, and see the changes brought to the setting over time. The culture itself, as manifested by the changed townsfolk, appears to have changed, contrasting the Dutch and British colonial facets with the new-fashioned youth. Van Winkle is emblematic of an old, bygone era, and the bustling town at the foot of the Catskills represents America's first steps towards a new century. I do think that there is more that can be gleaned from this story, however.

Young Goodman Brown by Nathaniel Hawthorne is perhaps a little less clear-cut when compared to Rip Van Winkle in terms of its message, but its setting is immediately noticeable, taking place during what can be inferred to be the Witch-trials period of Salem, Massachusetts. Taking the historical context of this time into account - the superstitious nature of the people, the obdurateness of Puritanism, religious fervor and structure - offers understanding of the setting's importance to the story. The journey of Goodman Brown is reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle in that he journeys to a mysterious locale and returns a drastically changed man, but in the former's case, it is only he who has changed, and not the town itself. Hawthorne's use of the Salem locale and hints that Brown's journey was only a dream comment, perhaps, on the wildly superstitious and dubious existence the rigid Puritans lived, which can be used to inform the trajectory of the new United States of America. The Puritans believed in unattainable perfection in conduct, and Hawthorne implies heavily that no matter what, even the most upright members of the community may have sinned (even if it all may have been in Goodman Brown's head). Maybe, then, America's future in the 19th century is going to be one with more forgiving religion and culture, both less rigid and exacting in

their demands of the individual. For Goodman Brown, the requirements of Puritan religion robbed him of all happiness and joy, and he died a bitter man. It is a warning, perhaps, to the young America on how faith in the Puritan style is inherently hypocritical and perhaps dangerous, only exacerbating the evils that tempt men and divide them.

The Fall of the House of Usher is a rather grim tale, like many of Poe's works. Roderick and Madeline's existence appears incredibly claustrophobic and anxious, the house they live in decaying yet holding together. The literal House of Usher serves both to accentuate Poe's love of wordplay and also to illustrate the structure of the Usher family itself. Much like in the other stories, the journey through the House of Usher is another crossing of a kind for the narrator, who bears witness to the fractured Ushers as they continue to fall into disrepair, both the House and the individuals living inside. This crumbling structure can be likened to an idiosyncratic era fast fading away as it splits itself and falls apart. The dynastic (and possibly incestuous) nature of the House of Usher brings to mind the Habsburg Dynasty of Europe, a hallmark of the Old World. Looking at the House of Usher in such a way, the often contrasting building and family that is the House of Usher represents the failing Old World, struggling to continue on; in the end, it is destined to come tumbling down. America's future, maybe, is to not make the same mistake, to continue where the 18th century left off and to prevent the same issues from plaguing the 19th century.

**1b. The opening of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* reads:**

**"My chambers were upstairs at No. \_\_\_ Wall Street. At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern."**

**In a post of about 200 words, describe the significance of this passage to the story as a whole.**

This opening passage introduces, primarily, the setting of the story. Being that the full title of the story is "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," the specification of the office location as being on Wall-Street in the bustling 1850s is not insignificant. Although presented in a seemingly positive manner, the description of the Wall Street office is somewhat austere and gloomy - the window commands an unobstructed view, yes, but that view is a blackened, old brick wall pushed right up to the windows themselves. The building entirely is overseen by surrounding taller structures, oppressive in their nature. Interpreting it this way, this passage sets up how the office building will affect Bartleby and the plot. Though favorably described, the nature of this office is much like the Dead Letter Office we find Bartleby to have been employed at in the past, sapping hope and motivation. The office is a place of economic productivity, of business, of material earnings and endless work, marking the resulting conditions of the Market Revolution that gripped America from the 1820s through to the beginning of the Civil War. Bartleby is introduced as the antithesis to this materialistic, obsessive bustling. What is taken simply as the state of life by everyone is refused quite plainly and politely by Bartleby, no matter how obdurate he grows to efforts to alter his behavior. This opening passage, therefore, establishes a vital component of the message that Melville may have intended, commentary on the changing American culture and its crushing influence on men like Bartleby.

**2a. Whitman and Dickinson began writing during a period called The American Renaissance, defined by F. O. Matthiessen as the period in the early to mid 1850s that saw American literature breaking away from its European roots. Examine carefully the works by Whitman and Dickinson that we have studied: what is new about these works?**

As is to be expected when humans are apart for extended periods of time, gradually groups begin to diverge in many qualities, literature style chief among them. Plotting its own trajectory, the United States of America saw in the latter half of the 19th century the evolution of American writing into something wholly distinct from European tradition, adopting very experimental and free methods to explore new topics in varying ways.

This is demonstrated in both Whitman's and Dickinson's poetry. For example, Whitman is known for having pioneered free-verse poetry. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a good case of this then-unique style, dispensing with traditional rhyming and meter conventions. This does much to set Whitman apart from European roots, having broken from tradition in a very literal, real fashion. "Oh Captain, My Captain" served as an extended metaphor for President Abraham Lincoln's death, exploring a very political death, also breaking with European roots by covering such a controversial, potentially taboo topic while simultaneously utilizing Whitman's own style.

Dickinson also demonstrably broke from European tradition in poems such as "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," which exemplifies her unconventional use of dashes throughout much of her poetry, giving it a starkly differing meter from previous European poetry. "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" demonstrates this unique style, too, as well as showing Dickinson's penchant for capitalizing words seemingly at random, words which also create a unique imagery. Even the topics that Dickinson covered in her poetry, like death, killing, liquor, and others were all rather taboo, making her poetry distinct even by dint of subject matter.

**2b. You will have noticed that this unit alternates between the highly regulated world of "society" in Wharton's novella and the natural world in Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, and London. Analyze the changes that you see in these works with respect to the place of human beings in the world. How does American literature treat the relationship between human beings and the natural world?**

Throughout all of these literary works, there is an apparent naturalist influence, emphasizing the power of the natural environment over the actions and behaviors of men. The works of Jack London very much exhibit this influence, such as in, "To Build a Fire." The story details the foolish endeavour of a man in the freezing Yukon territory to travel from one settlement to the next despite warnings from a much older and more experienced denizen of the area against traveling in such harsh, cold weather. Consequently, during the man's journey, he fails to overcome the obstacles set before him by the environment, and he dies, freezing to death. After falling through a patch of ice, he attempts to build a fire (as the title suggests), but his attempt is foiled first by his mistake in building the fire under a snow-laden tree, then by his own failure to properly manage the fire in lieu of his frozen hands. Without a fire, he succumbs to the cold. Clearly, this story is demonstrative of how weak and incapable humans can be against the natural world when not adequately prepared to control various aspects of it. This doesn't necessarily say that humans are weak, but that the natural world is strong; it is arrogant for humans to think they rule over what they do not fully understand.

Other writings by these authors also demonstrate the influence of naturalist beliefs in detailing the relation of humans to the environment. Crane's "The Open Boat" shows the power of the sea despite also

detailing a minor triumph by men in managing to survive. At the end of the story, it is written "When night came, the white waves rolled back and forth in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore. And they felt that they could then understand." This understanding is, perhaps, of the power the sea commands, of why the oiler died, of why the rest of the crew managed to survive with perseverance and a little bit of miracle.

In "On Civil Disobedience," Thoreau utilizes several environmental metaphors to describe the role of man in the world and how individuals must choose to shape their lives and the society they desire to live in. For example, he writes, "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man." Much as nature is governed by immutable laws that cannot be altered by man, man lives by immutable laws that cannot be altered.

The other works by Crane, Whitman, and Dickinson also detail ideas concerning the relation of man and nature in much the same way, exhibiting naturalist or transcendentalist influences seeking to explain the power of natural laws over the environment and human society.

**3a. Thinking about the poems in this unit as compared to the poems in the last unit, what similarities and/or differences can you identify between the Late Romantics and the Modernists? In the twentieth century, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg argued that American poetry was in a constant state of responding to the work of Walt Whitman: do you think that this is true?**

When comparing and contrasting the Late Romantics to the Modernists of the 20th century, Robert Frost serves as a good medium by which the qualities of both eras can be examined and analyzed, bridging the two and evolving the world of American poetry. Frost's poetry was known for his directness and careful word choice, yes, marks of the imagist culture of poetry that flourished in the early 20th century. He, however, also utilized traditional verse and avoided experimental writing, sustaining some of the qualities of the Late Romantic period of American poetry. Whereas Frost maintained the traditions of the older writing, Whitman stands in history as one of the great pioneers of distinctly American poetry with a love of democracy and free verse.

This is a contrast that plays out very much for the rest of the Late Romantics when compared against the Modernists. For the most part, many of the Late Romantics sought to experiment and innovate with their writing, while the focus of the Modernists varied. Of them, the Imagists stand prominently, seeking direct treatment of subject matter, economy of language, musicality and rhythm, freedom of subject matter, free verse, and common speech language. The products of Imagist influence were sharp and descriptive, lending themselves to extensive imagery. Therefore, many of the Modernists poets were influenced by pre-Romantic thinking.

Despite this, the events of the 20th century meant that Imagists did not hold absolute hold over American poetry. World War I did much to combat the optimistic views often taken by Imagist poets, and so Modernism came to be dominated by Eliot-esque poetry, disjointed imagery forming a confusing narrative from which exclusive meaning is gleaned.

In many ways, I can see merit with the idea that Modernist poetry was in a constant state of responding to Whitman. Whitman was a pioneer of what we think of as "American" poetry, providing a distinct and new style with new subject matter to explore. The ideas of Whitman were utilized in forming Imagist and Modernist styles, either by differing from Whitman's works or by taking what worked and cultivating those features further.

**3b. The final poetry selections in this unit represent two of the most famous and contested authors of the twentieth century. What similarities and differences do you find between "Supermarket in California" and "Daddy" when compared to the other poetry that we have read in this course?**

Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" is a deeply personal, lengthy literary work, dealing with, as the title would suggest, her father. In a similar vein, Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California" recounts a dream of the author, detailing a journey with poet Walt Whitman, who plays the role of a father figure. Of course, these two poems are both very different in their aims and what they achieve, as well as what inspired each.

Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California," much like the rest of Ginsberg's work, aspires to continue the legacy of Walt Whitman and pay homage to him, both by replicating Whitman's experimental style and carrying on thematically. In that way, it bears similarity to some of Whitman's own works and those inspired by Whitman from the 19th century. However, Ginsberg's poetry does also embrace freedom of thought, something emblematic of Modernist thinking, which emphasized exploration of new and varied topics in order to make a statement. This, certainly, Ginsberg achieves in "Supermarket in California," making a statement on the disconnect of modern society with the natural world. This statement, of course, hearkens back to poetry and writing from earlier in this course which was influenced by naturalist viewpoints, like Dickinson and Whitman. It goes without saying that there is a lot of relation between this poem and Whitman's poetry, but Ginsberg's work also relates in many ways to other Late Romantic writings, as well as some Modernist influences.

Plath's "Daddy," on the other hand, isn't necessarily a statement on a broader subject or facet of society, instead recounting the poet's own internal struggles as she finally comes to terms with her complex relationship to her father. Certainly, meaning can be derived from her comparisons of the man to Fascists and National Socialists, and her father can serve as a symbol of oppressive male figures for all, but the very atmosphere of the poem does not lend itself to such an interpretation. As it connects to other poetry, it bears similarities to Dickinson's in how deeply personal it is and the focus of it on internal struggles of the mind and soul, and Plath's use of irregular meter and irregular rhyme connects with the Late Romantics.

Both of these poems can be analyzed in myriad fashions, and I would be interested to hear other perspectives in how they relate to one another and relate to other famous pieces of American poetry.