Expanding and Revising the American Renaissance

Published in 1941, F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* remains one of the landmarks of American literary criticism. At a time when American literature was still establishing itself as a discipline, Matthiessen’s book helped to solidify arguments for American literature’s philosophical depth, artistic achievements, and distinct tradition. In this book, Matthiessen focuses on five authors—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville—and the five-year period (1850–1855) in which they produced their greatest works. While Matthiessen’s study provides extensive historical contextualization, offering accounts of various other authors, and he explicitly chooses these authors, in part, because of their politics—their commitment to democratic politics—his overarching method was in keeping with the apolitical decontextualization of literature associated with New Criticism. New Criticism, which dominated academic literary study in the United States throughout the middle of the twentieth century, emphasized reading a work of art on its own, largely without reference to historical context, author’s biography, or other texts. The literary work, from such a point of view, should stand on its own.

In the decades that followed Matthiessen’s study, the antebellum period in American literature would come to be known as the American Renaissance, with Matthiessen’s canon and method largely defining the field. Scholars expanded the period, sometimes going as far back as James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romances in the 1820s and as far forward as Henry James’s realistic novels at the end of the nineteenth century; in general, though, the American Renaissance came to be defined as extending from the early 1830s, when Hawthorne and Emerson first began to publish widely, to the Civil War. With this temporal expansion, more works by Matthiessen’s group of five were included, and a few other authors—most notably Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson—began to be incorporated.

From the 1950s onward, psychoanalytic criticism became more prominent, and beginning in the early 1970s, deconstruction and other semiotic approaches drawing on Continental philosophy began to play a larger role in academic criticism. But despite their challenges to New Criticism’s view of a literary work as unified and autonomous, these approaches did little to change the basic outlines of the American Renaissance (and other literary periods). Since the early 1980s, however, Matthiessen’s canon has been significantly questioned and expanded, in part due to another seismic shift in dominant academic literary criticism. In short, the last few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the larger historical context for understanding literary works, alongside a tendency to read those works within a political frame and a desire to recover alternative voices from the past.

Some of this revisionary work arose directly from the identity politics that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the wake of the civil rights movement and the resurgence of feminism. One of the most striking changes to our understanding of the American Renaissance over the last few decades has been the broadening of our picture of the literary landscape of the antebellum years. In particular, long-overlooked works by African Americans and women, as well as popular works by less elite authors, have received attention.
This expansion of the canon has required a shift in method, a revised approach to understanding these works, as their authors usually imagined their relationship to their audience and to their literary productions in terms distinctly different from those established by New Critical practices. New Criticism largely embraced a view of literature derived from the modernist literary practice and criticism of the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly as found in the work of T. S. Eliot. From this point of view (i.e., art for art’s sake), literature should have no end outside its own production. Literature, thus, should not be explicitly political or didactic; it should primarily work through a kind of self-referentiality—all you need to know to understand the poem or story or novel should be provided by the work itself. Most of the African-American and female writers of the antebellum period, however, had explicitly political and/or moral intentions in writing their works. To understand how their texts work and to grasp why they are constructed as they are, then, we need to view them through a different lens.

One of the most influential works making this argument was Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, published in 1985. Tompkins makes a particularly incisive and influential argument in regards to sentimental fiction. While “sentimental” has most often been used as a pejorative, to describe works that rely on melodramatic scenes and plots to easily evoke feelings and sympathy, Tompkins argues that sentimental texts are far more complex and compelling describe works that rely on melodramatic scenes and plots to easily evoke feelings and sentiment. While “sentimental” has most often been used as a pejorative, to describe works that rely on melodramatic scenes and plots to easily evoke feelings and sympathy, Tompkins argues that sentimental texts are far more complex and compelling when we attempt to understand them on their own terms. According to Tompkins and other cultural historians, mid-nineteenth-century sentimentalism was grounded in the wide cultural acceptance of basic Protestant tenets that made salvation and the application of Christian principles and teachings the chief question of life and that relied on philosophical conceptions of humans having an innate moral sense accessed by their emotional, sympathetic responses to others’ suffering. Through this reframing, Tompkins explains why works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World* (1851) were the most popular works of their time. Rather than being shallow works, these texts emerge, in the hands of Tompkins and other scholars, as “the other American Renaissance.”

While this new understanding of sentimentalism has led to the exploration of numerous popular works, other scholarship has sought to recover other popular works, most notably dime novels and sensational fiction that largely flourished in urban centers. From different theoretical orientations, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* and David Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance* similarly broadened American literary scholarship in the mid-1980s by focusing on a variety of popular antebellum works. Denning’s focus is narrower, as he hones in on dime novels—cheap, mass-produced works often marketed specifically to urban working-class audiences. Arguing that these texts reveal a nascent working-class sensibility and consciousness, Denning offers an explicitly political reading of dime novels based on their importance as a counter to the acceptance (or avoidance) of market and industrial capitalism found in the canonical literature of the period. Reynolds, on the other hand, while acknowledging the explicitly political nature of some popular works, seeks to uncover a broader array of popular literature that he sees as providing the raw material that the true literary artists—the canonical authors—rewarked. In the decades since these works appeared, more
scholars have offered increasingly sophisticated accounts of the political intentions and aesthetic qualities of an even broader array of popular and forgotten works, often demonstrating a more complex relationship between the canonical authors and this material.

One specific area that has probably received the most attention and has most transformed our understanding of this literary period has been a renewed attention to the centrality of slavery, and cultural productions concerning slavery, in antebellum culture and society. For most of the twentieth century, until the civil rights era, the early writings of African-American authors were largely dismissed by literary scholars and historians as mere antislavery propaganda. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as more historians began to pay attention to African-American accounts of slavery as historical evidence, literary scholars began to explore the same (and other) works for their literary achievement. At the center of this recovery effort were the numerous slave narratives—most famously Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845)—produced by former slaves during the 1840s and 1850s. While the earliest slave narratives appeared in the late eighteenth century, the form flourished in the antebellum decades as the controversy over slavery grew. The first works of African-American fiction appeared in the 1850s, and while these works had previously been dismissed for their lack of artistic quality, with a shift to more historical and political understandings of literature they have received increasing attention over the past decades, as scholars have begun to develop how authors such as William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, and Harriet Wilson balanced abolitionist and antiracist politics with sophisticated narrative strategies.

These shifts—the recovery and redefinition of sentimentalism and popular literature, an emphasis on the politics and social embeddedness of literature, and a renewed focus on the slavery controversy—have also reinvigorated scholarship on the figures from the older canon. While attention to recovered writers has grown over the past decades, much academic literary criticism of this period remains focused on the figures from Matthiessen’s study. In the past decades, then, one of the major revisions to the American Renaissance has involved rethinking the relationship of canonical figures to their sociopolitical context.

This revision has tended to develop along three different lines. On one line, many scholars, especially in the 1980s (see Bercovitch and Jehlen for one collection), began to offer ideological analyses of canonical works, contending that rather than standing outside of their sociopolitical context, these texts necessarily and inevitably reproduced dominant ideas about society and its proper economic and political organization (see Crews’s review for a critique of this movement). From such a point of view, the attempts of authors to avoid sociopolitical commitments or commentary became, in essence, an acceptance of the status quo, of the continuing development of a capitalist system that relied on the exploitation of wage workers in the North and slaves in the South. From the outset, this sort of ideological analysis considered canonical works in terms of a variety of major sociopolitical questions, from questions about slavery and race to the nature of American democracy and the role of egalitarianism in society, from the place of women in society to the expansion of the United States through war against Mexico and the expropriation of Indian lands.
While such ideological critique of the major authors explicitly rejected New Criticism’s tendency to isolate authors and their works from sociopolitical contexts, the application of New Critical methods to the canonical authors was always somewhat problematic, and a second line of criticism has sought to recover how these writers actively engaged with the key political and social debates and events of their times. None of the writers Matthiessen enshrined embraced the notion of art for art’s sake, and they all, to different extents, envisioned their work as potentially having some social, moral, or political impact on their society and culture: Thoreau and Emerson both spoke out against slavery, especially in the 1850s following the Fugitive Slave Law, with Thoreau eventually becoming a defender of John Brown’s attempt to arm slaves and lead a slave uprising; Whitman’s poetry frequently and directly addresses the gap between the promise of American equality and freedom and the reality of slavery; Melville’s novels and short stories offer insightful, if sometimes oblique or ambiguous, accounts of the degradation and suffering of individuals under developing industrial capitalism and slavery; and Hawthorne’s meditations on freedom and conscience, history and its effects, through his characters and plots, do not exist outside of time in some philosophical abstraction but emerge from the period’s own questioning of these issues. For scholars such as Eric Sundquist (see his To Wake the Nations, for one of the most influential studies of this sort), revising the American Renaissance has meant bringing new attention to largely overlooked writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass while revitalizing our view of authors such as Melville by showing their similar efforts at melding a variety of literary techniques with incisive social analysis.

These two trends, then, can be distinguished by their reaction to the conventional view of American Renaissance writers as detached from their social milieu. On the one hand, ideological critique has accepted this view as reflecting what those authors were attempting to do, but has judged that attempt as politically complicit with the status quo; on the other hand, other revisionary work has questioned this characterization of these authors by redescribing their engagement with social and political issues.

Finally, another line of scholarship has recognized this engagement while also emphasizing that the older canonical writers do seem to have had a different sense of their role as authors from many of the more popular and/or political writers who have been recovered over the past decades. Thus, while Emerson and Thoreau spoke out against slavery, they shied away from joining the antislavery movement, and their works frequently attempt to prod their readers to make their own judgments about the problems of the nation, and often cordon off those problems as relatively unimportant within a larger natural, divine, or philosophical frame of reference. Similarly, while both Melville and Whitman implicitly and explicitly frame their explorations of the self’s relationship to the world within the historical context of the antebellum U.S., neither Melville, in his darker, more pessimistic meditations, nor Whitman, in his more celebratory expostulations on the grandeur of human life and the American nation, offers concrete or specific political positions. For scholars taking this approach, a return to the formal innovations and developments of these writers often grounds an attempt to discern the relationship between literature and politics in more nuanced terms.
The renewed attention to historical and political understandings of literature, along with the recovery of forgotten works, have thus combined to provide a much fuller, richer picture of literature during the antebellum period in U.S. history. We will build on that picture by surveying some of the most important and representative works from that time and placing those texts within the broader cultural and social development of the United States.
Suggested Reading and References (excerpts from many of these works are available on websites that can be found through any search engine):


