

## **Reframing 19th-Century American Literature Through Critical Whiteness Studies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay advocates for the use of a Critical Whiteness Studies framework in the analysis of classic White literature. Following an introduction of Critical Whiteness studies, I provide instances from the instruction of nineteenth-century American literature where Critical Whiteness methodologies are beneficial. Expanding the curriculum in English departments to include Critical Whiteness studies redefines the teaching of canonical White literature on syllabi and aids students in identifying ongoing discourses of White supremacy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The study of literature is inherently intertwined with cultural, social, and historical contexts, and this is particularly evident in the examination of 19th-century American literature. This era, marked by profound transformations in American society—including westward expansion, industrialization, and the burgeoning abolitionist movement—offers a rich tapestry for exploring themes of race, identity, and power dynamics. Among these themes, the concept of whiteness has emerged as a critical focal point for contemporary literary studies, challenging educators and scholars to reevaluate traditional narratives and representations.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) provides a framework for examining how whiteness functions as a racial identity and social construct, rather than merely as a default or normative condition. It emphasizes the need to interrogate the privileges and power structures associated with whiteness and to consider how these factors shape both literary production and interpretation. By applying CWS to 19th-century American literature, educators can uncover the complexities of race relations, the marginalization of non-white voices, and the often-unexamined assumptions that underpin canonical texts.

This introduction sets the stage for a discussion on the importance of integrating Critical Whiteness Studies into the teaching of 19th-century American literature. It begins by highlighting the historical context of the era and the significance of race in shaping literary themes and characterizations. It then explores the pedagogical implications of adopting a critical lens on whiteness, particularly in fostering more inclusive and diverse literary discussions that engage students with a broader range of perspectives.

In the following sections, we will explore key literary works from the 19th century that exemplify the dynamics of race and power, including texts by authors such as Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Mark Twain. Through a critical examination of these works, we will illustrate how CWS can enhance our understanding of the literature, encourage critical engagement among students, and contribute to the development of a more nuanced appreciation of American literary heritage.

By emphasizing the intersection of race, identity, and literature, this approach aims to cultivate an awareness of the historical and contemporary implications of whiteness in American society. It seeks to empower students to think critically about the texts they encounter and to recognize the significance of their own positionality as readers and interpreters of literature. Ultimately, integrating Critical Whiteness Studies into the curriculum can enrich the study of 19th-century American literature, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of race and its ongoing relevance in literary discourse.

The methodology I'm framing here assists with reorienting messages that include fringe or missing Dark and Native characters, where racial personality is as yet present through creators' development and assessment of Whiteness. In *Playing In* obscurity, Toni Morrison contends that Edgar Allan Poe arranges 'pictures of impervious whiteness' against brief Africanist existences to show that White American essayists rely upon the presence of Darkness to all the while undermine and fortify White characters, and that early US writing can't try not to reflect on the country's racial context.<sup>12</sup> We can stretch out Morrison's contention to Poe's messages where Africanist existences have all the earmarks of being missing. Educators of nineteenth-century American writing frequently present Poe as an expert of structure and sort and utilize his work to look at the improvement of the brief tale, satire, ghastriness, the gothic, and the connection among science and writing. A Basic Whiteness concentrates on way to deal with showing Poe would take care of texts, for example, 'Current realities on account of M. Valdemar', a brief tale I have shown on both a transoceanic odd writing topical module and a nineteenth-century American period module.

In this story, a withering White man is suspended in a spellbinding state for a considerable length of time, at last bringing about complete materially obliteration. In this fantastical story, Poe utilizes the logical examination as a story gadget to voice White male urban delicacy. Written in a setting of 1830s and 1840s clinical graverobbing and analyzation — a training that frequently designated unprotected African American bodies — this story understands the terrifying chance that White men could likewise be controlled and controlled for the sake of clinical progress.<sup>13</sup> In the workshop, perusing with a Basic Whiteness focal point permits understudies to peruse the depictions of Valdemar as a White ongoing worker who is truly darkened, entangled, and tormented — not to consider him to be a representative substitute for African Americans, yet as a figure of Whiteness that is under danger. Poe puts Valdemar first on the limits of, and afterward the beyond, Whiteness trying to exorcize nerves that White male residents could be taken advantage of and oppressed by others. Seeing Valdemar as a White 'Other' urges understudies to make Whiteness explicit and strange, as opposed to general and normate, and to arrange Poe's work in his social setting while at the same time valuing how structure and classification add to the terrible experience of perusing Valdemar's misery.

A re-visitation of White writers that closer views Whiteness as an identitarian site of concern, as opposed to a nonattendance or deliberation, can illuminate how we show the nineteenth-century American standard, while likewise adding to the vital work of extending the scope of essayists we educate to more readily mirror the worldwide creation of Anglophone writing. A different perusing list is socially and mentally improving for our understudies, especially so at an overwhelmingly White organization, for example, my own, where numerous understudies enter never having perused writing past sanctioned White writers. A way to deal with the group that accepts Basic Whiteness concentrates as a method of enquiry supplements variety by requesting that our understudies consider how culture supports as well as difficulties racial orders. It requests our understudies to face the intricacies from 'Incredible Writing' that can be both lovely and engaging and an appearance of backward yet persuasive racial governmental issues. As in Poe's work, over and over the feeling of dread toward being treated as a minority, whether in the nineteenth or twenty-first hundred years, tracks down structure in the language of White enslavement and envisioned mistreatment. The language of contemporary White exploitation isn't a variation, however a duration of belief systems created since the coming of pilgrim expansionism and overseas subjection, communicated in scholarly texts.<sup>14</sup> This resurgence and conspicuousness of Racial oppressor believed is the reason consolidating Basic Whiteness concentrates as a component of decolonizing the educational program is of pressing significance to showing writing today.

## REFERENCES

1. Carolyn Betensky, 'Casual Racism in Victorian Literature', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47.4 (2019), pp. 723–51 (p. 724).
2. In this piece I underwrite White and Whiteness. I'm cognizant that promoted White/ness shows up in the language of Racial oppressor bunches that lift Whiteness as a prevalent racial character. My act of promoting White/ness isn't just obviously against this belief system, yet my work arranges how this philosophy creates in writing. Capitalization of White/ness centers consideration around Whiteness as a huge social build meriting scrutinize, instead of a default position that today keeps up with its power through intangibility.
3. See Bruce Dain on Illumination race science building racial ordered progressions, Cheryl Harris and Aileen Moreton-Robinson on Whiteness legitimizing European land proprietorship and barring non-White possession in pioneer pilgrim countries, and Theodore Allen on the repercussions of seventeenth century settlers imagining Whiteness to raise European obligated workers above oppressed Africans. Patrick Wolfe's work gives a similar conversation of racial pecking orders in nineteenth-century America and the English Domain. Bruce Dain, *A Ghastly Beast of the Brain: American Race Hypothesis in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard College Press, 2002), chap. 1; Cheryl L. Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Regulation Survey*, 106.8 (1993), pp. 1707-91; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive: Property, Power and Native Sway* (Minneapolis: College of Minnesota Press, 2015); Theodore Allen, *The Development of the White Race, Volume 2: The First of Racial Mistreatment in Old English America* (London: Verso, 1994); Patrick Wolfe, 'Land, Work, and Contrast: Basic Designs of Race', *The American Verifiable Audit*, 106.3 (2001), pp. 866-905.
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