

English 611: Teaching Literature
July 22, 2012
Mini Paper # 1

Thematic Juxtaposition: Hawthorne and Poe

As the last crimson tint of the birth-mark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. ~"*The Birth Mark*" by Nathaniel Hawthorne

And the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed *Life* itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved:—She was dead! ~"*The Oval Portrait*" by Edgar Allan Poe

Contemporaries, both influential writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, share similar preoccupations consistent with the American Romanticism movement. Questions regarding the true nature of knowledge, humanity, perception, and reality are just as significant and compelling now as they were during these writers' lives. Consequently, close analysis of "The Birth Mark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne and "The Oval Portrait" by Edgar Allan Poe present an opportunity for thematic juxtaposition within the classroom.

The renown scientist, Aylmer of "The Birth Mark" and the famous unnamed artist of "The Oval Portrait," both share a desire to shape their reality through their "art". Aylmer attempts to perfect his wife, Georgiana, through his alchemist-like science, while Poe's artist seeks to possess his wife's life by painting her essence onto his canvas. Both characters become obsessed with their work, driven by a desire for perfection and their own delusions of greatness. Through the juxtaposition of Aylmer and the artist, students can explore the dangerous consequences of obsessive behaviors.

In both stories, the husband views his wife as subordinate, eventually even subservient, to the husband's true devotion. Hawthorne describes Aylmer as so dedicated to his "scientific studies [to ever] be weakened from them by any second passion" (219). Similarly, Poe characterizes the artist as "passionate, studious, austere, and having already a bride in his Art" (122). Unable to compete with their husbands' work, both women, Georgiana and the artist's wife, find themselves willing participants in their husbands' ultimately deadly obsessions. Both stories present the opportunity to engage students in a discussion about unhealthy relationships. Aylmer is unable to accept or overlook the birth mark on Georgiana's cheek—convincing himself and his wife that its removal is the only way to marital bliss. Desperate for her husbands' attention, the artist's young wife humbly and obediently submits to be painted.

Significantly, both Aylmer and the painter find it necessary to sequester themselves and their wives away from the rest of the world as they work. In "The Oval Portrait," the artist isolates his wife in a "dark high turret-chamber where the light

dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead...there were admitted none into the turret" (122). In "The Birth Mark," Aylmer secludes Georgiana in a refurbished part of his laboratory. Notably, both women are kept in almost darkness; the curtains, as Hawthorne remarks, "appeared to shut in the scene from infinite space" (223). Furthermore, both women, desperate to appease their husbands, remain submissive, sitting in the literal and metaphorical dark. Despite her ailing body, the artist's wife, "smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter...took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak" (122). Likewise, Georgiana is aware of her fate and yet does nothing, so convinced by her husband's passion. She admits to Aylmer, "I might wish to put off this birth-mark of mortality by relinquishing mortality itself in preference to any other mode" (229).

Although Aylmer does admit the potential danger of his experiments, his overconfidence and desperation leads him to give Georgiana the draught, a tincture developed through his alchemy to eliminate the offending mark. Even as Georgiana lays there, unconscious in front of him, Aylmer is entirely focused on the slowly fading birth mark—witnessing the success of his experiment. Ultimately, neither Aylmer nor the artist realize that their wives are about to die. As Poe writes, "he [the artist] was a passionate, and wild and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he *would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride" (122). Aylmer and the artist attempt to defy Nature's claim as sole creator of life, refusing to acknowledge the true nature of humanity as innately flawed and imperfect. Aylmer's boisterous words, "what will be my triumph when I shall have correct what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work!" (222) seem to echo the artist's own claim of brilliance in which he describes his painting as "this indeed is *Life* itself!" (122). The artist's attempt to immortalize the perfection of his mortal wife in paint is like Aylmer's attempt to perfect his wife with his science. Aylmer's unwillingness to accept his wife's flaws, both the visual birth mark as well as her humanity, leads to her eventual death. Consequently, both stories challenge the reader to consider their own humanity and what it means to be human. Not only do these stories engage students in a conversation about the acceptance of human flaws or limitations, but also challenges such a notion by depicting the dangers of such human follies as foolish obsession or submissive relationships.

Engaging students in such thematic discussions is essential in fostering a more comprehensive and complex "transaction between the reader and the author's text" (Rosenblatt 34). A text does not necessarily have meaning in its self, but requires the reader to engage in a transaction. In other words, the meaning of a text is dependent on what the student brings to his or her reading. As Rosenblatt notes, "the reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" (30). Moreover, students do not read any text in isolation, but carry with them their prior reading experiences. Consequently, students understanding of Hawthorne's "The Birth Mark" can be informed by the reading Poe's "The Oval Portrait". By placing both texts in conversation with each other, a student ultimately takes away greater insight than if he or she had merely read one of them.

Further, students can transfer the experience of reading "The Oval Portrait"—specifically, the students' approach to reading, interpreting and criticizing the text (Blau 51)—to the experience of reading "The Birth Mark" which is a more challenging text in terms of language, length and complication. For example, the description of the chateau in "The Oval Portrait" bares many similarities to the description of the boudoir which Aylmer prepares for Georgiana. Students may, upon reading Poe's story for the first time, be unfamiliar with such items as tattered antiques, hanging tapestries, armorial trophies, candelabums, etc. But by reading "The Oval Portrait," students will be better prepared to encounter similar descriptions when later reading Hawthorne's short story. Furthermore, the juxtaposing of both stories presents an opportunity for students to not only discuss the use of setting in creating the strange, mysterious, ominous mood that pervade both works, but its affect on the characters as well as the reader.

Both texts present, in almost opposition of one another, different ways in which one obtains or manipulates knowledge or truth: Alymer through science and the artist through his paintings. Yet both stories also include books, specially dairies as a source of knowledge or truth. Surrounded by strange objects—paintings in "The Oval Portrait" and scientific equipment in "The Birth Mark"—Poe's injured narrator and Georgiana discover a book which provides insight into the circumstances surrounding them. But the knowledge read from books only complicates the characters' understanding by offering insight into the creative mind of scientist and artists, alike. In a little volume found by the narrator of "The Oval Portrait," he learns about the strange painting hanging throughout the chateau. Aylmer's book, read by Georgiana, is "both the history and emblem of his ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life" (Hawthorne 227). By first encountering this motif in Poe's story, students become more likely to notice it employed in Hawthorne's work. Moreover, such familiarity may help students to more easily move beyond what the text is saying to a more complicated discussion of the major themes depicted in both works.

Rosenblatt, in her work, discusses the myriad of reasons why the reading of literature is important and valuable as "a means of enlarging their knowledge of the world, because through literature they acquire not so much additional information as additional experience" (38). Rosenblatt goes on to describes these experiences in the form of personal identification in which students recognize themselves, their problems and their world in a work of literature. Moreover, literature has the ability to objectively view the problems and issues that we may encounter in life. As Rosenblatt writes, "It places them outside us, enables us to see them with a certain detachment and to understand our own situation and motivation more objectively" (40). The themes depicted in Hawthorne and Poe's work are sophisticated, yet innate and intrinsic to the human experience. By placing "The Oval Portrait" and "The Birth Mark" in thematic juxtaposition, students engage in a personal as well as academic experience—hopefully, gaining not only further insight into what makes us human, but a better understanding of how to interpret and analyze literature.

Citations

Blau, Sheridan. *The Literature Workshop" Teaching Texts and Their Readers*.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birth Mark." *The Norton Induction to Literature*. Ed. Booth,
Alison and Kelly J. Mays. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011. 218-
231.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Oval Portrait." *Adventures in American Literature*. Ed. Hodgins,
Francis and Pamela Schirmeister. Boston: Holt McDougal, 1996. 121-122,

Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration*. 5th Edition. New York: MLA, 1995.

Evaluation Sheet – Mini-Paper 1

Content:

Does the essay take a stand, which it is able to defend, about the significance/usefulness of a
particular thematic/formal juxtaposition?

Does the essay show independent thought, initiative, uniqueness, creativity in the selection of the
"new" text?

Does the essay maintain consistent focus on the topic?

Does the essay include paraphrased and interpreted passages from the juxtaposed texts and
secondary material (Blau, Rosenblatt, or Smith) as evidence?

Is the juxtaposition convincing and relevant for the selected audience?

Organization:

Is the argument focused and reflective of the essay's sequence of ideas?

Does the essay use topic sentences to organize the progress of the argument from one main point
to another?

Does the essay use an effective method of argumentation?

Are the ideas presented in a clear and logical order, which is easy for the reader to follow?

Are ideas thoroughly developed, explained, and clarified?

Does the essay use effective transitions between sentences and paragraphs to create a "smoother"
reading experience?

Presentation:

Does the essay use clear, vivid language and style appropriate to the purpose?

Are the sentences clear, direct, and varied in length and structure?

Does the essay establish and maintain an appropriate and consistent tone?

Are the sentences free of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics?

Does the essay follow the format requirements, which were specified (length, typed, margins, spacing)?

Does the essay include a "Works Cited" page?

Comments (I have highlighted in blue the strengths and in red the areas in need of improvement):

Your comparative analysis of the two stories is precise, clear, and convincing. I hadn't thought of pairing Poe with this story, but your paper suggests that this juxtaposition could work quite well. Moreover, your attention to the language of the texts helps to clarify the thematic connections you make regarding the topics of art and nature and the discovery of truth. I also appreciated your use of Rosenblatt to explain how the experience of reading one text will inform the reading of another. It's a perfect pedagogical fit for juxtaposition!

As I was reading your paper, a number of questions emerged. First of all, which "particular" theme were you attempting to focus on here? As I note in the above paragraph, I recognized some of the thematic possibilities you discussed, but it wasn't clear to me the thematic focus for the juxtaposition. Also, which specific strategies would you employ with your students to take advantage of the new "experience" they gain from each text?

Overall, this paper demonstrated your careful reading of each text and your application of the pedagogical theories we've read so far in this course. Well done.