

PEDAGOGIES OF WHITENESS: TEACHING NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN TEXTS CRITICALLY

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the application of Critical Whiteness Studies as a pedagogical framework for teaching nineteenth-century American literature. Canonical texts from this period often reflect and normalize racial hierarchies, national identity formation, and cultural power structures shaped by whiteness. This paper examines how a critical engagement with whiteness enables students to interrogate implicit racial assumptions, ideological constructions, and historical contexts embedded within literary works. By foregrounding whiteness as a socially constructed and historically contingent category, the approach encourages deeper critical reading, fosters inclusive classroom discussions, and challenges traditional interpretive practices. The study also highlights teaching strategies that promote reflexivity, historical awareness, and ethical literary analysis. Ultimately, integrating Critical Whiteness Studies into literary pedagogy enhances students' understanding of race, power, and representation in nineteenth-century American texts while contributing to more socially responsive and critically informed humanities education.

Keywords: Critical Whiteness Studies; Nineteenth-Century American Literature; Literary Pedagogy; Race and Representation; Cultural Power; Critical Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century American literature occupies a central position in literary studies, reflecting the cultural, political, and social transformations that shaped the United States during a period marked by expansion, slavery, nationalism, and

emerging ideas of citizenship. Canonical authors and texts from this era have traditionally been taught as foundational expressions of American identity, often emphasizing themes such as individualism, democracy, and moral progress. However, these narratives frequently embed unexamined assumptions about race and privilege, particularly through the normalization of whiteness as an invisible or universal standard.

Critical Whiteness Studies offers a valuable theoretical framework for interrogating these assumptions by examining whiteness as a socially constructed, historically contingent, and power-laden category rather than a neutral or default identity. By making whiteness visible, this approach reveals how literary texts participate in the production and reinforcement of racial hierarchies. Applying Critical Whiteness Studies to nineteenth-century American literature allows educators and students to critically analyze how race, power, and exclusion operate within literary representations, narrative voices, and thematic structures.

Incorporating Critical Whiteness Studies into the teaching of nineteenth-century American literature also responds to broader pedagogical calls for inclusive, reflective, and socially engaged education. Contemporary classrooms are increasingly diverse, and students benefit from interpretive strategies that acknowledge historical injustice and encourage critical self-awareness. Examining whiteness alongside issues of race and representation fosters deeper engagement with texts and challenges students

to reconsider long-standing interpretations that overlook systemic power dynamics.

This study explores how Critical Whiteness Studies can be effectively integrated into the pedagogy of nineteenth-century American literature. By recontextualizing canonical works and employing critical teaching strategies, the approach seeks to enhance literary understanding, promote ethical reading practices, and support a more nuanced exploration of American literary history.

II. CORE THEMATIC PILLARS

A. Manifest Destiny and the Racialized Landscape

Nineteenth-century American literature frequently frames the natural landscape as an empty or untouched space awaiting moral, spiritual, and national fulfillment. Nature writing by authors such as Henry David Thoreau and James Fenimore Cooper often presents the American wilderness as a blank slate—an arena for white self-realization, transcendence, and progress. This literary move aligns closely with the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which cast westward expansion as both inevitable and divinely sanctioned while erasing Indigenous sovereignty and presence. The land appears available not because it is uninhabited, but because Indigenous relationships to it are rendered illegible within white epistemological frameworks.

Central to this narrative is what may be termed the **“proprietary self”**: a conception of subjectivity in which the white individual is imagined as owning not only land but also autonomy, interiority, and futurity. This proprietary self assumes an inherent right to mobility, settlement, and self-fashioning—rights systematically denied to Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. By portraying nature as spiritually restorative and universally accessible, canonical texts mask the racial violence embedded in land acquisition and normalize

white possession as a natural extension of personal freedom. Teaching these texts through a CWS lens enables students to recognize how literary representations of landscape participate in racialized logics of ownership and exclusion.

B. The “Dark Face” of the Canon

Canonical nineteenth-century literature often constructs white subjectivity through contrast, relying on Black or Indigenous figures as symbolic “shadows” against which white humanity, morality, and complexity are defined. Toni Morrison’s concept of the “Africanist presence” is particularly instructive here, as it reveals how racialized others function not as fully realized characters but as narrative devices that stabilize white identity. In works such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, darkness and blackness operate simultaneously as metaphor and racial signifier, blurring the line between symbolic abstraction and embodied racial meaning.

In *Moby-Dick*, the figure of Queequeg and the racialized language surrounding the whale itself allow Ishmael’s philosophical depth and moral ambiguity to emerge, while nonwhite bodies absorb danger, excess, and otherness. Similarly, Hawthorne’s symbolic use of darkness—moral, spatial, and psychological—draws on racialized associations that reinforce hierarchies of purity and corruption. These texts do not merely reflect racial thinking; they actively shape it by embedding racial difference within the aesthetic structures of the canon.

This dynamic is further reinforced through nineteenth-century sentimental fiction and the ideology of the Cult of Domesticity, which positioned white womanhood as a site of moral virtue, emotional refinement, and national stability. The idealized white domestic sphere depended materially and symbolically on the exclusion, displacement, or labor of racialized others—enslaved people, Indigenous women, and immigrant laborers—whose presence was either erased or rendered peripheral. By

foregrounding white femininity as universal morality, sentimental literature naturalized racial hierarchies while obscuring their economic and social foundations.

C. Legal and Scientific Contexts

Literary constructions of Whiteness in the nineteenth century cannot be separated from the legal and scientific discourses that shaped racial identity during the period. Laws such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 institutionalized racial exclusion and violence, transforming Whiteness into a legal category tied to land ownership, bodily autonomy, and national belonging. These statutes did not merely reflect racial ideology; they actively produced it, defining who could claim protection under the law and who could be dispossessed or rendered fugitive.

Simultaneously, the rise of phrenology and so-called “race science” in the mid-nineteenth century provided a pseudo-scientific vocabulary for naturalizing racial difference. Character descriptions in novels increasingly drew on these frameworks, associating moral character, intelligence, and temperament with physical features and racialized bodies. Such descriptions lent scientific authority to literary hierarchies, reinforcing the idea that Whiteness signified rationality, self-control, and progress, while nonwhite bodies were depicted as instinctual, excessive, or degenerate.

When taught in isolation from these contexts, canonical literary texts risk appearing detached from the racial realities of their time. A Critical Whiteness Studies approach restores this historical grounding, revealing how literature, law, and science worked together to imagine and enforce Whiteness as the normative center of American identity.

III. PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: TEACHING THE TENSION

Teaching nineteenth-century American literature through a Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) framework requires instructors to foreground

tension rather than resolution—between universality and particularity, invisibility and visibility, canon and counter-narrative. The goal is not to replace canonical texts, but to teach them differently by equipping students with analytical tools that reveal how Whiteness operates as an unmarked norm within literary form, characterization, and moral logic.

One effective strategy is comparative reading, in which canonical texts are paired with contemporaneous counter-narratives that expose the racial assumptions embedded in “universal” claims. For example, teaching Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* alongside Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* allows students to examine how slavery, revolt, and moral agency are narrated from radically different positionalities. While Melville’s text often frames Black resistance through ambiguity, fear, and inscrutability—filtered through a white observer—Douglass foregrounds Black heroism, intentionality, and political consciousness. This pairing makes visible how narrative authority and racial perspective shape meaning, challenging students to recognize Whiteness not as neutral observation but as a situated viewpoint.

Another key pedagogical move involves de-centering the “universal.” In many classrooms, students are implicitly trained to read white protagonists as raceless representatives of humanity, while racialized characters are read as culturally or historically specific. A CWS-informed pedagogy interrupts this habit by encouraging students to ask critical questions such as: *How does this text signal the character’s whiteness? What assumptions about citizenship, mobility, morality, or interiority are attached to that whiteness?* By shifting the interpretive default, students begin to see that what appears universal is often a specific construction of white subjectivity shaped by legal, cultural, and racial power.

To support this analytical shift, instructors can use structured activities such as mapping Whiteness, which helps students identify recurring patterns across texts. Table 1 provides a classroom tool for contrasting traditional readings with CWS-informed interpretations, enabling students to systematically deconstruct how Whiteness is produced and sustained within nineteenth-century literature.

Table 1: Mapping Whiteness in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Textual Element	Traditional Reading	CWS Reading (Deconstructed)
The Protagonist	A “universal” American hero.	A specific construction of white masculinity and autonomy.
The Frontier	An empty space for opportunity and self-making.	A site of racial dispossession and the production of Whiteness through land seizure.
Morality	Innate goodness or individual moral struggle.	Often tied to racial “purity,” discipline, and boundary policing.

Using such frameworks, students learn to recognize that Whiteness in nineteenth-century literature is not simply present but actively produced through narrative form, symbolism, and omission. Teaching the tension—rather than resolving it—invites students to engage critically with the canon while understanding how literary texts participated in the historical making of racial hierarchies. This approach ultimately fosters deeper historical literacy, ethical reading practices, and a more inclusive understanding of American literary history.

IV. CHALLENGES AND RESISTANCE

Implementing a Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) framework in the literature classroom inevitably encounters forms of resistance, both affective and institutional. These challenges are not obstacles to be avoided but conditions that must be addressed explicitly if critical pedagogy is to succeed. Two recurring points of tension—the affective “guilt” barrier and debates surrounding the literary canon—are particularly central to teaching nineteenth-century American literature through a CWS lens.

One of the most frequently cited challenges is what may be described as the “guilt” barrier, especially among white students encountering CWS for the first time. Discussions of Whiteness can provoke defensiveness, discomfort, or the perception that the classroom is assigning moral blame rather than fostering critical inquiry. This reaction often stems from the deeply ingrained association of racism with individual intent rather than structural power. When Whiteness is framed as a historical system rather than a personal identity, students may initially struggle to separate critique from accusation. Effective pedagogy therefore requires careful scaffolding that emphasizes analysis over indictment, clarifying that CWS seeks to historicize Whiteness as a cultural and legal construct rather than to moralize individual students’ identities. Framing discomfort as a productive site of learning, rather than a failure of engagement, allows students to move from defensiveness toward critical self-reflection.

A second point of resistance emerges in ongoing debates about the literary canon itself. In many academic contexts, diversity initiatives have focused on expanding the canon by adding works by African American, Indigenous, and other marginalized authors. While this approach is both necessary and valuable, it can unintentionally preserve the assumption that canonical white-authored texts are raceless or universal, while race becomes the defining feature of noncanonical works. CWS challenges

this logic by advocating not only for inclusion but for re-reading the canon—examining how white authors and texts actively participated in racial formation and exclusion.

This tension is often perceived as a zero-sum choice: either preserve the canon or dismantle it. A CWS-informed approach rejects this binary. Instead, it argues that expanding the canon and re-reading it are complementary rather than competing practices. Teaching Melville, Emerson, or Hawthorne through a racial lens does not diminish their literary significance; rather, it deepens historical understanding by situating their work within the racial, legal, and cultural frameworks that shaped nineteenth-century America. Resistance to this approach often reflects institutional investments in tradition and neutrality, underscoring the need for pedagogical transparency about why and how these texts are being taught differently.

Ultimately, confronting these challenges is essential to the ethical teaching of American literature. By addressing affective resistance and canonical debates directly, educators can create classrooms that prioritize critical inquiry over comfort and historical accountability over abstraction. In doing so, CWS pedagogy transforms resistance itself into a site of learning, revealing how deeply the invisibility of Whiteness is embedded not only in texts but in educational structures and reading practices.

V. CONCLUSION

Integrating Critical Whiteness Studies into the teaching of nineteenth-century American literature provides a powerful framework for reexamining canonical texts and the cultural narratives they sustain. By foregrounding whiteness as a historically constructed and ideologically influential category, this pedagogical approach enables students to uncover the racial assumptions and power structures embedded within literary works that have long been treated as universal or neutral. Such critical engagement deepens textual

analysis and broadens students' understanding of how literature participates in shaping social hierarchies and national identity.

Moreover, applying Critical Whiteness Studies in the literature classroom promotes reflective, inclusive, and ethically informed learning. It encourages students to question dominant interpretations, recognize marginalized perspectives, and develop a more critical awareness of race and representation in literary history. Ultimately, this approach not only enriches the study of nineteenth-century American literature but also contributes to the cultivation of socially conscious readers and scholars, reinforcing the relevance of literary studies in contemporary discussions of race, power, and education.

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