

Prof. Cari Carpenter
English 347: American Literature, 1865-1915
Fall 2010

Essay Three: Texts as Artifacts

This assignment provides a framework for students to think about books as commodities that circulate ideas, and reflect culture, marketing, and aesthetics. In doing so, this assignment offers strategies for students to evaluate books as artifacts of culture. This assignment will require time in the West Virginia Collection (3rd floor of Downtown Library).

As you work through this exercise, please keep the following in mind:

- *You must comply with all of the rules of the Rare Book Room.*
- *Please wear gloves (which are provided by the Rare Book Room) while handling all texts.*
- *Please handle all texts with care; do not bend book spines back, bend pages, and so on.*
- *You may only use pencils while working in the Rare Book Room; pens are not allowed.*

Choose an American text from the West Virginia Collection that was published between 1865 and 1915. Based on your knowledge of the historical period, develop a thesis and argument about the way(s) the text represents, interprets, and circulates particular ideas. In other words, what is the connection between the material conditions of the text and the cultural work it is doing?

Suggestions:

1. As you evaluate the selections, consider the tone, style, genre, and audience for the piece.
2. Evaluate the book in which the selection appears. Consider the size, contents, illustrations (or lack thereof), preface or dedication (or lack thereof), and marketing materials (or lack thereof). What do the physical aspects of the book suggest about the intended market for the book? The audience who might be reading this work?
3. Take a look at WorldCat, available through the WVU Library Database system, which will provide a sense of the number of editions of these works.
4. Your thesis may focus on the style or content of the text in terms of the circulation of ideas, or marketing of the book and the circulation of ideas, etc. Remember that a thesis is a position statement, and that you need to stake a position about the way this text circulates particular ideas.
5. The more specific evidence you use in your essay to prove your point, the better.
6. Each paragraph of your essay should support your thesis statement. Please make sure that there are transitions between paragraphs, so that each paragraph leads to the next, and that each paragraph builds upon its predecessor.
7. Every book reflects (and even helps construct) a cultural moment. Your job is to make sense of it.
8. This assignment does not require external research—although you may choose to pursue research on periodical journalism if you wish. (If you do so, be sure to cite your sources.) This assignment does require careful viewing, thinking, and writing.

This paper should be 5-6 typed, double-spaced, stapled pages. Remember:

- Use a regular-sized font and double spacing
- Include a creative title that mentions the text's author and/or title
- Number and staple the pages.
- Use present tense when analyzing literature.
- Novel titles should be underlined or italicized; poem and short story titles are in quotes
- Use the correct MLA citation format for citations and bibliography
- Include a bibliography that cites your outside sources

Deadlines

- Draft due Friday, Oct. 29 (bring copies to class for workshop)
- Peer workshop forms due to authors Monday, Nov. 1
- Final draft due Monday, Nov. 15 (include rough draft and peer forms)

Specific questions to consider in your research:

1. What is the size of the book? What does the size suggest about the potential audience of the book? What does it reveal about technologies of book production?
2. What is the cover made of? Are there illustrations on the cover? Decorations? If so, are they ornate? Simple? Related to the content of the book? What does the cover suggest about the intended market for the book? (Hint: think about the marketing of modern paperbacks versus hardback books).
3. Are the edges of the paper gilded? Colored? Plain? Is the binding design the same as the book cover? Feel the paper, and look at the size and style of the print. What do these physical details suggest about the intended market for the book? About the publisher's investment in physical production?
4. Is the book illustrated? Are there many illustrations? What is the purpose or function of the illustrations? What do the illustrations suggest about the intended market for the book? About the the process of book production?
5. Does the book have a dedication, or a preface by the author? If so, what does this suggest about the author's intentions for the book?
6. Does the book have a table of contents? If so, what does this suggest about the author's approach to his/her subject? The author's strategy in terms of the reader?
7. Does the book include information about the publisher's catalogue (with the titles and/or prices of other books that the publisher sells)? If so, what does this suggest about the publisher, their market share, and their marketing strategies?
8. Is this text annotated by a reader? If so, what do those annotations suggest?

