

The Novel of Sentiment in a Short Story:
Reflections on Teaching “Theresa”

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Just Teach One

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Background

I am fortunate to work with a population of gifted high school students, and when a colleague introduced me to “Theresa, A Haytien Tale” and its fascinatingly mysterious genesis in the fall of 2014, I was able to incorporate it quickly into my curriculum. It fit neatly into our sophomore core course that blends composition and American literature.

I teach the course more or less as a chronological survey, emphasizing the historicism and frequently taking New Historical perspectives. It is a two semester sequence, with the first semester covering Native American literatures and discovery up until 1900. Because the timeframe frequently overlaps with the American Studies curriculum, this approach works well, as the courses often reinforce each other. It also allows us to develop and explore, as a class, the shifting historic, philosophical, scientific, literary, and other influences as American literature evolves – what I call the story or narrative of American literature. It is this interplay of influences, the dialogue of history in the narrative of American literature, that my students and I found to be one of the most compelling aspects of “Theresa.”

Contexts

I introduced “Theresa” in between units on “The Age of Reason” and “American Romanticism.” Thus it was foregrounded by works like Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Phyllis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” and followed by stories by Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe. Strictly speaking, this puts “Theresa” slightly out of sequence; its serialization in 1828 precedes by at least ten years the works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Irving that we study. Despite this, the text functioned well as a transitional piece, although I would consider moving it deeper into the Romantic unit. The exotic setting, relative to our other texts, appealed

to the students, and wasn't so jarringly different as I might have thought. The author of "Theresa" describes nature with a richness that echoes earlier writers like Crèvecoeur and anticipates Romantic, and to a lesser degree, Transcendentalist authors. The underlying theme of revolution in "Theresa" also forms a solid basis for understanding elements of Romantic era writing and thinking.

It is the treatment of nature as a cause for good and understanding that drives a Romantic perspective of the text. Consider for example how a benevolent nature inspires and energizes the protagonists of "Theresa":

In this grove of quiet security, the troubled souls of the fugitives ceased partially to be oppressed with fear – the milky juice of the cocconut allayed their thirst and moistened their parched lips, and the delicious orange, and luxurious mango, in spontaneous abundance, yielded a support to their nearly exhausted natures.¹

Nature becomes almost another character in the story, comforting and nurturing the protagonists and providing an oasis from the horrors of the fighting, or from the "famine which had usurped the places of plenty and happiness"². Nature functions thus as romantic salvation, in which a hummingbird is a welcome distraction, characters are "greatly refreshed by the cool breeze," and the even the roar of a distant canyon announces that "all creative beings were born to enjoy peace" – and this in contrast to man, who is "stimulated by ambition, [and] is more cruel than the beasts of the forest"³

Although we didn't cover these comparisons in class, it might be interesting to contrast this portrayal of nature as supportive of and sympathetic to the efforts of man with the indifference of later realist and Naturalist writers like Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, in the postbellum and early twentieth century period. In Melville's poem, "Malvern Hill," for example,

¹ Frances Smith Foster, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?" *African American Review*, Vol. 40, no.4 (Winter, 2006), 641.

² *Ibid.*, 639.

³ *Ibid.*, 641-642.

the elm trees watch over a great battle of men, but ultimately have no reaction or sympathy, concluding indifferently, “*But sap the twig will fill; / Wag the world how it will, / Leaves must be green in Spring.*”⁴

“Theresa” also offers the opportunity for some very interesting pairings with other early American texts by or about African American women, Phyllis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent). Jacobs’ narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, especially, it seems to me, provides an opportunity to analyze and discuss the nature of courage, and when the most courageous deed can simply be to run away or to hide.

A Novel of Sentiment?

Thanks to the work of Frances Smith Foster, who points out of Theresa’s protagonists that “gender is the single most important element that complicates their conflict and accentuates their heroism,” it is easy to see how students might engage issues of feminism in “Theresa.” And indeed, my students enjoyed debating whether the characters represented strong women. They noted and debated contradictions, such as the one Foster points out, that “Madame Paulina cries and sighs at every turn, but she is also inventive, resourceful, confident – and literate.”⁵

Feminist questions notwithstanding, a genre which I think would enrich student understanding of “Theresa” is the novel of sentiment. Abrams provides the following definition, which describes “Theresa” remarkably well:

[a work] of the latter part of the eighteenth century similarly emphasiz[ing] the tearful distresses of the virtuous, either at their own sorrows or at those of their friends; some of

⁴ Herman Melville. “Malvern Hill.” Poetry Foundation. 2005. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/244852>, 33-35.

⁵ Frances Smith Foster, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?” *African American Review*, Vol. 40, no.4 (Winter, 2006), 634.

them represented in addition a sensitivity to beauty or sublimity in natural phenomena which also expressed itself in tears.⁶

My students enjoyed discussing the merits of “Theresa” as a Sentimental text – a story that had been through “Disneyfication,” as one student called it. Historically, the novel of sentiment is popular only fleetingly (and, it may be argued, possibly even more briefly in America than in the rest of the world), with Abrams citing examples from Rousseau (*Julie, or the New Héloïse*) and Goethe (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*). American examples include Hannah Webster’s Foster’s *The Coquette* or Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*. By the early nineteenth century, the novel of sentiment has largely fallen out of style, with one immensely popular exception – Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. It might be interesting, therefore, to pose to students the question: can we conclude that “Theresa” provides us with a heretofore missing link in the narrative of American literature, connecting the (somewhat anachronistic) style and mood of Stowe with earlier writings – and might other links be found?

⁶ M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Eighth Edition, Australia: Thomson, 2005, 292

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