

# **CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES AND TEACHING NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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## **Abstract :**

This essay makes the case for approaching classic White literature through the lens of critical whiteness studies. I give a summary of Critical Whiteness studies and then talk about successful applications of Critical Whiteness methods in teaching nineteenth-century American literature. Incorporating Critical Whiteness studies as part of decolonizing the curriculum reorients how we teach canonical White literature that remains on our syllabi and helps students recognize ongoing discourses of White supremacy today, in addition to broadening the selection of what we teach in English departments.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

In her recent essay on teaching ‘casual racism’ in Victorian literature, Carolyn Betensky demarcates texts that outwardly discuss race, or where race and racism is central to plot, and texts which ‘we don’t especially associate with racism but in which racist language or figuration occurs, nonetheless, in passing’.<sup>1</sup> Urging her readers to talk with their students about racist episodes that are so casual—unremarkable, transient, ignored within texts—she suggests that ‘calling out and recognizing banal incidents ... can provide a crucial entry point for students to reflect on the myriad continuing effects of racism and privilege in their own world that generally go unmentioned in polite public discourse’ (p. 740). Betensky is right to think about how we can attend to the everyday racism that permeates nineteenth-century literature, including works today considered canonical and a marker of cultural capital in English departments and the wider reading public.

In this short piece, I make a case for extending this attention towards nineteenth-century literature’s everyday construction of Whiteness.<sup>2</sup> It is in the nineteenth century that Whiteness becomes formalized as a racial identity through the convergence of race science, settler colonialism, slavery, and imperialism—all of which cement racial hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> In concert with expanding what we teach in English departments, teaching canonical texts through the lens of Critical Whiteness studies alters how we teach White-authored works. As Priyamvada Gopal recently argued, decolonization of the university is not achievable without significant social and economic restructuring, but universities can commit to the ‘anticolonial’ practice of ‘recognising the centrality of European colonialism in shaping the globe as we experience it today’.<sup>4</sup> A Critical Whiteness studies framework—as I illustrate through a discussion of nineteenth-century American literature—balances the demands of teaching canonical literature with recognizing that earlier constructions of Whiteness articulate both the racial politics of their period and how they continue in the language surrounding and enabling White supremacy today.

Critical Whiteness studies contains three meanings of ‘critical’: one, drawing attention to Whiteness as a site of critique; two, criticizing structures of Whiteness in an anti-racist framework; and three, the critical or urgent importance in understanding how Whiteness operates and dominates today. Although Critical Whiteness studies did not become a field until the 1990s, its initial aim—put forward in earlier work by Black writers such as W. E. B.

DuBois, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks—has been to invert the expectation that Whiteness is the invisible yet default position in society against which all other groups stand out, particularly Black people.<sup>5</sup> But Whiteness is not an absence of identity and this default abstraction is a form of identity politics itself. Whiteness is not an innate biological condition, but a social construct: not simply a phenotype, but ‘a way of “doing identity”’.<sup>6</sup>

As Critical Whiteness studies has developed, scholarship has expanded to examine how Whiteness intersects with class, ethnicity, and nationality to form intra-White hierarchies in which people can be more or less White.<sup>7</sup> Just as Betensky alerts her students to the casual racism permeating Victorian literature, Critical Whiteness studies asks readers to pay attention to and interrogate constructions of Whiteness in literature. Whiteness is articulated not only through racist incidences or discussions of the slave trade and settler colonialism, but also through the practice of personal values that have been identified and maintained as White, which in the nineteenth century included autonomy, charity, civility, industry, rationality, respectability, property ownership, and sociality.<sup>8</sup> A Critical Whiteness studies approach argues that these values of Whiteness can be found on the surface of texts in descriptions of character, gesture, narrative and spoken voice, behaviours, reactions, emotions—all aspects that fit into the ideology of Whiteness as a constructed social identity. Whiteness is not hidden or repressed within nineteenth-century texts but has been routinely made invisible in earlier scholarship—the approach I outline here makes readers alert to what may have been overlooked or ignored.<sup>9</sup> Using Critical Whiteness studies as a tool helps students to rethink what is taken for granted: the presentation of White characters as unremarkable, normate, universal. Employing this approach makes Whiteness visible and subject to the same attention from the perspective of racial identity as the Black, Indigenous and people of colour portrayed in a text. It returns predominantly White readers and students in British universities to ‘the problem of whiteness’ so they can recognize the social and material conditions that produce Whiteness as an identity, conditions already visible to—and understood by—students and writers of colour.<sup>10</sup> Whiteness occupies a central place in my research on nineteenth-century American literature. In the early USA, the identity expectations of Whiteness were inextricable from the conscious creation and delineation of citizenship. Processes for becoming an American citizen were written into the Naturalization Acts of 1790 onwards, which guaranteed citizenship after two years’ residency to White immigrants only. Within US borders, race became the dominant language for framing civic worth, with the explicit denial of legal, social, and economic rights to free and unfree Black people and Indigenous people. Debates and discussion of slavery and abolition, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and ongoing westward expansion and EuroIndigenous encounters abound in the period’s most canonical texts: *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Since the rise of Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, and textual recovery in the 1970s and 80s, racial identity has become a core component of teaching and studying nineteenth-century American literature. Syllabi have expanded to regularly include slave narratives, early Black and Asian-American

fiction, and Indigenous speeches and essays. Yet, too often questions of racial identity can be siloed to just these non-White writers. Alongside widening the texts taught on a nineteenth-century American literature module, teachers can reorient their discussions of White-authored texts to include examination of how White identity is constructed, whether that is in relation to Black or Indigenous characters, or within broader discussions of the slave trade and settler colonialism, or neither. This approach often involves asking students to consider small or marginal details. For example, analysis of Washington Irving's 'Rip van Winkle' often overlooks the postscript in which the narrator Diedrich Knickerbocker details an Indigenous legend of a 'Manitou or Spirit' who 'wreak[s] all kinds of evils and vexations upon the red men' and could be responsible for the disappearance of Rip.<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of this postscript clearly tells us how early national US writers viewed Indigenous culture as a space of enchantment. A Critical Whiteness approach takes this reading further, asking students to consider why the Indigenous storytellers have been relegated to a postscript and the story relayed by White narrator Knickerbocker instead. Asking these questions alerts students to the settler colonialist trope in which White possessiveness of American land and culture is expressed through replacing existing Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, this Whiteness is delineated along ethno-regional groups in Irving's work. He depicts Dutch American groups as romanticized communities of interdependency, kinship and stasis in opposition to the roaming and self-interested New England Yankee such as Ichabod Crane in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow'. Dutch Americans in Irving's work articulate a White indigeneity—an idealized original American justified in claiming land and legitimacy over Indigenous peoples. The approach I am outlining here helps to reorient texts that feature peripheral or absent Black and Indigenous characters, where racial identity is still present through authors' construction and examination of Whiteness. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that Edgar Allan Poe situates 'images of impenetrable whiteness' against brief Africanist presences to demonstrate that White American writers depend on the presence of Blackness to simultaneously threaten and strengthen White characters, and that early US literature cannot avoid meditating on the nation's racial context.<sup>12</sup> We can extend Morrison's argument to Poe's texts where Africanist presences appear to be absent. Teachers of nineteenth-century American literature often present Poe as a master of form and genre and use his work to examine the development of the short story, comedy, horror, the gothic, and the relationship between science and literature. A Critical Whiteness studies approach to teaching Poe would attend to texts such as 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', a short story I have taught on both a transatlantic grotesque literature thematic module and a nineteenth-century American period module.

In this story, a dying White man is suspended in a mesmeric state for several months, ultimately resulting in complete bodily destruction. In this fantastical tale, Poe employs the scientific experiment as a narrative device to voice White male civic fragility. Written in a context of 1830s and 1840s medical graverobbing and dissection—a practice that often targeted unprotected African American bodies—this story realizes the frightening possibility that White men could also be controlled and manipulated in the name of medical progress.<sup>13</sup> In the seminar, reading with a Critical Whiteness lens allows students to read the descriptions of Valdemar as a White recent immigrant who is physically blackened, entrapped, and tortured—not in order to see him as a symbolic stand-in for African Americans, but as a figure of Whiteness that is under threat. Poe places Valdemar first on the boundaries of, and then the outside of, Whiteness in an attempt to exorcise anxieties that White male citizens

could be exploited and subjugated by others. Seeing Valdemar as a White ‘Other’ encourages students to make Whiteness specific and unusual, rather than universal and normate, and to situate Poe’s work in his cultural context while appreciating how form and genre contribute to the horrific experience of reading Valdemar’s suffering.

A return to White authors that foregrounds Whiteness as an identitarian site of concern, rather than an absence or abstraction, can throw new light on how we teach the nineteenth-century American canon, while also contributing to the necessary work of widening the range of writers we teach to better reflect the global production of Anglophone literature. A diverse reading list is culturally and intellectually enriching for our students, particularly so at a predominantly White institution such as my own, where many students enter never having read literature beyond canonical White authors. An approach to the canon that takes on board Critical Whiteness studies as a mode of enquiry complements diversity by asking our students to consider how culture bolsters as well as challenges racial hierarchies. It asks our students to confront the complexities of ‘Great Literature’ that can be both beautiful and entertaining and an expression of regressive yet influential racial politics. As in Poe’s work, repeatedly the fear of being treated as a minority, whether in the nineteenth or twenty-first century, finds form in the language of White subjugation and imagined oppression. The language of contemporary White victimhood is not an aberration, but a continuance of ideologies developed since the advent of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery, expressed in literary texts.<sup>14</sup> This resurgence and prominence of White supremacist thought is why incorporating Critical Whiteness studies as part of decolonizing the curriculum is of urgent importance to teaching literature today.