

THE LEGACY OF CURRIER & IVES: SHAPING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Curricular Collaboration Between Springfield Museum of Fine Arts

And

Bay Path College

Longmeadow, Massachusetts

Contact Person: Dr. John Jarvis, Bay Path College
Course: American Literature of the Nineteenth Century

Project Title:

**“Cultural Analysis in American Literature
Using
the Lithographs of Currier & Ives”**

Theoretical Foundation For the Study of Literature as Culture

One useful way to make the study of literature interesting and relevant to undergraduate students is to draw upon ideas and interpretive tools from the school of cultural criticism. This approach is based upon the ideas of literary critics such as Frenchman Roland Barthes, who presented the most fundamental concept of the school with this insight: “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (1). Upon this base, cultural criticism encourages us to look at a given text as the product of those cultural forces, provocative ideas, and social conflicts that produced it. American social theorist R. Gordon Kelly helped bring Barthes’ ideas into American Studies with the notion that “literature, in the broad sense, could be approached as a meaning-making, meaning-sustaining, or meaning-subverting activity” that leads ultimately to “the production of meaning and the maintenance of social reality in society” (2).

Integrating the study of Currier & Ives lithographs into an American Literature course offers an ideal context in which to provide students with conceptual tools for the productive study of those “meaning-making, meaning-sustaining, [and] meaning-subverting” activities that were at the heart not only of the building of a national identity on this land (mainstream, Euro-American) but also of the simultaneous destruction of competing identities (Native American, African, and other ethnic-immigrant). The nearly 800 Currier & Ives prints available in a new special collection at the Springfield Museum of Fine Art (Springfield, Massachusetts) offers teachers of American Literature a unique opportunity to bring their courses to life visually and culturally for students through the use of popular nineteenth-century artwork reflecting mainstream beliefs, values, and cultural ideals as they took shape in nineteenth-century America.

Currier & Ives—A Short Overview

(Note: The following information was excerpted from the Springfield Museums website.)

Nathaniel Currier was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1813 and died in 1888. James Merritt Ives, born in Ohio, passed away in 1895. From the beginning, Currier & Ives sold their lithographic renditions of American life to ordinary people, who hung them on the walls of their homes, stores, barbershops, firehouses, barrooms and barns. The firm, the most prolific and successful company of lithographers working, represented every phase of American life. The varied subjects of their prints reflected what middle-class Americans wanted to believe about their own country and went far toward defining national identity. The works provided a foundation for people living with enormous change and included such themes as hunting, fishing, whaling, city life, rural scenes, historical scenes, clipper ships, yachts, steamships, the Mississippi River, Hudson River scenes, railroads, politics, comedy, gold mining, winter scenes, commentary on life, portraits and still lifes.

The firm of Currier & Ives, which produced two to three new images every week for 64 years (1834-1895), is estimated to have produced 7,450 different images. . . . The small works sold for 20 cents each and the large works sold for \$1 to #3 each. The Currier & Ives firm ran a shop in New York City and also consigned prints to pushcart vendors, peddlers, and book stores and sold work through the mail. The works were sold internationally through a London office and agents throughout Europe.

The firm closed in 1907 and today the works are highly prized as valuable records of popular taste and works of art in their own right (3).

Notes:

1. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image/Music/Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, [1957] 1972: 146.
2. R. Gordon Kelly, "The Social Construction of Reality: Implications for Future Directions in American Studies, *Prospects* 8 (1983): 53-54.
3. http://www.quandrangle.org/news_detail.epl?news_id=19; searched May 24, 2005.

American Literature Course
Cultural Analysis Paper Option #1: Competing American Identities in the 19th Century

Task: With their focus upon appealing to an emerging white American middle-class who could afford to buy their lithographic prints, Currier and Ives presented images of America that reinforced certain beliefs and values while ignoring competing beliefs and values. After reading an essay, a work of fiction, or a collection of poems by any 19th-century American author, use representative lithographs from the Currier & Ives collection at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts (available online at <http://www.springfieldmuseums.org>) to undertake “cultural analysis” of the piece of literature that you have read. The main point of your research and analysis should be to show how closely the literary piece mirrors or rejects the emerging mainstream “American identity” that is evident in the images and themes treated by Currier & Ives. Use the following questions to guide your analysis:

1. How similar or different are the ideal role models in the prints to the ideal role models in the work of literature in terms of gender, race, and/or ethnicity?
2. How might social codes and cultural attitudes have enhanced or limited who got to be a role model and who did not?
3. How do the role models (heroes and/or heroines) in the work of literature you are studying treat other people who are not like themselves?

Paper Length/Format: 4-6 pages; use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Due Date: To be announced

Writing Tips:

- In your opening paragraph or two, introduce clearly the work of literature that you are analyzing (title, a bit of author’s background, theme treated) and how you are using Currier & Ives prints to take a look more deeply into the cultural themes and values that shaped (or contradicted) the author’s perspectives. Include in your introduction a “thesis statement” that sums up in 1-2 sentences the major findings of your cultural analysis.
- In the body of your paper, show how the author’s work conforms to white, mainstream cultural values of 19th-century America, and/or ways in which the work challenges these values. You may find the following works from Currier & Ives most useful for looking at the persons and values that were to take primary roles in shaping a national culture. As you look at these prints, think as much about who and what has been culturally left out of them as about what has been included:

Historical Prints

“The Landing of Columbus” (1876)

“Washington’s Dream” (1857)

“Washington’s Reception by the Ladies” (1845)

“Franklin’s Experiment” (1876)

“The Art of Making Money Plenty” (undated)
“The Destruction of Tea at Boston Harbor” (1846)
“The Declaration of Independence” (undated)
“Surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, VA (1852)
“General Andrew Jackson at New Orleans” (undated)
“Washington and Lincoln: The Father and the Saviour of our Country (1865)

Workplace

“The Union Volunteer: Off for the War; and: Home from the War (both 1863)
“The Village Blacksmith” (undated)
“The American Fireman ‘Always Ready’” (1858)
“The Drunkard’s Progress” (1846)
“Home from the Woods ‘The Successful Sportsmen’” (1867)

Men and Women

“The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats (1865)
“Capture of an Unprotected Female, or Close of the Rebellion (1865)
“Lover’s Quarrel” (1846)
“Kiss Me Quick” (undated)
“The Day Before Marriage—The Bride’s Jewels” (1847)
“A Year After Marriage—The Mother’s Jewel” (1847)
“Father’s Pride” (1846)
“The Cares of a Family” 1856)
“The Happy Family” 1874)

- In your paper’s conclusion, try to sum up clearly your insights into whose values “won” in most shaping the new young nation’s sense of identity, as well as what happened to those people whose values did not fit well into the mainstream. If your findings allow you to do so, you might even suggest the kinds of things that were lost to the mainstream white culture as it forged a new nation.

Grading Criteria

1. Does the research paper contain a clear introduction to an author’s work, to the Currier & Ives prints to be included, and to the main findings (thesis) of the writer?
2. Does the body of the paper develop the thesis with clear ideas, insights, and examples both from the literary work being analyzed and from relevant Currier & Ives prints?
3. Does the paper end with a conclusion that effectively sums up and closes the student’s research?
4. Does the paper show mastery of standard American grammar and punctuation as well as of proper MLA format and source documentation style?

American Literature Course
Cultural Analysis Paper Option #2: The “Seasons of Life” in Early America

Task: After reading a work of fiction by any 19th-century American author, use representative lithographs from the Currier & Ives collection at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts (available online at <http://www.springfieldmuseums.org>) to undertake “cultural analysis” of the piece of literature that you have read. In particular, use the four prints in “The Four Seasons of Life” series to compare and contrast the life cycle of one or more main characters in your reading with mainstream ideals in early America. Note that the works of Currier & Ives present ideals that may or may not be available to people (Native Americans, African-Americans, other ethnic/racial groups) outside of the white, Euro-American mainstream. The main goal of your analysis should be to tell us how closely the work of literature that you have read supported or challenged mainstream notions of what life should be like in the 19th century. You should also tell us *why*, in your opinion, the author chose to write something that would support or challenge these mainstream ideas about “the good life.” In short, what was the author’s purpose and how successful was (s)he in accomplishing this purpose, in your perspective?

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages; use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Due Date: To be announced

Writing Tips:

- In your first paragraph, introduce clearly the work of literature that you are analyzing (title, a bit of author’s background, theme treated) and how you are using Currier & Ives prints to take a look more deeply into the cultural themes and values that the author drew upon. Include in your introduction a “thesis statement” that sums up in 1-2 sentences how closely your author followed mainstream values about how life “should be.” Your thesis should also give your insights into why the author chose to write this kind book and how successful (s)he was.
- Use the body of the paper to sum up comparisons and contrasts between the cycle of life as depicted in your work of literature and as depicted in the following four Currier & Ives prints from 1868:
 - “The Four Seasons of Life: Childhood—The Season of Joy”
 - “The Four Seasons of Life: Youth—The Season of Love”
 - “The Four Seasons of Life: Middle Age—The Season of Strength”
 - “The Four Seasons of Life: Old Age—The Season of Rest”
- In your conclusion, sum up as clearly and effectively as you can the reasons you feel that your author either followed or departed from mainstream notions of the ideal seasons of life and evaluate how successful this effort was.

Grading Criteria

1. Does the paper contain a clear introduction to an author's work, to the four Currier & Ives prints to be included, and to the main findings (thesis) of the writer?
2. Does the body of the paper develop the thesis with clear ideas, insights, and examples both from the literary work being analyzed and from relevant Currier & Ives prints?
3. Does the paper end with a conclusion that effectively sums up and closes the student's research?
4. Does the paper show mastery of standard American grammar and punctuation as well as of proper MLA format and source documentation style?

American Literature Course
**Cultural Analysis Paper Option #3: Nineteenth-Century Attitudes towards the
Natural World**

Task: After reading a work of fiction by any 19th-century American author, use representative lithographs from the Currier & Ives collection at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts (available online at <http://www.springfieldmuseums.org>) to undertake “cultural analysis” of developing American attitudes towards the natural world and human responsibility towards this world. Select representative prints from the “American Progress” and the “American Success” collections to get an idea of mainstream American attitudes towards nature. Then evaluate how closely your author held similar attitudes towards the world of nature. The main goal of your paper should be first to establish clearly the kinds of attitudes your author had towards nature and, second, to analyze the long term implications of these attitudes for maintaining a healthy world in the U. S. and beyond.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages; use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Due Date: To be announced

Grading Criteria

1. Does the paper contain a clear introduction to an author’s work, to the Currier & Ives prints to be included, and to the main findings (thesis) of the writer?
2. Does the body of the paper develop the thesis with clear ideas, insights, and examples both from the literary work being analyzed and from relevant Currier & Ives prints?
3. Does the paper end with a conclusion that effectively sums up and closes the student’s research?
4. Does the paper show mastery of standard American grammar and punctuation as well as of proper MLA format and source documentation style?

American Literature Course

Cultural Analysis Paper Option #4: The “Family” in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Task: Either directly or indirectly, many works of literature from the 19th century reveal conflicting ideas about the nature of the family and about what constituted “good family values.” While Native Americans were seeing their families devastated by encroaching white culture, African-American slave families were often shattered when husbands, wives, or children were sold and taken away never to be seen again. Immigrant families also suffered greatly as they struggled to get a toe-hold in their new American world. After reading a work of fiction by any 19th-century American author, use representative lithographs from the Currier & Ives collection at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts (available online at <http://www.springfieldmuseums.org>) to undertake “cultural analysis” of developing American attitudes towards the family. Select representative prints from “The American Home” collection to get an idea of mainstream American ideals and values concerning family culture. Then evaluate how closely your author shares similar ideals in the work that you have read. Your analysis should aim first to establish clearly the kinds of attitudes your author had towards the family and, second, to analyze the long term implications of these attitudes for maintaining healthy families in American culture.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages; use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Due Date: To be announced

Grading Criteria

1. Does the paper contain a clear introduction to an author’s work, to the Currier & Ives prints to be included, and to the main findings (thesis) of the writer?
2. Does the body of the paper develop the thesis with clear ideas, insights, and examples both from the literary work being analyzed and from relevant Currier & Ives prints?
3. Does the paper end with a conclusion that effectively sums up and closes the student’s research?
4. Does the paper show mastery of standard American grammar and punctuation as well as of proper MLA format and source documentation style?