

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice
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Moby Web:
Teaching Melville Online

Much has changed since the Modern Language Association published its *Approaches to Teaching Melville's Moby-Dick* over twenty years ago. The Melville volume was the eighth in a series called *Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature*. Since then the series itself has changed with the times: dropping the word "Masterpieces," focusing instead on subjects "widely taught" to undergraduates, and expanding to contain more than 80 titles. The early volume on teaching Melville, in contrast, remains a static cultural artifact, and is perhaps most interesting for what it can tell us about the subsequent transformations in the American literary canon and in undergraduate education.

As "electronic" editor Randy Bass notes in his introduction to the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, "the study of American literature has outgrown 'the book,'" a statement that has important implications for teaching Melville today. First, as Bass suggests, the *Heath's* organization of texts around key issues or historical themes, rather than a strict chronological approach organized by author, illustrates "the impossibility . . . of finding a single organization for what is really a web of interrelationships among readings." Therefore, he continues, the printed *Heath* anthology "is what we might call a 'post-print' paradigm: not linear but multilinear, not univocal but dialogic, organized not to tell a story, but to open up a complicated matrix of issues and perspectives." As the study of American literature shifts away from emphasizing the great men and masterpieces of American literature, Melville's central position in the canon necessarily changes. Second, when Bass states that American literature has

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“outgrown the ‘book,’” he is imagining the printed *Heath* anthology functioning much like an index or a portal for a more extensive online database of electronic texts. This theoretically unlimited expansion of the primary texts of American literature available online is invigorating; however, with so much material to choose from, there is rarely room enough and time for a bulky old classic like *Moby-Dick* in an undergraduate survey course.

Of course, Melville's and *Moby-Dick*'s place within the tradition of American literature is infamously dynamic and changing: a relatively forgotten text at the time of Melville's death, *Moby-Dick* later became, in the words of Michael T. Gilmore, the “unavoidable centerpiece of the American tradition” (qtd. in Delbanco 8). It follows that our approaches to teaching Melville are similarly historically situated and in flux. How does one approach teaching Melville and the increasingly “avoidable” masterpiece *Moby-Dick* today? Moreover, how do new forms of information technology transform our methods of instruction and our expectations of student participation and research?

In this essay, I use my experiences teaching an online upper-division literature course on Melville to explore these questions and others. In addition to *Moby-Dick*, I discuss methods and strategies for teaching some of Melville's shorter works, such as *Benito Cereno*, *Billy Budd*, “Bartleby,” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” which are all currently included in both the *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies used in American Literature survey courses, and which are today more frequently taught than Melville's most famous work. Although my examples are from an exclusively online course taught through the Blackboard platform (a program comparable to WebCT), the discussion questions, multimedia assignments, and links to web resources

will also be of use to instructors teaching in traditional classrooms and to those in “hybrid” courses that meet both in the classroom and online.

“The Try-Works,” Or, the Curious Anomaly of an Online Melville Course

While it might seem odd to offer an online course on Melville, such a strategy makes sense at my institution, New York Institute of Technology, where there are relatively few English or English Education majors, who are, in turn, spread out over multiple campuses. An online course frees up classroom space (a key concern at our Manhattan campus), fits into any student’s schedule, and ensures that our course enrollments are high enough to satisfy administration (online literature courses are capped at 20 students and always fill). Since literature classes focus on reading and analyzing texts, the online option also makes sense when one considers the course content: the online environment, although “post-print,” is still text-driven, and the reading and writing skills that ensure a student’s success in a traditional literature classroom are of even greater importance in an online classroom.

While there are certainly affinities between the traditional and online literature classroom, there are also crucial differences that one must take into account when designing a course. The key anxiety, for both students and instructors, may be the mechanics and structure of the online classroom, which can be disorienting initially. It’s all too easy to feel lost at sea in an online course, and this is part of the nature of this environment: the professor at the helm is relatively invisible compared to the obvious and commanding presence one might have in the lecture hall. Designing the course around a clear and consistent weekly structure will help orient the students and will help make the

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technology seem transparent. In any online literature course I create, students follow a basic three step process each week: 1) the first item that students see when they enter the course site is my weekly **Announcement**, which directs them to 2) the **Assignments** section for the week's assigned readings, and then to 3) the **Discussion Board** to read the discussion questions. Students have one week to read and to participate in the Discussion Board (they must post four messages by midnight each Sunday). For example, a student logging into the Melville course in the fifth week would pass through the following steps:

1) Announcement

Chasing the Whale: Welcome to Week Five, October 2

"Give way there, give way! The devil fetch ye, ye ragamuffin rascallions; ye are all asleep. Stop snoring, ye sleepers, and pull. Pull, will ye? pull, can't ye? pull, won't ye? Why in the names of gudgeons and ginger-cakes don't ye pull? pull and break something! pull and start your eyes out!" (182).

Let Stubb inspire you ragamuffin rascallions to keep working hard as you journey through *Moby-Dick*. Don't let this whale of a book dismast you! If you are finding this book a challenge, and most people do the first time around, remember to check my chapter by chapter synopsis in this week's **Assignment** folder. I sum up what happens in each chapter, and I also tell you what chapters you can safely skip reading if you are falling behind or are short--Flask-like--on time. So, if you are practical like Starbuck, you can whittle down the reading and still get the job done. If you are philosophical like Ishmael, you will of course want to read and experience everything that the book can give you, and you will survive it all. Whatever your preference or tactic, like the crew on the Pequod, we still have a mission and we need to pull (read) away.

2) Assignment

Week Five: October 2

1. Read chapters 35-70 of *Moby-Dick* (pages 131-250).
2. Participate in this week's **Discussion Board**.

HINT: Look inside this folder for a plot synopsis of this week's reading!

[Inside the folder, students will find the following:

Chapter by Chapter Synopsis of *Moby-Dick*, Part Two

Chapter 35: Ishmael's practical and poetic description of standing watch for whales.

Chapters 36-40: Ahab's dramatic challenge to the crew to find Moby Dick, and the mates' and crew's reaction to their mission.

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Chapters 41-42: Ishmael describes the superstitions and rumors circulating about Moby Dick, how Ahab lost his leg, and how Ahab developed his monomania toward the whale. Ishmael also contemplates the symbolism of the whale's whiteness (very important).

Chapter 43: A foreshadowing of the secret hidden below deck.

Chapters 44-45: Describes how Ahab is tracking Moby Dick. Ishmael offers evidence of other cases of "celebrity" whales to defend the truthfulness of his story. If you are short on time, you may choose to skip these two chapters (but if you like whaling legends, you will enjoy chapter 45). . .]¹

3) Discussion Board

Week Five: *Moby Dick* (chapters 35-70)

Please post your responses to this week's reading assignments here. As stated in the Syllabus, you should submit at least four posts to the Discussion Board each week. Two posts should answer a question posed by the instructor and should be approximately 200 words each, and two other posts should be thoughtful responses to your classmates' comments. **Your four posts are due by midnight 8 October.**

This is a structure that is, quite frankly, more rigidly organized than any of my traditional courses, and it is not a pattern that I would necessarily replicate elsewhere. However, the regularity in the format, the weekly repetition of Discussion Board assignments, and the consistent deadlines work exceedingly well in the online environment.

“The Gam,” Or, The Online Discussion Board

As Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt write in *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, “Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course” (29). Over the past several years of teaching both online and hybrid courses, I have found this statement to be true: the key to a successful online course, or online component of a hybrid course, is to create a high level of student interactivity in asynchronous discussion boards, thereby fostering a community of learners. Quality

¹ While the notion of skipping certain chapters of *Moby-Dick* may be disconcerting, this is a strategy that helps many students. As Robert Lamb writes, “In four or five weeks you cannot explore everything, but you can give students a rich first encounter” with *Moby-Dick* (45). In the spirit of providing the most productive “first encounter” possible, directing students to important passages, and allowing them to skip other sections, is a useful practice.

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student participation improves the learning environment in a traditional classroom but is even more crucial to the success of an online course. I have therefore structured my online courses around discussion board activities, which make up a significant proportion of the student's final grade.

I begin the semester with a Discussion Board assignment and relatively little required reading (I have students read either the *Heath* or the *Norton* online biographies of Melville). In the first week students learn how to post messages to the board by introducing themselves to the rest of the class. They also learn how to reply to other students' messages. This is an important ice-breaking activity that establishes a cordial environment and is a form of communication familiar to "Millennials," the current generation of college students who have grown up immersed in communication technologies and the web. This first discussion board is purely social, which relieves any initial performance anxiety but still gives me the opportunity to see how each student writes, which may be important in evaluating the authenticity of a student's future posts, and gives me the opportunity to establish ground rules and make my expectations clear. For example, when a student wrote in his introductory post, "I'm sorry if this post seems a bit rushed, I don't really like to spend a lot of time over a post on the discussion board," I could intervene immediately in a very public way: "If you don't like spending much time on Discussion Boards, then it will be difficult for you to succeed in this class. Please read the syllabus to make sure that this course will be a good fit for you and your learning style."

Weekly online Discussion Boards on assigned texts fulfill several functions important to the goals of a literature course. First, they are the online counterpart to class

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discussion, giving the students the opportunity both to answer and to pose questions. Second, the online discussion boards also function as a weekly writing assignment, a characteristic that makes the online discussion board distinct from and more challenging than its in-class discussion counterpart. As Jeanette McDonald writes, “online education creates a novel instructional environment with its own particular advantages, limitations, and challenges” (11). The very textual nature of an online discussion board is one of these unique advantages. Instead of blurting out answers in class, students have time to reflect and to write in response to an instructor’s prompt; they can also modify or revise their responses. As many other observers have noted, students who may be too shy to speak in a traditional classroom setting often flourish in the relative safety and anonymity of the online environment. These short writing assignments strengthen student comprehension and challenge students to analyze the primary texts. Finally, as different students cluster around different discussion threads, the class forms collaborative groups of students who are interested in common issues or problems. A successful discussion board promotes active, collaborative learning, critical thinking, and strong writing skills.

The most effective Discussion Board prompts are those that move students beyond simple reading comprehension and toward more open-ended analyses of issues in the primary text. The following are examples sorted by text and including the subject line (an important tool that makes busy discussions easier to navigate) in boldface:

“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”

- **Kind Nature:** The narrator’s friend, Blandmour, states that “through kind Nature, the poor, out of their very poverty, extract comfort” (167). What does this mean? Do Blandmour’s examples convince you that this is true? Why or why not?
- **—finish the sentence!:** At the end of the “Poor Man’s Pudding” sketch, the narrator says, “if ever a Rich Man speaks prosperously to me of a Poor Man, I shall set it down as—I won’t mention the word” (173). Finish the sentence,

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mention the word that you think the narrator means, and why you think this word adequately finishes the sentence.

- **Misery:** The narrator states the misery “maddens” in the city of London but “softens” in the country (175)? What does this mean? Why do you agree or disagree?

Moby-Dick

- **Before you plunge in . . .:** Even if you’ve never read *Moby-Dick* before, you’ve probably at least heard of it as a masterpiece of American Literature. What have you heard about it? What are your expectations of this book? What do you think you may gain from reading it? If you have read *Moby-Dick* before, tell us about that experience. What did you think about the book the first time you read it? How do you feel about the prospect of reading it again?
- **Cannibals and Christians:** Ishmael says that Queequeg is “George Washington cannibalistically developed” (55). What does that mean, and what does Ishmael think of Queequeg’s cannibal or pagan practices? Compare and contrast what Ishmael says about Christianity and Christians. Explain how you agree or disagree with Ishmael’s thinking on these points.
- **The Play’s the Thing:** Why do you think Melville shifts from writing this novel in the first-person, through the voice of Ishmael, to using other perspectives and genres, as he does in Chapter 40, which is written like a play? How does this shifting form and perspective add to or detract from the novel, in your opinion?
- **Fin-Backs and Dericks:** Chapter 81 ends as follows: “Oh! many are the Fin-Backs, and many are the Dericks, my friend” (284). What does this mean? Give us an example of a fin-back and a Derick from your own experience.
- **Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish:** Is Iraq a fast-fish or a loose-fish? Why?
- **Starbuck: Wise or Wimpy?:** What major ethical dilemma does Starbuck face on this voyage? Do you think he makes the right decisions in general? Why or why not?

“Bartleby”

- **The Narrator:** What do you think of the narrator? Is he a good boss, or is he too indulgent toward his employees?
- **Bartleby and Prozac:** Do you think Bartleby would have been better off if his boss were able to slip some Prozac into his ginger nut cakes? Is “Bartleby” really a story about mental illness? Why or why not?

Benito Cereno

- **Bachelor’s Delight:** Why is the name of Delano’s ship so appropriate? What connections can you make to other images of bachelors in other texts by Melville?
- **Padlock and Key:** What does Delano mean when he says, “So, Don Benito—padlock and key—significant symbols, truly”(257)? Are they really symbols? Of what? Did you notice any other symbols in this story so far?
- **Padlock and Key: Part Two:** At the conclusion of *Benito Cereno*, Melville writes: “If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back,

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- the *San Dominick's* hull lies open to-day" (313). Is the Deposition truly the key? How does this new padlock and key compare to the previous padlock and key symbolism? Are both padlock and key symbols equally "true"? Why or why not?
- **Sunshine and the American:** After Benito Cereno is saved, Amasa Delano tells him to look on the sunny side: "the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves" (314). Is this good advice? Why can't Cereno see things Delano's way? Should we moralize upon the past? Is Delano's optimistic outlook an example of American insight or a delusion?

Billy Budd

- **Billy's Impressment:** How does Billy Budd join the British Navy? What is significant about the ship that he leaves and the ship that he enters?
- **Starry Vere:** What does Captain Vere's nickname mean? Of all of the captains you have encountered in texts by Melville, how would you rate him so far?
- **Starry Vere: Part Two:** Do the members of the drumhead court believe that Vere is giving Billy a fair trial? What do you think? Does Vere prejudice or predetermine Billy's fate?

For additional discussion questions, see Donna Campbell's "Selected Reading Questions on *Moby-Dick*" and Paul Rueben's "Perspectives in American Literature" site, which also includes an extensive bibliography of traditional printed literary criticism.

While Discussion Board prompts are important in beginning a conversation—research shows that the initial post in an online discussion determines the level of conversation that follows (Meyer)—it is just as important that the instructor remains an identifiable presence by giving students necessary feedback, helping reticent students to develop their ideas more completely, asking follow-up questions, gently shaping the discussion at crucial points, etc. This doesn't mean responding to every single post or student: an instructor's continued presence should not overwhelm or curtail the student-centered conversation that emerges organically. Furthermore, after a few weeks of Discussion Board assignments, students can also be encouraged to begin their own conversation threads, an activity which helps them prepare to write their final papers by training them to interrogate the text.

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The culmination of these weekly online Discussion Board assignments is the Writing Workshop. In the final weeks of the course, I divide the students into groups of four or five, and each student is required to post a final paper draft and to respond to the drafts of other students in the group. The feedback that the students provide for each other is guided by criteria I give them, and each draft must subsequently be revised based on the peer feedback and my comments. In addition to posting the draft in their group's discussion board, each student also submits their paper to a plagiarism service, Turnitin.com. The use of such services is controversial, evoking criticism over ownership of student work and its potential as a punitive device for policing student research. However, I've found Turnitin.com to be a useful teaching tool, but only when students are allowed access to the "originality report," a report generated after a paper is submitted, which color codes and highlights text that may be found in sources elsewhere on the web. For example, if I comment that there is little of the student's own analysis of the primary texts by Melville in her draft, I can refer the student back to the Turnitin.com originality report to illustrate my point. Similarly, if a student has used a secondary source inappropriately, the originality report shows exactly where, and the revision process provides an opportunity for the student to correct this. In short, this service can be productive and useful in the hands of the students.

Multimedia Melville

An online discussion board is one of many ways to teach Melville electronically or to supplement a traditional classroom experience. One can also use web sources within the classroom. In "Teaching in the Wired Classroom" Marjorie Perloff writes,

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“Especially for those of us who teach courses that include visual or sound materials, the Internet can function as a distribution tool, allowing materials, previously unavailable, to enter the classroom as well as the dorm room” (3). Perloff describes bringing her laptop into the classroom and accessing websites with reproductions of rare, hard to find texts of Futurist manifestos and digital images of avant-garde art. Instructors who do not have access to such high-tech classroom equipment can create a companion course website using Blackboard, WebCT, or a weblog, and then post links to web sources that their students can access outside of the classroom.

For example, there are several multimedia internet sources that students of *Moby-Dick* might find useful. On the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s website, one can find the online exhibit, “Overview of American Whaling,” a combination of text and images of whaleboats. Also at New Bedford, “Heroes in the Ships: African Americans in the Whaling Industry,” contains photographs of whalers and of modern try-works. Although these photographs are mainly from the 1920s, this exhibit also includes several remarkable color drawings from a Black sailor’s sketchbook, circa 1864. A more extensive collection of images are searchable through a commercial site associated with the New Bedford Whaling museum (“Window Back Gallery”).

In addition to images and text, one can also find audio-enhanced sources online. Studio 360’s “American Icons: *Moby Dick*” is an online radio show produced by Public Radio International about contemporary artists and musicians influenced and inspired by *Moby-Dick*. Students can listen to the entire hour-long show (“Listen to Show”) or pick and choose which particular segments interest them by clicking on different audio links, which include “Moby-Dude,” a fictional high-school student’s two-minute synopsis of

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the book, dramatic readings of sections of *Moby-Dick*, interviews with Melville scholar Elizabeth Schultz, and contemporary political commentary by Melville biographer Andrew Delbanco (all available as a downloadable podcast as well). The “*Moby Dick*” page of PBS’s Voyage of the Odyssey website also contains audio files about the Essex disaster and video clips from the *Moby-Dick* film starring Patrick Stewart, including the scene when Ahab nails the doubloon to the mast and the scene when Moby Dick rams the Pequod. For a more off-beat experience, one can also listen to a computer-generated voice read *Moby-Dick* on the Project Gutenberg site, which consists of more than 150 mp3 files that are listed chronologically but not titled in any useful way. For example, the file titled “moby1037.mp3” is actually the beginning of “Cetology,” chapter 32, an infamously boring digression for many students, which is hardly rendered more exciting by the strange staccato and pauses of a computerized voice. Nevertheless, there is probably some clever way to use this material and, at the very least, some may find it a humorous counterpart to Patrick Stewart’s performance. (See Brogan’s “A Kaleidoscope of Digital American Literature” for a comprehensive overview of resources.)

In addition to providing access to supplementary internet resources, the electronic environment enables students to engage with primary texts in new ways. As Randy Bass notes, “Having literary and rhetorical texts in electronic form is beneficial because it allows you to do something with them: to search them, manipulate them, annotate them, to make them into hypertexts.” For example, Bass describes an assignment using word searches of electronic texts: students search for a common term in two different texts and then analyze the meaning of the word. As Bass notes, “such exercises tend to bring students back to the their printed texts with a heightened sense of language, and a greater

interest in interrogating the text for patterns.” The digital version of *Moby-Dick* created by Peter Batke, which includes an online search function, is particularly useful for such an assignment.

Other methods of digital text manipulation that may be used as a teaching tool include the creation of hypertexts. For example, Ann Woodlief has created a hypertext version of “Bartleby”: students can click on highlighted words to open floating text boxes of commentary or explanatory notes. While such a document can aid students’ initial interaction with the text, it can also function as a model for students, who would in turn create their own hypertext versions of a Melville work. Students might work collaboratively on a short story, or individually on a poem or an important passage from a longer work. Such an assignment does not require a high level of technological competency: Woodlief has easy instructions for creating hypertexts using the Insert /Comments function in MS Word, and instructions for the more complex process of creating hypertexts files in html (“Creating Webtexts”).

This strategy of extending the use of technology to students, rather than leaving it solely in the hands of the instructor, has other applications. While many instructors teaching literature online or in hybrid environments may have experience creating video or audio versions of their traditional in-class lectures, it is perhaps less common for students to participate using these technologies. A notable exception is a post-World War II American fiction class taught by Peter Schmidt at Swarthmore in which students create podcasts that combine a passage from a primary text read aloud and their analysis of the passage (Evans). These recordings, created with assistance from the office of academic computing, are posted by the individual students as MP3 files on a weblog page set up

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especially for the course. The podcasts then become part of the required “reading” for the course: in addition to reading the primary text, students must listen to two podcasts before coming to the class session devoted to that novel (Evans). By beginning class with a discussion of the podcasts and by referring back to them during his lecture, Schmidt gives the podcast authors necessary feedback and integrates the weblog assignments into the traditional classroom. Such an approach might be particularly useful in a large lecture course in which students have little in-class time to participate publicly on an individual level.

In conclusion, new forms of information technology and developments in online education will certainly continue to transform how we approach teaching Melville. As Melville writes in *Moby-Dick*, “small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity” (125). The process of building a “cyberinfrastructure for humanities” is a comparable grand erection (*Our Cultural Commonwealth*), and emerging technologies and the dynamic nature of literary study will “ever leave the copestone to eternity.” This is but “the draught of a draught” (125).

Selected Primary Electronic Texts

Note: In a fourteen week course, I assign the following texts, spending one week on each text, unless otherwise noted: “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”; “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”; *Moby-Dick* (4 weeks); “Bartleby the Scrivener”; *Benito Cereno* (2 weeks); *Billy Budd* (2 weeks). All of these texts are available free online, and I include links to the electronic versions of the appropriate text each week. However, as I explain to the students, reading significant amounts of text electronically is not a pleasant experience, and so I encourage them to buy an inexpensive collection of Melville’s shorter works (the HarperCollins Perennial edition of *Great Short Works of Herman Melville* contains all the texts they need and is under \$15), and I require that they purchase the Norton Critical edition of *Moby-Dick*, which contains explanatory footnotes that are indispensable to first-time readers.

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<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12384/12384-h/12384-h.htm> [also available in plaintext format]

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<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webtexts/bartleby/> [a unique hypertext version of “Bartleby”]

---. *Benito Cereno*. Prepared by Ken Roberts. Great Books Index. 11 January 1999. 20 September 2006. <http://books.mirror.org/melville/benitocereno/> [useful because Roberts has divided the text into chapters, not included in the original text, making the long work much easier to navigate and read through this medium]

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<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/bb/BillyBudd.html> [an ambitious scholarly hypertext with many links to lists explaining terms and allusions]

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the essay in *Harper's Magazine*, 1855, divided into two parts and accompanied by digital images, not too legible, of the original publication]

- . "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs." *Making of America*. Cornell University Library. 20 September 2006. <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/sgml/moa-idx?notisid=ABK4014-0009-16> [a clear and legible digital image of the essay in *Harper's Magazine*, 1854, which makes reading the essay more like a trip to the rare book room than an internet experience]

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