The Romance and Tragedy of American History: Analyzing Narrative from Day One

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HISTORY DONE WELL is culturally relevant. In part due to the shifting demographics on our college campuses, and in part due to the modern cultural and political climate, history professors have enhanced their approaches to make their once-lecture-heavy survey courses more culturally relevant to their students. Yet reframing the teaching of history is not new. Frequent improvement has been integral to the field since its origins, and scholarship calling specifically for survey redesign emerged throughout the late twentieth century. In the 1980s and 1990s, professional historians began incorporating varying content and competing perspectives to move beyond teacher-centered learning in the undergraduate classroom.[1] Ultimately, it appears that the urges—both old and new—to change one's approach to teaching the survey arose from a need to teach our students how to actively *do history*, instead of how to passively *learn history*.

Recent work to redesign the history survey demonstrates that historians and educators are grappling with ways to make their introductory courses more innovative and culturally relevant.[2] Active learning, document-based analysis, and more group work

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are among the oft-most cited examples of teaching to and through student skills. Primary sources, for example, can teach students that "one's worldview is not the worldview of others."[3] Another approach to enhancing the cultural relevance of one's content is to add more sources from divergent perspectives. For example, some recent survey texts seek to include a strong representation of non-Eurocentric, non-male voices. Primary sources from women, native people, people of color, and other diverse representatives have become more common in our most popular texts.

Other experts attempted to shift the survey's approach to meet students where they are, and improve their essential skills beyond the history classroom. Valerie Thaler's survey redesign acknowledges that today's college students might have significant "knowledge gaps" due to impatience, reading too quickly (and not enough), and their access to "short snippets" of information. As Thaler explains, when faced with large portions of text-heavy secondary source material, our students may not have the skills or training yet to read and analyze such content.[4] In a public K-12 setting, one team of educators recognized that the assigned reading alone for a typical Advanced Placement class was so cumbersome, that even if students were able to read all required material, it was unlikely they would have the time or energy to balance the hard work of analysis. These researchers decided it was imprudent to expect students to learn history by reading and simply seeing it modeled, so they restructured their class around a new formula for reasonable student workload.[5]

Others still attempt a culturally responsive framework, albeit not always with this stated intention. It appears that one popular redesign approach includes restructuring an entire class around one assignment, central question, or learning outcome. For example, Jennifer Cote radically changed her delivery by centering her class on a challenge to her students to *think like historians*. Her syllabus contained a single learning objective: "To construct historical knowledge though historical inquiry and interpretation." In her 2017 article, Cote reflects on the difficulties and pride students expressed because they were unaccustomed to taking action in a history class.[6]

It is evident that those of us seeking to reframe the survey are motivated by a nagging sense that our students need to learn more about how to *do history* regardless of their stated majors or career paths. The explanations for redesigning a survey tend to be centered

on this question: *How do I teach my students the skills required of a historian, in order to teach them essential life skills?* These essential skills include citizenship; contextualizing diverse historical accounts through evidence; critical and chronological thinking; developing relevant questions; document-based inquiry; evaluating multiple perspectives; information literacy; and synthesizing multiple sources, to name a few.[7]

One such example of reframing a survey course to teach critical thinking skills can be seen in Jennifer Frost's approach to teaching the Civil Rights Movement. Attempting to debunk the myth of a master narrative, but also to teach students to challenge their familiarity with such an approach, Frost placed the "Civil Rights Movement master narrative and criticisms of it at the center" of her course redesign.[8] Taking a familiar myth, like Christopher Columbus, Pocahontas, or Rosa Parks, and demonstrating the "real" story behind the legend can be a popular way to engage student interest into a particular topic, just as Frost revealed.

So, how to do it? How to start? Rewriting a course should follow a backward-redesign process. It should be constructed with the end in mind. If the goal is to help students create their toolbox of skills to analyze, synthesize, and question historical sources so that they may form knowledgeable and complex worldviews, we must first build a literacy-rich culture in our classrooms.[9] It is fundamental to the practice of history that students question sources and compare perspectives of both the historical actors and the tellers, in order to see history itself as a social construct. While it is apparent that historians are starting to talk about stepping away from the whiteboard, PowerPoint, and lectern, it is not evident that all of us know how. As the adage goes, we tend to best remember that which we teach, not that which we are taught. Therefore, I have made it my mission to stop teaching the way I was taught in most of my undergraduate classes. The teller of the history shapes the story, so if I want my students to understand the history, the story, and the work that goes into building such a tale, it's time to drop the microphone.

In this article, I introduce the activities I use in the first two class periods that demonstrate the narrative approaches to history. These in-class activities guide students to view the works of Hayden White and Joseph Campbell as instruments in their own toolkits when they themselves *do history*. They come back to these tools often in the

foundational assignments of this class—a storytelling and discussion activity, and the final exam, which I describe in this article. Relying on my training as an oral historian, but also incorporating aspects of literature, storytelling, and good old-fashioned document-based inquiry, these class activities and assignments seek to teach students that the teller of history shapes the story. Thus, the ownership and the *doing* of history shifts from me to the students within the first day of class.[10]

Day One, Lesson One: Romance, Tragedy, and Bias in the Telling of History

I start simple and set the stage early. Instead of calling attendance or launching into the expectations of the class, I begin the first day with the end in mind. I share our goals: students in my history classes will be learning the chronology, yes, but history also teaches us to dissect the narrative, interpret the silences, and question sources to understand bias and perspective. If these are among our end goals, I explain that the beginning should incorporate the end. Handing out sticky notes, I direct students to write the name of their favorite movie, television show, or book. Then, students introduce themselves to one or two others by stating their names, majors or career interests, and their favorite movies, television shows, or books.

After students have met each other, it's time to talk as a group. First, I provide a brief spoiler alert, and then ask each student to share his/her name and selections of favorite entertainment. Using a casual tone, I ask each student to share more about his/her favorite book or movie. I ask two questions: *Who is the hero?* and *How does it end?* When students share their favorite stories with the class, they typically include highlights as they identify the hero and the ending. Other students who are familiar with the same stories might add to the account, debate who the hero is, or agree with the assessment. This helps to demonstrate later that a story might be a shared text, but that analyses might often differ. These questions inevitably resurface later.

While the students are invested in the telling of their favorite and familiar stories, I introduce them to strategies of emplotment and framing. Trying not to overwhelm them with historiography, I explain that if we outline a few methods of narrative analysis, they will understand more about the organization of the class and

assignments before delving into historical content. Our project on the first day is to acquaint ourselves with the idea that the narrative is suspect—in part, because the narrative is in many ways a result of human nature, and humans, historians though we may be, are biased. I encourage the students to see that this work can and should begin on day one. We start with Hayden White's four major aspects of emplotment, while also referencing Shakespeare and Greek philosophy.[11]

Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire

To begin, I ask the students to think about their sticky notes. Would their chosen entertainment be a romance? A tragedy? Comedy? Satire? I write the four categories on the whiteboard and ask students to place their sticky notes under the category where their entertainment would fit best. Then, beginning with satire, I jump right in, asking for the owner of each sticky note to explain his/her choice. A light debate typically ensues, and I take notice when some students appear slightly uncomfortable. I keep moving through the discussion until one unsatisfied student seeks clarification, asking something like, "What is satire?" I then acknowledge that, yes, we need to define these terms. And then I simply move on to a new category. This naturally begins to frustrate the students ever so slightly, which triggers their curiosity and piques their interest. Some look up the definitions of satire on their phones. Others start talking to each other about what they think constitutes a romance or a comedy. By creating this confusion, I am employing a strategy for reading and comprehension called an anticipation guide.[12] Anticipation guides find ways to create buy-in to the content, so students care about what they are about to read. Following this usually robust discussion of the entertainment in each category, I articulate useful and succinct definitions for each group. Below, you can see my broad definitions of each term, and the TV shows, movies, and books that most commonly come up in a variety of classes each semester.

Romance: A hero's or heroine's triumph over evil in an epic tale of self-discovery (e.g., *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, James Bond films, *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, *Black Panther*, *The Karate Kid*, *Scandal*).

Tragedy: A hero's or heroine's failure resulting from his/her own restrictions and the limitations of the world (e.g., *Titanic*, *Breaking Bad*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and other documentaries, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Game of Thrones*, *Survivor*).

Comedy: A story of balance, harmony, and ensemble success, with the hero typically being an entire group of characters or an inanimate object (e.g., *Friends*, *Modern Family*, *black-ish*, *Seinfeld*, *Full House*, *Cheers*).

Satire: A combination of irony and humor, satire relies on the assumption that the audience is in on the joke, making the hero the audience itself (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Office*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, *Chappelle's Show*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*).

As you can see, much of this is up to interpretation. Students argue over stories like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic*, because they both provide examples of complex perspectives. How you interpret the ending depends on who you see as the hero. These films provide the perfect opportunity to engage students in a dialogue about perspective, which leads us to narrative and the telling of a story. At this point, I allow the students to get up and move their sticky notes to new categories if they prefer. Then, I ask students who chose to do this to explain their changes. This physical action allows us all in the room to visualize that one sticky note (story) can be told in a variety of ways, depending on the context and the teller.

Next, I ask the students to predict how we will learn and tell American history this semester. They consider the definitions of each term, and choose which category our class content should fit in. This activity links the previous discussion on the framing of popular stories to a conversation about the narrative approaches to history. For some students, this might be the first time they have heard about the human influence over the telling of history. It might also be the first time that they are asked to weigh in on how a college class is taught. Most students lean on their past experiences in high school or grade school and predict that the class will tell history in a romantic or comedic lens. Others hope that a collegiate approach might emphasize irony or satire. A few students request to know the dark underbelly of history, conveying their hope for a tragic interpretation.

Following this discussion, I set some parameters. Using a marker, I cross out "satire" and "comedy" on the whiteboard. I try to explain that satire relies on ironic humor, or the assumption that the audience is "in" on the joke, and we should not assume intimacy in the academic environment. Comedy is dismissed next because it is an easy target. Our students recognize that, too often, history is told with clean endings and harmoniously tied bows. Black history, for example, is squeezed into one celebratory month, with only a few major leaders and a few pieces of legislation highlighted each year. At this point in their academic careers, our students are hungry for grit, depth, and what they commonly refer to as the "real story." I keep the crossed-out terms on the board, however, to reference back that these narrative devices will be evident in the secondary and primary sources, so we cannot completely erase satire and comedy from our analysis.

Next, I offer some advance instruction. In the weeks to follow, I share with the class, our semester will be built around an analysis of romance and tragedy in American history. This is a call to students to begin the process of critiquing the way history is told, instead of reciting a simple chronology of facts, dates, and famous historical characters. This can all be somewhat abstract for first-time college students, especially those who have not taken a history class in years and are expecting what they call "old-school lectures" when they walk into my classroom. However, if the foundation is well-built, the students will have tools to employ when analyzing historic events, primary sources, and the narratives used in framing a textbook.

The benefit to this approach is its versatility. We can consider complete units of history—civil rights, second-wave feminism, the Mexican-American War, for example—all the while trying to identify the arguments being made by the historians writing the summaries. Is this a story of romance or a tragedy? *Who is the hero? How does it end?* At the same time, students can consider individual sources and look for romantic and tragic elements. For example, a student might lead a discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis by launching a complex conversation about Turner's perspective. She might highlight full lines of Turner's speech and argue if Turner saw the romantic heroism of the west, or the limitations of a frontier lost to civilization. As always, the debate can boil down to two questions: *Who is the hero? How does it end?*

In the case of an introductory survey course, *America is the hero.* How it ends remains to be seen. Over sixteen weeks, America the hero faces a series of challenges. On the final day of the semester, we ask ourselves—"American history: romance or tragedy?" For sixteen weeks, they will grapple with this very concept, and on their final exam, they must take a stand. Thus, these narrative frameworks create a literary and intellectual hook for students of American history. Here is a way to keep students engaged and, in some ways, entertained through multiple discussions of Revolutionary War battles and persisting Native American resistance during the Cultural Revolution.

Day Two, Lesson Two:
History as The Hero's Journey

When we meet on the second day of class, students have been introduced to themes of narrative and emplotment. They have grappled with the concept that stories in history might be told through romantic, comedic, satirical, or tragic lenses, but they might not yet be convinced that America itself can be studied as a narrative subject. Using the work of Joseph Campbell, I present to the students an argument that a sixteen-week course and its resources are also plotted within a recognizable narrative formula. The goal of this second meeting is to end with students questioning how they've been taught American history in the past. If they question their own myths and assumptions, they can begin to see how multiple viewpoints have shaped both the past itself and the telling of the past. In the paragraphs that follow, I provide the major claims that I present in the second day's lecture and a general explanation of how I do it.

If America is the hero, its history will likely be told in a familiar narrative framework. Regardless of romantic and tragic emplotment, the country and its identity will follow the trajectory of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey.[13] Campbell's classic study of the common narrative arc from a hero's ordinary world to grand adventure may be rooted in mythology, but this literary tool can be applied to the study of history as well. To begin, I ask the students to think back to the movie or TV show they identified on the first day. They might recall the two questions we asked: *Who is the hero?*

How does it end? I ask for one student to volunteer his/her movie for analysis. For example, one volunteer might offer to analyze her favorite movie, *The Karate Kid*. I ask this student to come to the front of the room, and I hand her a colored whiteboard marker. I then ask the rest of the class to refer to the table of contents within their textbooks. I select another student to come to the front, and hand him a whiteboard marker of a different color. I will be using a black marker. I introduce the activity. I will diagram the general structure of the hero's journey on the board, stopping to summarize each phase. The first student volunteer will then describe her hero's plot and point on the board as it aligns with each phase, writing a two- to five-word description next to the diagram. After she does, the rest of the class will look through their textbook's contents and suggest to the second volunteer a selection from the text that also fits within the stages I described. They may use chapter titles, sub-headings, or the names of primary sources. The goal is to find the best fit. The second student will write the title of the selected sections in the same area of the whiteboard.

Our plan is to use some loose interpretation to align our history text within Campbell's framework. A general scan of some respectable American history survey texts demonstrates this outline well. Several chapter titles and selected primary sources from *The American Yawp*, *Give Me Liberty!*, and *Major Problems in American History* provide excellent examples of the framing of American history within the hero's journey.[14] Below, the key phases of the hero's journey are briefly described, along with some of the best examples students have brought forward describing their favorite movies, as well as observations we have made of the chapter titles and primary sources that fall precisely within this narrative structure.

Origins: The Ordinary World

It starts with the preface. Campbell calls it "The Ordinary World." In this initial phase, the students meet their hero and briefly learn about the hero's origin story. Daniel from *The Karate Kid* lives in New Jersey. Cinderella is tortured by her extended family. Oscar from *Fruitvale Station* has an underwhelming start to his last day on earth. Students looking through the *The American Yawp* notice the first chapter, "The New World," begins:

> American history begins with the first Americans. But where do their stories start? Native Americans passed stories down through the millennia that tell of their creation and reveal the contours of indigenous belief.[15]

In one class, a student exclaimed, "Dr. C., they're asking the same questions about heroes and endings!" The text provides a short account of the Salinan origin story, and the chapter includes two additional origin stories in the primary source reader, along with several credible suggestions for additional reading.[16] Volume 2 of Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!* introduces readers to a new world for white and black Southerners. Its first chapter, titled "'What is Freedom?': Reconstruction, 1865-1877," paints a brief portrait of the collapsing South and General Sherman's Special Field Order 15.[17] This new world for African Americans is used as a narrative device to teach students to question their definitions of freedom, independence, and America itself, while also learning of Reconstruction-era policies. Perhaps my favorite for this initial stage of America on the hero's journey is the primary source, "The Iroquois Describe the Beginning of the World," located in *Major Problems in American History*'s first chapter of the first volume.[18] This primary source document is ripe for Campbell's framework and the initial stages of the hero's journey, because it provides students with a translated interpretation of the Iroquois creation story. Upon reading it, students are faced with questions about validity regarding who wrote it and why, as well as how the Iroquois saw themselves in history, in America, and as they negotiated with newcomers.

Adventure: Calls, Refusals, and Meeting the Mentor

According to Campbell, the hero does not cross the threshold of his/her ordinary world until he/she is first called to adventure, refuses the call, and then meets a mentor who helps him/her accept the call. Daniel doesn't like living in California. Katherine Goble is assigned to a major space exploration project and faces initial racism and sexism. Walter White is told he has cancer and ignores the diagnosis at first, though he eventually steps over the threshold into a dangerous world of drugs. This initial call to adventure can be seen in American history through a series of colliding cultures, resistance strategies, or global isolationism in the early

years of the Republic. *The American Yawp*'s sixteenth chapter, which immediately follows its chapter on Reconstruction and thus introduces the second half of the survey, is called "Capital and Labor."[19] Adventure calls Americans westward, as they attempt to rebuild the economy and national spirit through industry, railroad lines, and industrialization. However, within the first few lines of this chapter, a refusal of this adventure is referenced with a robust discussion of labor strikes, unrest, and class inequality. Challenges faced by the emerging powerhouse nation are discussed at length in this chapter, which ends on a note regarding the new world our hero has entered: "But whether winners or losers in the new economy, all Americans reckoned in some way with their new industrial world."[20] Foner's first volume of *Give Me Liberty!* includes a second chapter on "Beginnings of English America, 1607-1660," along with a strong introduction of English life and the religious, political, and economic motivations for English colonists to move west.[21] Yet within the first few pages of the chapter, Foner describes the social crisis facing potential colonists as they considered moving to America, and the challenges faced in the New World by indentured servants, American Indians, and new tenants. Told primarily through the perspective of a growing English empire, the chapter ends with the final acceptance of the call to adventure. "The next century," it argues, "would be a time of crisis and consolidation, as the population expanded, social conflicts intensified, and Britain moved to exert greater control."[22]

Perhaps one of the most significant players in Campbell's hero's journey is the mentor, or spiritual guide. Most romantic and tragic films, books, and well-known tales feature an older and wiser support to the hero. Yoda, Fairy Godmothers, Mr. Miyagi, Oda Mae Brown, and Gandalf the Grey all come to mind. This is typically a difficult part to cast in a traditional survey, as students look to find specific mentors to pinpoint along the way. However, American history is rife with spiritual chaperons, expert leaders, and wiser individuals who inform and influence key players. For example, entire courses are devoted to Abigail Adams' attempt to guide her husband's foundational decisions. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* is still relevant as the rallying cry of the American Revolution, just as the significance of both General Braddock and Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben are highlighted in the telling of George Washington's military leadership. In an abstract way, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King

Jr. are constantly used, reused, and misappropriated to give credence to centuries of black resistance and the freedom struggle.

Moreover, stories without known or obvious mentors tend to instead highlight the role of the voice from within, a higher power. In the TV series *Dexter*, the main character is visited by his deceased father at least once an episode, and the father's significance is a thread throughout the series in the form of constant voice-overs. Dexter narrates his every internal thought and decision for audiences, referring to his dad's "code." Similar examples abound throughout the telling of American history. The pervasive role of Manifest Destiny during rapid American westward expansion and conquest, for example, can be analyzed in this framework. Moral and urgent calls to colonize, civilize, and save people across the globe can be found in documents like Jane Addams' "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements" (1892), Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" (1899), and in many Native American cries to arms, like Pontiac's "Calls for War" (1763). For the duration of the American journey, heroism as part of the nation's duty, identity, and significance is debated. Take for example, the Vietnam War. In the context of understanding the war and America's role in the Pacific, students can analyze American romanticism and its inferred spiritual guide, from many sides of the argument. A common image found in textbook chapters on the Vietnam War era is Bernie Boston's 1967 photograph of George Harris placing a flower in the rifle of a National Guardsman at the March at the Pentagon.[23] Foner's chapter titled "The Sixties, 1960-1968" features this image, with a discussion of clashing viewpoints, moral righteousness, and the contradictions that existed in the era regarding free speech and patriotism.[24] Using this image, students can discuss real or imagined spiritual guides informing these viewpoints as people clashed at anti-war protests during this decade.

Crisis: Tests, Allies, and Enemies

Upon crossing the threshold, the hero moves toward what will eventually become his/her culminating, self-defining crisis. To demonstrate the training of our hero, Campbell establishes that tests, allies, and enemies play a significant role. Daniel learns to wax on and wax off. Rocky scales the steps. Nettie runs away. Both the

Spanish-American War and World War I are typically portrayed as early attempts by America to interact on a global scale, all the while guiding the reader toward the epic battlefields of the Second World War. Within these discussions are also frequent references to how the country will eventually come to understand itself as a global economic and political power. For example, Foner's *Give Me Liberty!* presents the Spanish-American War within a chapter titled "Freedom's Boundaries, At Home and Abroad, 1890-1900," in a section called "Becoming a World Power."[25] A later chapter, titled "Safe for Democracy: The United States and World War I, 1916-1920," follows with discussions about American intervention, neutrality, and the war at home.[26] Likewise, *The American Yawp*'s coverage of the Spanish-American War is all but contained within a sweeping discussion of American imperialism and how such expansionist efforts reframed the identity of a new emerging global force.[27]

The Central Ordeal: Slaying the Dragon

At this point, the hero faces a culminating predicament. More than just a conflict, the challenge puts the hero in an identity crisis. Frodo loses faith that he can destroy the ring. Moana gives up her quest. N.W.A breaks up. It is, to use the title of a textbook I have referenced often, a *Major Problem in American History* and a defining moment in the hero's life. A specific elective class on civil rights, women's movements, or globalization might already have the central ordeal identified in the course title. However, introductory American history classes discover their own dragons. This moment of the course sequence—the culminating identity crisis or the most important question guiding the textbook—typically betrays the author's (or the educator's) biases. Engaged students might be able to point out this crisis rather easily. For example, *The American Yawp* uses action verbs to denote the major crises faced by the hero within each of the two halves of the survey. In the chapter leading up to Civil War, "The Sectional Crisis" brilliantly presents the true catastrophe of *identity* faced by northern, southern, and western Americans.[28] In some cases, the slaying of the dragon is depicted through the utter destruction of the American South, making the Civil War not the central ordeal; rather, it is the lack of cohesion among Americans about their country, their economy, and their identity

that is the true crisis. When framed this way, students can discuss the rupturing national identity along racial, economic, and regional lines, instead of simply quantifying the Civil War as a binary conflict over slavery, between the sides of good and evil.

In the case of the second half of the American history survey course, a classic central ordeal may not be as obvious. Nonetheless, some texts persist in framing a specific event or era as the apex of action. For instance, *The American Yawp*'s chapter, "The Unraveling," leads reader in a discussion of fracturing national identity within the generation following World War II.[29] Affluence and civil rights are portrayed as challenges along the way, while the political catastrophes of the 1970s, accompanied by Americans losing faith in their leaders and subsequent identity politics, arise as culminating crises. This central ordeal may not be a classic war, but it is *central* in and of itself, as it shapes the country's understanding of its place in history in the coming chapters.

Actualization and Achievement: The Final Chapters

Following this identity crisis, the hero faces a few smaller hurdles that test this newfound self-actualization. Having falling in love, Cinderella returns home and loses a slipper. Inman chases a member of the Home Guard through the snowy forest. Rose refuses her family as the rescue ship pulls into New York Harbor. With regard to history, these smaller hurdles are typically covered in the final chapters, with titles usually referencing the recent or contemporary past. Some of these seemingly smaller challenges may loom large in the memories of contemporary Americans, but they are often discussed in the framework of America continuing its quest with renewed confidence. Globalization might be discussed as an extension of American imperialism, though heroic advances in technology and information are used to justify the journey. The rise of domestic and international terrorism, the government's failure to appropriately respond to victims of Hurricane Katrina, and the outbreak of AIDS across the country are often highlighted in these final chapters as more struggles—smaller though they are from the central ordeal—that challenge the evolution the hero has already accomplished.

The hero, at this point, emerges with a symbol of achievement. Modern American texts reference the election of Barack Obama

immediately following Hurricane Katrina or the perceived unity following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Chapter titles about the election of Obama frequently employ the term "hope," not only as an homage to his iconic campaign slogans, but also to frame the most recent years in American history as ever so slightly romantic. Our hero, America, has advanced through a series of struggles, and has made it to the other side victorious. In texts on early American history, the final chapters characteristically reference the segregation, intimidation, and violence that typified the South following the Civil War. In contrast, Reconstruction is framed as an effort made by the heroic Union following the epic struggle of the Civil War. Specialized texts also follow this narrative. Reconstruction comes to an end in a text about the long freedom struggle in a chapter titled "Becoming a People."[30] A Mexican-American history text published in 2011 ends with sections called "Losing Their Fear" and "The Stairway to Heaven."[31]

By the end of the second day, the students' reactions tend to vary. Some are excited to see that the study of history can be so interpretive. Others are annoyed that I am making it so complicated. Within a few more class periods, however, I start to hear students question primary sources in a way that is rewarding and thrilling. Throughout the semester, each student is charged with leading a discussion of the assigned reading, and I have been very happy to evaluate the complexities of their observations. They say things like, "Columbus definitely saw himself as the romantic hero in this journal entry." I recently heard a student muse, "Thomas Newe's version of life in Carolina was stark, but it wasn't tragic. Notice how he ends with such hope, requesting to hear from his family soon." One of my favorite student-led discussions included the question, "Which seemed more significant to you—the fact that Harriet Jacobs became a celebrity and romantic hero through her writing, or the tragic and violent experiences she documented?"

Concluding with Historical Narrative

On the first day of class, the syllabus contains the final exam question. Fastidious students might schedule the exam and note the question in their phone calendars, while others may circle it, make a mental note of it, or disregard it completely. Regardless of their initial

reaction to learning the final exam question on the first day, by the last day, they know what I am going to ask. Over the course of sixteen weeks, we have asked ourselves, individually and collectively:

American History: ROMANCE or TRAGEDY?

Of course, there are many arguments for saying "both" or "neither." But tightening down to a binary—dualistic though it may be—draws a boundary around our discussion. Thus, the students are challenged to analyze sources looking for evidence of triumph, self-discovery, and the epic battle of good over evil. They also comb through primary documents, images, and scholarly accounts to discover language describing loss, limitations, failure, and destruction. As we realize throughout the semester, historical accounts almost always contain evidence of romance and tragedy. Our preferred textbooks intentionally provide primary sources that tell stories and provide juicy content. But the surprising and exhilarating reality is that the textbooks themselves employ this language as well. The American odyssey is told as just that: an epic adventure with sweeping morals and lessons to be learned. Those of us rethinking the survey have echoed the following concern: historians know this; do students? In analyzing the story of America through dueling lenses of triumph and failure, students begin to recognize that indeed, the teller is shaping the story. They now have a guide to challenge their own previously held assumptions that American history is simply a chronology of facts and names. Moreover, they are now motivated to challenge the experts, the teachers, and themselves when *doing history*.

On the final exam, students can choose romance or tragedy, but they must choose one. The only way to fail a submitted and correctly formatted final is to select "both" or "neither." Students almost always provide nuance in their responses, but I know they have gotten it right when they use well-selected primary sources, quotes from class discussion, and examples from the text and lectures to explain whether the story of our hero—America—should be told as a series of limits and failures, or a triumph of self-discovery.

Notes

1. Bradford R. Collins, "Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey: A Practical, Somewhat Theoretical, and Inspirational Guide," *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 23; William Cronon, Howard R. Lamar, Katherine G. Morrissey, and Jay Gitlin, "Women and the West: Rethinking the Western History Survey Course," *Western Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (July 1986): 269-290.

2. Michael Lovorn and Veronica Dristas, "The Mt. Lebanon Project: Partnering to Re-Envision the Teaching of World History," *The History Teacher* 50, no. 3 (May 2017): 331-358; Elizabeth Barrow and Kathryn Caprino reference "perspective consciousness, or recognizing that one's worldview is not the worldview of others" (p. 324) and point to the importance of using primary sources to represent and teach multiple perspectives, but they rightly point out that, "if the subjects of primary sources are unfamiliar, not all students may be able to completely grasp the concepts of perspective consciousness." Elizabeth Barrow and Kathryn Caprino, "Developing Perspective Consciousness via Middle Grades Trade Books that Feature the Global South(s): A Case for Using Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out and Back Again*," *The History Teacher* 51, no. 2 (February 2018): 323-348. Valerie Thaler suggests course redesign to meet student skill sets, pique interest, and bridge knowledge gaps, and rightly demonstrates that today's traditional students are "impatient learners," who toggle and multitask, and have been taught to learn in short sequences. They are prone to distractions and are used to absorbing information in small "snippets." Valerie S. Thaler, "Teaching Historical Research Skills to Generation Y: One Instructor's Approach," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 2 (February 2013): 267-281.

3. Barrow and Caprino, "Developing Perspective Consciousness," 324.

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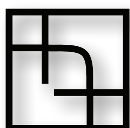

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