

Week 4 Reading Questions: Reactions to Science

Opening statement: The short stories we are reading this week are long and intense. Please make time to deal with both of them. The Hawthorne story is difficult simply because of his archaic language use, though the story itself is fairly straightforward. The Pynchon story is purposely complex. He takes science to a new extreme. Thus, if you can ‘attempt’ to read and process Pynchon, I’ll be impressed. If you have trouble with it, don’t worry: he wrote it to be troublesome.

Reading Change: I only recommended one of the readings, the Ammons poem, “Motion Which Disestablishes Organizes Everything,” because it is nearly as complex as Pynchon. I still recommend this reading, but will not hold anyone officially accountable for reading it.

General Questions:

How do attitudes towards science contrast to those about religion? What is the prevailing attitude towards science? How do different authors view science and why?

Whitman, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (1110)

From a formal standpoint, what do you notice the first four lines have in common? How do they differ from the second half of the poem?

How important is his use of the word “unaccountable” in the second half of the poem? How does this relate (possibly) to his experience with the stars? [Note the silence in the last line – does this seem a negative or positive silence?]

What overall attitude about scientific thinking emerges from this poem?

Poe, “Sonnet – To Science” (491)

This poem follows the form of a Shakespearian sonnet (you can tell because it ends with the final two lines rhyming and commenting on the rest of the poem). This is interesting as a place to begin because Shakespeare’s sonnets were about love. Does this seem like a love poem?

In the first four lines, Science is spoken to as a living thing (personified). Poe does not pull any punches – what is his attitude towards science?

The rest of the poem acts as the lament of a jilted lover – what reasons does Poe give to support his opening position?

Finally, the poem comes back to the poet in the last two lines, and Poe tells us what all of this leads him to: what position has Science left him in?

Overall, what is his attitude towards science? [Hint: how does poetry differ from science?]

Dickinson, 185 (Faith is a fine invention) (1137)

Some of you commented on Dickinson’s attitude toward religion last week, using words like whimsical and distanced. She is no Bradstreet, accepting the will of God.

Why is “faith” in quotes? Could it have anything to do with the word “invention” at the end of the line? What does it mean for faith to be an invention?

What does the word “prudent” mean? How is science, then, different from faith?

Overall, what view of science emerges, especially in contrast to the other two poets?

Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter" (641)

WARNING I: The first page of this story is not the actual story, but an excerpt from the introduction to a book of short stories. It is not required and does not play a direct role in this story, though it does let you see what Hawthorne thinks he is doing, if you are interested.

WARNING II: This story is long and driven by plot devices. As it proceeds, keep your eye on two things: first, the comments on science, and, second, the love story that evolves. How do the two comment on each other?

General Short Story questions: 1) Who is the narrator/what is the point-of-view (POV)? 2) What is the setting? How does the setting evolve and how does it help how the story plays out? 3) Note the distinct character types. How do the types of characters help drive the story (in other words, is Dr. Rappaccini a flat or round character – are these people humans or caricatures?)?

644 – We meet the doctor and his daughter here. Note the religious reference to Eden and Adam: how is this reference eventually ironic, considering what is in the garden? What relationship does our scientist have to the original Adam?

645 – In Dante's *Inferno*, an epic poem, he constantly seeks Beatrice, his love. Why does Giovanni find this Beatrice enticing?

646/647 – How does the scientific rivalry here thicken the plot?

648 – With "The Black Cat" in mind, how do the details here help to make us wonder what is real? How do they advance the plot of the story?

649 – Note the long emotional summation our narrator offers here: how does this drive the story forward?

650/651 – How does Professor Baglioni's observation, followed immediately by access to the secret door, drive the plot? How important is the psychology of a young man to how the story works?

653/654 – If by this point you don't want to shake Giovanni into acceptance, then you aren't reading closely. What is our opinion of him here? Why does Beatrice shriek at him?

654 – Note the second reference to Eden, by Baglioni. How does this change how we view the setting of the story?

656/657 – Why does Giovanni have a hard time facing the truth that Baglioni tells him? When he gives Giovanni the "little silver vase," note how obvious it is that this 'prop' will be important. Again, focus on how the plot moves forward.

658/659 – Speaking of props, how does the mirror function? Does it seem reasonable for a young man in love to act this way? If not reasonable, does it at least seem probable?

660 – How important is Giovanni's ignorance to the climax of this story? What is your opinion of these characters as we head to the end?

661 – How does science (and scientists) fare at the end of this story? How is science treated throughout, and how does this ending make a comment on science as a whole?

Pynchon, "Entropy" (2221)

As I keep mentioning, this story is complex. Instead of asking specific question by page, I will give you some general guidance to help your reading experience.

First, note the point-of-view (third person, omniscient): why is it crucial to be able to move through so many characters' perceptions? How do the characters we see the most move the story forward?

Second, note the setting. The story takes place in Washington, DC, in an apartment complex. We learn the disconnected stories of two apartments in the building, which are very different. What attitude about Washington, DC emerges from the story?

Third, a hint about the science in this story: as your textbook tells you, this story focuses on theories about thermodynamics and heat-death. The ‘entropy’ of the title involves the gradual cooling of the universe. How does this depressing brand of scientific thinking drive the story forward?

As you read this story, focus on how the two very different apartments interact. We have a closed ecosystem in one apartment and an insane party in the other. Entropy is about the inevitable loss of energy to any system (or group of people, or country). As circumstances get more bizarre, moving from the possible to the improbable, where does the energy go? What dramatic moment happens at the very end and what does it signify?

Even through the confusion of this story, I hope that a view of science emerges for you. Does science seem like an answer? Does science defeat the characters? Does science lead to anything positive in this story? If you aren’t sure, that’s ok, but some general ideas should hopefully emerge.

Ammons, “Motion Which Disestablishes Organizes Everything” (1967)

Even though I made this reading optional, I wanted to include a few points, since it might help make the Pynchon story make more sense.

William James is the father of modern Psychology, so the science in question here is psych. If you read the poem, you will see that the problem it addresses is motion. Motion and change are under consideration. He concentrates on the idea of “brightness,” which makes people happy, but quickly explains that we have a hard time being genuinely bright. This is why, in the morning, when someone asks how you are, we usually say “fine” or “marvelous morning” – because it is easier to tell a pleasant lie than to really share oneself.

By the end of the poem, he discusses the idea of happiness, which is where he relates to Pynchon. His vision of happiness is a stable, static picture of a girl who “projects / golden / worlds.” However, he points out that the poet usually denies us an unchanging reality and instead points out (like Bryant from last week) that people die and love “falters” and “how the eyes of hungry children feed / the flies.” In Pynchon, the attempt to keep things going indefinitely fails, just as it fails for poets. Things keep happening and changing.

In other words, the world cannot be stable and good because things keep moving, but this motion of constant change is what organizes the world. There is no way to stop the motion or to freeze a happy experience. Thus, science here is about accepting the way things are, even if that way isn’t perfect, much like Bradstreet accepts God’s plan. The different is, Bradstreet had God, whereas this poem doesn’t mention God, only the dream of golden, wonderful worlds.

Aren’t you glad I unassigned this complex reading?

General Comments:

This week is more challenging than previous weeks, but try your best to read each work and to get a sense of things. Next week, when we move on to war, things will calm back down. Good luck with the readings.