

Depicting Veterans in Early American Literature

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Characters endowed by their creators with veteran status have been mobilized for a variety of rhetorical effects and purposes in American literature. As early as Colonel Manly in Royall Tyler's 1787 play, *The Contrast*, authors have used veteran status to associate their characters with the most salient values, insights, and behaviors attributed to veterans in the author's milieu. This module will explore several literary depictions of veterans that reveal a transition in their characterization from the American Revolution to the postbellum era.

#1—Prigs and Patriots in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast: A Comedy*

Though this play is a derivative revision of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, Tyler transposes the hero into the guise of a Revolutionary War veteran, Colonel Henry Manly. Manly's characterization as a virtuous American exemplar includes scenes where he remarks on his work to obtain pensions for soldiers who served under his command. Tyler had two periods of service in the Massachusetts militia that helped inform his characterization of Colonel Manly.

Readings: the entire play, *The Contrast*

Questions: What is the relationship between Manly's virtues and his military service? In what ways does the play suggest Manly is a model for Americans without military service? How do the critiques of his sister undercut Manly's role as democratic exemplar? In the end, is he a hero or a prig?

#2—Hapless Veterans and Ungrateful Nations: Melville's *Israel Potter*

Melville's fiction is full of veteran characters, but Revolutionary War veteran Israel Potter is undoubtedly his most fully developed. In this novel, Melville experiments with the practice more famously perfected in *Benito Cereno* of adapting historical memoirs into scathing novelizations.

Readings:

- selections from *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, Herman Melville, 1855.
- selections from, *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter*, Henry Trumbull, 1824

Questions: After comparing Melville's adaptation of Trumbull's biography to the original, list some of the major differences in emphasis and presentation. What new traits emerge in Melville's retelling? In 1855, Melville's literary career was foundering. What factors might have caused Melville stake so much on his retelling of a Revolutionary soldier's life? In what ways do

ingratitude to talent and services rendered link Melville and Potter? How does Melville's period of service in the U.S. Navy (1843-1844) affect the inclusion of incidents in the novel?

#3—The Political Civil War Veteran: Hawthorne and Tourgée

In an 1862 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Nathaniel Hawthorne predicted that after the war, "military notoriety, will be the measure of all claims to civil distinction. One bullet-headed general will succeed another in the Presidential chair; and veterans will hold the offices at home and abroad." Hawthorne's wry prediction allowed that military service might provide as good a pretext for the public trust than "the many shams on which men have heretofore founded their claims to public regard." Though history proved him right, novelists were slow to incorporate veterans as politicians. In 1879, Albion Tourgée, a Union veteran from Ohio, created two semi-autobiographical veteran characters in an early novel that highlight the transition of ideological authority from veterans as deliberative leaders to ones whose combat experiences qualify them for public respect but don't inherently qualify them for office. Tourgée displaces his political career as a carpetbagger in North Carolina to an Ohio setting so as to make his critique of the political utility of veteran status less constrained by the unique political dynamics of Reconstruction.

Readings: "Chiefly about War Matters," Nathaniel Hawthorne in July 1862 *Atlantic Monthly* *Figs and Thistles: The Story of an Earnest Man*. Albion Tourgée. Chapters 38-43 and 53-57.

Questions: In what ways is military service seen as a qualification for political office in "War Matters"? Does Tourgée's description of "King Caucus" confirm or deny Hawthorne's prediction? Are the virtues and faults of Tourgée's veteran characters the product of military service or other circumstances?

#4—Ventriloquizing the Veteran in Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham*

William Dean Howells experimented with veteran characters in two of his novels of national and economic critique, Colonel Silas Lapham in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884) and Brevet Corporal Berthold Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and the heightening of the character's military trauma and political rhetoric from the first novel to the second puts Howells in the vanguard of a new stage in veteran depictions and in a related cultural struggle over ideological authority.

Readings: *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, W.D. Howells, Chapters 1, 13-14, 23, and 27.

Questions: What is the relationship between Lapham's military service and his business career? How do wartime experiences shape Lapham's relations with Jim Millon's family? What role does Lapham's military service play in the Corey's reception of his family? In what way is Lapham's moral rise also a military retreat?