



Cooper, L. A. (2001). Review of *Literature, class, and culture: An anthology*. *Workplace*, 7, 177-178.

REVIEW OF *LITERATURE, CLASS, AND CULTURE: AN ANTHOLOGY*

Edited by Ann Fitzgerald and Paul Lauter

Lisa A. Cooper

As Tony Scott aptly comments in [his review of *Literature, Class, and Culture*](#), this anthology “will help teachers to answer the call [. . .] for more public awareness concerning how class continues to shape consciousness and define relationships” (par. 2). As one such teacher concerned with class and work issues, I found this anthology to be a superb representation of working-class writings. As a comprehensive collection of fiction, poetry, theoretical essays, and biographical narratives, the anthology lends itself well to either literature or literature-oriented composition classes.

I used Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald’s collection for my sophomore level intermediate composition class. Along with a rhetoric textbook, *Literature, Class, and Culture* was utilized as a reader that provided not only important forays into working-class studies but also valuable models of writing strategies that the students themselves were employing. The theme of the course was work and social class, and I found this particular anthology an excellent introduction to this topic. Teaching at an institution where most undergraduates are not attuned to issues of social class, *Literature, Class, and Culture* served the students well because it brought in canonical writers such as Herman Melville and William Faulkner, and it also introduced more obscure authors such as Sue Doro and Tom Wayman. This balance between traditional and lesser-known writers is perhaps one of the most significant assets of the collection. Another advantage of the text is its inclusion of various genres of writing. So often in our literature and writing classes, we focus on merely fiction or poetry. However, *Literature, Class, and Culture* very appropriately extends this scope to also include essays, speeches, autobiographies, and songs. I know my own students were excited when they had the opportunity to read song lyrics by Dolly Parton and Woody Guthrie alongside the fiction of Edith Wharton and the poetry of Jack London. This extension of the traditional sense of literature allows students to see that writing about class and work has a very important role in the realm of public discourse.

One of the challenges of teaching working-class writing and literature is providing a contextual framework by which our students can understand the nature of the discipline. Often, the transition into working-class studies is not a smooth one. As Laura Hapke points out, in working-class writings, students’ belief systems are called into question as they read works “that challenge rather than celebrate upward mobility,” and upward mobility and this idea of a shared notion of success is what most middle- or upper-class students have been taught to give credence to in capitalistic society (146). *Literature, Class, and Culture*, however, supplies a context by not only providing helpful introductions to the sections but also comprehensive, historical biographies of the authors included. This, in my opinion, is one of the greatest strengths of the anthology. Tracking down information on working-class authors is often a challenge in itself and Lauter and Fitzgerald’s anthology readily provides this information for students and instructors. For example, in Kenneth Fearing’s biography, one learns that “perhaps no poet of the Depression era so

successfully used the vernacular to mourn and to protest what was becoming of ordinary American women and men in a nation ill-fed, ill-housed, and ill-used” (305). These biographical inclusions thus provide both important historical and life information on the authors, as well as theoretically placing the writers in the larger context of working-class studies. These biographies further provide a personalizing factor to the anthology that help students better envision the authors they are reading.

In addition to the comprehensive yet easily accessible text is the highly useful and inclusive instructor’s manual, which provides countless discussion questions and suggested writing activities to guide readings. The manual, which is prepared by the authors themselves, even provides additional bibliographic suggestions for further study. This allows for both scholars of working-class studies as well as those new to the field to provide a thorough pedagogical approach to their classes.

Perhaps one of the largest concerns of any teacher is how students will respond to a given text. For no matter what we, as scholars, think about an anthology, the book is essentially useless if our students do not find it relevant. There was only one point in the when the students felt overwhelmed by the textbook and, not surprisingly, that came early in the semester after the students had read the introduction. While the introduction was one of the highlights of the text for me as a scholar, my undergraduates found it slightly unwieldy. Lauter and Fitzgerald do a nice job of making popular culture and current references to class issues in *Good Will Hunting* and *Titanic* in an attempt to appeal to students, but most of those in my class still felt intimidated by the in-depth introduction to the book. Still, I must think that this comments more on the lack of attention given to class issues in academia than it does any possible limitations in the book. For, after spending a semester investigating work and social class and utilizing *Literature, Class, and Culture*, my students admitted that the issues in the introduction were more understandable.

Luckily, the students in my composition class responded extremely well to the bulk of the collection, and I feel confident that other students will react similarly. My own class thoroughly enjoyed the reading selections assigned, became quite interested in class issues more generally, and by the end of the semester, most admitted that they were surprised at how “interesting” the topic became for them. Perhaps the greatest compliment any student can give to a textbook is this infrequently uttered phrase: “I liked this book so much that I may not even sell it back!” And believe it or not, I had several students state this exact comment. What better endorsement can one hear?

Works Cited

- Hapke, Laura. “A Wealth of Possibilities: Workers, Texts, and Reforming the English Department.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 23 (Spring & Summer 1995): 142-154.
- Scott, Tony. Review of *Literature, Class, and Culture: An Anthology*, by Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald. *Workplace* 3.2 (Winter 2000): 8 pars. 18 March 2001
<<http://www.louisville.edu/journal/workplace/issue6/scott.html>>.
- Zandy, Janet. *Introduction. Calling Home: Working Class Women’s Writings*. Ed. Janet Zandy. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.

Lisa A. Cooper, Texas Christian University