Introduction to Literature
Henry W. Longfellow: *Poems on Slavery*

The Intention of the Author
Programm

• Problem of anchoring an interpretation in the assumption of 'intention'
• Reconstructing Longfellow’s political intention
  – History of Publication
  – Abolitionist Iconography
  – Sentimentalism
• Reading of the poems
  – Slave as wild beast
  – Eroticism

Explanations: „The Death of the Author“
The Politics of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

- Abolitionism
- Publication History
- Two framing poems in the style of sermons
- Six poems presenting slaves as subject for moral meditation
- Sentimental scenes: slave about to die, girl sold by her father, discovery of escaped slave, skeletons on sunken ship
- \(\rightarrow\) Abolitionist Iconography
Abolitionist Iconography

• Not individual instances but evidence of evil in the midst of a Christian society

• Social order contradicts moral order
  – Quadroon Girl: Young woman sold into prostitution by her own father!

• (How) does this work?

• Models of moral education: The Good Part…
Sentimentalism in the US

• 19th century Sentimentalism depicts the Self in relation to others, usually the family in the widest sense. Tension arises from the constant threat of loss and the possible reconciliation with loss. Poems present mourning individuals, fiction depicts women, slaves, children (that is, those in need of protection) as increasingly abandoned.

• Sentimentalism in the US has a social and political function, embedded in reform movements (abolitionism, temperance, against Indian removal, proto-feminism): Society in its present form seems to be unable to protect the weak who we identify with
Henry W. Longfellow,  
The Slave in the Dismal Swamp

In dark fens of the Dismal Swamp  
The hunted Negro lay;  
He saw the fire of the midnight camp,  
And heard at times a horse’s tramp  
And a bloodhound’s distant bay

Where will-o’-the-wisps and glow-worms shine  
In bulrush and in brake;  
Where waving mosses shroud the pine,  
And the cedar grows, and the poisonous vine  
Is spotted like the snake,

Where hardly a human foot could pass  
Or a human heart would dare,  
On the quaking turf of the green morass  
He crouched in the rank and tangled grass,  
Like a wild beast in his lair.

A poor old slave, infirm and lame  
Great scars deformed his face,  
On his forehead he bore the brand of shame,  
And the rags, that his mangled frame,  
Were the livery of disgrace.

All things above were bright and fair,  
All things were glad and free;  
Lithe squirrels darted here and there,  
And wild birds filled the echoing air  
With songs of Liberty.

On him alone was the doom of pain,  
From the morning of his birth;  
On him alone the Curse of Cain  
Fell, like a flail on the garnered grain,  
And struck him to the earth.
In this poem “the traditional calling of the man of letters is obtrusive. The words carry our thoughts not to a slave in a swamp, but to a man using the special equipment reserved for men of letters when they write poems.”

Leo Marx, “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature”
The Quadroon Girl

The Slaver in the broad lagoon
Lay moored with idle sail;
He waited for the rising moon,
And for the evening gale.

Under the shore his boat was tied,
And all her listless crew
Watched the gray alligator slide
Into the still bayou.

Odors of orange-flowers, and spice,
Reached them from time to time,
Like airs that breathe from Paradise
Upon a world of crime.

Her eyes were large, and full of light,
Her arms and neck were bare;
No garment she wore save a kirtle bright
And her own long, raven hair.

And on her lips there played a smile
As holy, meek, and faint,
As lights in some cathedral aisle
The features of a saint.

His heart within him was at strife
With such accursèd gains:
For he knew whose passions gave her life,
Whose blood ran in her veins.

But the voice of nature was too weak;
He took the glittering gold!…

The slaver led her from the door,
He led her by the hand,
To be his slave and paramour
In a strange and distant land.
Explanations

• Psychology: Siegmund Freud
  – Unconscious

• Sociology: Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias
  – Habitus

• Roland Barthes “Death of the Author” (1967)
  "To give a text an Author" and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that text."
In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

Roland Barthes, Death of the Author
We may use the author to situate the text, but we should look „behind the author‘s back“