

## Abstractions

Lately, we have had abstracts on the brain here in the offices of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* thanks to a long-term project whose first phase, I am excited to announce, is now complete. The abstract project, as we call it around the office, represents one manifestation of our desire to make all of our content easily searchable and broadly marketable. Beginning in 2008, Laura M. Stevens, my predecessor, began asking authors to submit abstracts of their work along with their articles. These abstracts are immediately useful in the peer review process; one gets an initial sense of an article's quality from the strength of its abstract, and specialist readers will often agree or decline to read an article based on their reactions to the abstract. Later, after publication, readers can decide whether to read or pass over an article based on the content of its abstract; there is a direct correlation between the availability of an abstract and the attention that an individual essay receives. We know from our Project Muse hits that articles—even much older articles—are more likely to be downloaded and read if they are accompanied by abstracts. For the sake of both our finances—we earn royalties based on number of downloads—and our passion for ensuring the broadest possible circulation of our authors' excellent work, abstracts are a must.

Enter the abstract project. Prior to 2009, *Tulsa Studies* did not publish abstracts, and thus it has been one of our long-term goals to abstract every article in our back catalogue. This process has occurred gradually; it was back in 2011 that Laura first announced her intent to post “abstracts on our website of every article published in the journal since its founding,” and for the past seven years, our graduate student interns have been working towards this goal during office downtime.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, they have adapted the abstracts from old editorial prefaces, which between 1989 and 2008 included overviews of each issue's contents. This practice became redundant when authors began providing their own abstracts, and it was ultimately discontinued, but these prefaces provided a valuable starting point for our interns. With even older articles, they had to start from scratch. I am pleased to announce, then, that the first stage of the project is complete; our interns have drafted abstracts for every article of every back issue. We will now move on to the next stage of the project; managing editor Karen Dutoi and I will edit the abstracts and send them off to their authors for feedback and approval before finally uploading them to our website. I am excited that our readers will finally begin to benefit from this labor, and I want to express my gratitude to all of the interns, past and present, who worked so hard on the project over the years: Melissa

Antonucci, Jacob Ball, Jennifer Fuller, Alex White, Amy Pezzelle, Dayne Riley, Ashley Schoppe, and Onyx Zhang. I am also grateful to our authors, many of whom have already gamely returned to their old articles to oversee and approve our work. And, of course, I am grateful to Karen for her leadership throughout the process of completing this work.

The abstract project has naturally occasioned a lot of discussion in the office about what constitutes an effective abstract. I confess, abstract writing does not come naturally to me. It is neither a genre that I was taught in graduate school nor, I must admit, one that I thought to discuss with my own graduate students, at least until recently. If being a journal editor and working on the abstract project has taught me anything, it is that we need to provide more guidance on and insight into the purposes and format of abstracts. Those of us who are editors or advisors to graduate students should directly address this strange genre, a form of writing that is at once extremely mundane and inherently unfamiliar, recognizing that good abstract writing is a learned skill. Indeed, I think back with deep gratitude to the editors of my own work who provided me with feedback over the years, teaching me that a good abstract is not simply a reproduction of my thesis paragraph, which was always my initial impulse.

So what, then, constitutes an effective abstract? Speaking as an editor, I am looking for two main things. First, the abstract should provide a clear overview of the article's argument, one that is comprehensible to someone who has not yet read the article. This goal may seem self-evident, but drawing from personal experience, I know it can be hard for authors to avoid getting caught up in small details at the expense of the big picture. Frequently, scholars will pepper their abstract with terms that only make sense in the context of the larger article. Authors should keep in mind that the purpose of the abstract is to help readers decide if they want to read your article. If they cannot understand the terms of your argument, they are more likely to pass it over.

Second, a good abstract explains the essay's importance and positions its argument within the broader scholarly conversation. As Faye Halpern and James Phelan wrote in an excellent column for *Inside Higher Ed*, an effective abstract provides an "answer to the 'so what' question."<sup>2</sup> The abstract should make clear what the article offers that is new and different, how it intervenes in a preexisting debate or changes the terms of that debate. It helps the reader understand why she should bother to read the essay and what she should expect to learn from it.

To achieve these goals effectively, a good abstract should not be taken directly from the essay (although it may include similar phrasing) nor should it reproduce the article's introductory or thesis paragraph. In Halpern and Phelan's words,

The purpose of the first paragraph is to launch the argument, while the purpose of the abstract is to provide a comprehensive overview of it and its stakes. Both the abstract and the first paragraph may include the thesis of the argument, but the first paragraph can't offer the bird's-eye view of the whole essay and why it matters that an effective abstract does.<sup>3</sup>

An introductory paragraph begins an essay, but an abstract spoils the essay (in the best of ways), making sure that the reader understands what the article will argue and why.

If none of this advice is particularly new, it will, I hope, give insight into the way that Karen and I intend to approach each article's abstract in our editorial process. Going forward, we are going to be paying more attention to this overlooked genre of writing, and when we request changes to abstracts, it will be in service of these two goals. We are deeply grateful to all of the authors who routinely respond to our requested edits with grace and skill, and we hope that our work to ensure effective abstract writing will prove useful to writers and readers alike.

This is one of those rare semesters without a change in office staff. Thanks to Amy, Dayne, and Onyx, who continue to execute their duties with aplomb, and as always, to Karen, who keeps *Tulsa Studies* running like a well-oiled machine. We must, however, say goodbye to three of our editorial board members. I am deeply grateful to Ellen G. Friedman, Maren Linett, and Elizabeth Podnieks for their service to the journal and will miss their expertise and advice. In their place, I would like to welcome the three newest members of our editorial board team:

Brigitte Fielder is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she specializes in American Studies, African American literature, children's literature, transatlantic literatures, critical race studies, gender and sexuality studies, and human-animal studies. A recipient of the Nellie Y. McKay Fellowship, she has two forthcoming books: *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* and, with Jonathan Senchyne, *Infrastructures of African American Print*. A former member of the Executive Committee and a current member of the Advisory Board of C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, she has published articles in journals such as *American Quarterly*, *Early American Studies*, *The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, *Theatre Annual*, and *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*.

J. Samaine Lockwood is Associate Professor of English and Director of Undergraduate Studies at George Mason University, where she specializes in nineteenth-century American literature and gender and queer studies.

Her book *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (2015) redefines nineteenth-century New England regionalism as a cultural practice that included fiction writing, colonial home restoration, china collecting, history writing, and other colonial revivalist activities. She argues that in their meditations on New England's colonial past, women writers, photographers, and colonial revivalists presented the queer, unmarried daughter of New England as a figure crucial to remembering and producing United States history. Lockwood has articles published and forthcoming on Sarah Orne Jewett's representation of the Normans, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's colonial revivalism, women's china collecting, and queer critical regionalism. She is currently at work on two projects: a study of bohemian Bostonians' construction of cosmopolitan white identity at the turn of the twentieth century and a monograph on queer tourism in the nineteenth-century world.

Celia Marshik is Professor and Chair of English at Stony Brook University, where she specializes in modernism, cultural studies, and law and literature. She is the author of *British Modernism and Censorship* (2006) and *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (2017), coauthor (with Allison Pease) of *Modernism, Sex, and Gender* (2018), and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* (2015). She has published articles in journals such as *James Joyce Quarterly*, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, *The Journal of Modern Literature*, and *Victorian Literature and Culture*, and is the winner of the 1999 Margaret Church Memorial Prize for the best essay to appear in *Modern Fiction Studies*. In November of 2018, she will become President of the Modernist Studies Association.

I conclude this preface on a somber note. With this issue we say goodbye to Nina Baym, one of our early advisory board members, who passed away on 15 June 2018. Professor Baym was an early pioneer in the work of feminist literary recovery, and she dedicated her life and career to ensuring that women authors, too, would have a voice and a place in our intellectual canon. In *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), she writes,

I cannot avoid the belief that "purely" literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male—in favor, say, of whaling ships rather than the sewing circle as a symbol of the human community; in favor of satires on domineering mothers, shrewish wives, or betraying mistresses rather than tyrannical fathers, abusive husbands, or philandering suitors.<sup>4</sup>

In demonizing or dismissing the experiences of women, a “segment of literary history is . . . lost to us,” she further insisted (p. 11). Through her efforts, begun in the 1970s, women’s literary history has been to some extent restored; through her efforts, journals like our own exist. It is therefore with deep gratitude for her work and deep sadness at her loss that we say goodbye. Truly one of our feminist foremothers, she will be missed by all of us at *Tulsa Studies*.

Jennifer L. Airey  
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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Laura M. Stevens, “Women and Anglo-American Periodicals,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 30 (2011), 244.

<sup>2</sup> Faye Halpern and James Phelan, “Writing an Effective Abstract: An Audience-Based Approach,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 23 February 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/02/23/importance-writing-effective-abstract-when-you-submit-journal-article-essay>.

<sup>3</sup> Halpern and Phelan, “Writing an Effective Abstract.”

<sup>4</sup> Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 14. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.