

Kelly, R. Gordon. "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly*, v. 26 n. 2 [May 1974]. Reproduced in Madox, Lucy, ed. Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. 91-109. With a commentary by Sharon O'Brien, 110-113.

The non-exclusive study of literature and history formed the earliest corpus of American Studies scholarship, yet the often problematic relationships between the two, particularly their respective theoretical frameworks, were left mostly unexplored. Kelly takes this problem to task, exposing the weaknesses of previous scholarship, specifically New Criticism in literature and the Myth and Symbol tradition in history. Using anthropological notions of culture as defined by Geertz, and theories in the sociological construction of knowledge and reality, he argues that "the presumed autonomy of literary works [makes] the study of literature appear to be free from political and ideological influences," and thus presents falsely objective reasoning as to a work's significance for historical study. Additionally, through logical regression, the autonomy of literature contradicts the claim that it somehow embodies an historical "mind" or "consciousness," as the previous claim gave significance to the work because of significance as an absolute aesthetic accomplishment. With regards to the placement of literature in culture and the use of literature as cultural exemplar, "[i]t seems a better tactic," Kelly argues, "to begin with a concept of culture, one that promises to contribute to the historians task... rather than to begin with a commitment to great literature, and then to explore the implications of the concept for the use of literary documents as historical evidence. [Anthropological and sociological definitions] of culture... undermines any easy assumption that great literature, as it is usually defined, necessarily constitutes a superior source of historical knowledge" (96). In an example of the potential embodied in using this method, Kelly examines the role of late 19th century children's literature in reinforcing the social and cultural expectations for behavior, and by extension connecting those values to the contemporary historical situation. Many of the ideas and basic questions posed by Kelly identify perennial problems in American studies, notably the use of theories of culture, the resolution of literary theoretical and historical explanation, and synchronic and diachronic forms of analysis. Further, while many of his arguments and ideas may seem common-sensical to the present-day reader [a comment on the standing quality of his scholarship], his insight and method were pioneering and innovative in relation to contemporary scholarship, offering a clear-sighted contribution to a stagnant and suffering American Studies