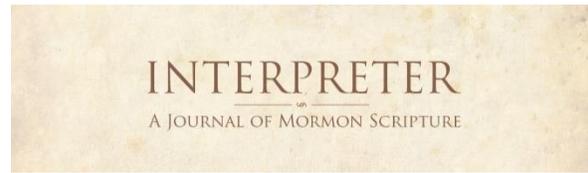




BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



The Interpreter Foundation
<https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/>

Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance: An Update

Author(s): Robert A. Rees

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Volume 19 (2016), pp. 1-16

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Abstract: This is a follow-up to my article, “Joseph Smith and the American Renaissance,” published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 2002. My purpose in writing that article was to consider Joseph Smith in relation to his more illustrious contemporary American authors — Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. In that article I tried to demonstrate that in comparison with these writers, Joseph Smith did not possess the literary imagination, talent, authorial maturity, education, cultural milieu, knowledge base, or sophistication necessary to produce the Book of Mormon; nor, I argued, had he possessed all of these characteristics, nor was the time in which the book was produced sufficient to compose such a lengthy, complex, and elaborate narrative. This addendum takes the comparison one step further by examining each writer’s magnum opus and the background, previous writings, and preliminary drafts that preceded its publication — then comparing them with Joseph Smith’s publication of the Book of Mormon. That is, each of the major works of these writers of prose, fiction, and poetry as well as the scriptural text produced by Joseph Smith has a history — one that allows us to trace its evolution from inception to completion.



The Interpreter Foundation is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Interpreter Foundation.

<https://mormoninterpreter.com/>

INTERPRETER

A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 19 · 2016 · Pages 1-16

Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance: An Update

Robert A. Rees

Offprint Series

© 2016 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com
You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

JOSEPH SMITH, THE BOOK OF MORMON, AND THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE: AN UPDATE

Robert A. Rees

Abstract: This is a follow-up to my article, “Joseph Smith and the American Renaissance,” published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought in 2002.¹ My purpose in writing that article was to consider Joseph Smith in relation to his more illustrious contemporary American authors — Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. In that article I tried to demonstrate that in comparison with these writers, Joseph Smith did not possess the literary imagination, talent, authorial maturity, education, cultural milieu, knowledge base, or sophistication necessary to produce the Book of Mormon; nor, I argued, had he possessed all of these characteristics, nor was the time in which the book was produced sufficient to compose such a lengthy, complex, and elaborate narrative. This addendum takes the comparison one step further by examining each writer’s magnum opus and the background, previous writings, and preliminary drafts that preceded its publication — then comparing them with Joseph Smith’s publication of the Book of Mormon. That is, each of the major works of these writers of prose, fiction, and poetry as well as the scriptural text produced by Joseph Smith has a history — one that allows us to trace its evolution from inception to completion.

I was fortunate as an undergraduate at BYU in the late fifties to have had Robert K. Thomas as a teacher and mentor. After taking “Introduction to Literature” from Bob, I recognized him as an unusually gifted teacher, one who made his subjects and his students come alive.

As an undergraduate at BYU, I have had a few great teachers in my life, including Hugh Nibley, Parley A. Christensen, and J. Reuben Clark Jr., and as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madeline Doran, Helen White, Ricardo Quintana, and Frederick Cassidy, but none spoke to my mind, heart, and soul as clearly and as forcefully as did “Brother

1 *Dialogue* 35:3 (Fall 2002), 83–112.

Thomas.” I took every class he taught, and it was essentially because of his influence that I became a professor of literature and a serious student of the Book of Mormon. I was pleased during my first year in graduate school to nominate Bob for the Teacher of the Year honor at BYU, which he won.

I say I was fortunate in having Bob as a teacher because he introduced me to the Book of Mormon, the Bible as literature, and the writers of the American Renaissance, including especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (the latter the subject of Thomas’s Columbia University PhD dissertation). When I published “Joseph Smith and the American Renaissance” in *Dialogue* in 2002, I was aware of how much that article was indebted to Bob’s insight into scripture and these great American writers.

What I attempted to show in that article, as summarized in the headnote to this article, is that in comparison to the major writers of the American Renaissance — that rich outpouring of imaginative expression Van Wyck Brooks called the “flowering of New England”² — at the time he produced the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith lacked the compositional skills, literary gifts, and cultural background necessary to write a book as structurally complex, rhetorically varied, and culturally “strange” as the Book of Mormon (by strange, I mean the Egyptian, Hebrew, and New World elements one finds in the history of these Promised Land peoples). That is, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman all had educations superior to Joseph Smith’s education, all lived under more substantial and more stable socio-economic conditions, and all had much greater family, community and cultural systems to support their writing than he did.

Since writing that article, I have continued to think of Joseph Smith in relation to his distinguished fellow authors. Recently in working on a dramatic script about Emerson and his contemporaries while at the same time teaching the Book of Mormon at Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley, I realized there was an important dimension of the comparison between the American prophet and his contemporaries to which I had not given sufficient consideration in my original article: the biographical and bibliographical context in which each writer produced his magnum opus. This article is an attempt to address that dimension because it completes the picture of these writers

2 Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England: 1815–1865* (Mattituck, NY: Amereon Ltd., 1981).

and their places in this incredibly fertile chapter of American literary history in relation to the Mormon prophet and the book with which he is most closely and famously identified.

Over the past century, scholars have been divided over the authorship of the Book of Mormon as well as its literary merits. Some have argued that the book is clearly the product of Joseph Smith's mind and imagination while others have contended that it could not possibly be so.³ Various theories have been advanced to show that Joseph Smith was the sole author, that someone else wrote the book, that he had considerable help from others in writing it, that he plagiarized large sections of it from the Bible and other sources, that he produced it by some mysterious or miraculous process, or that he had a colossal capacity to both compose, memorize and dictate its contents—and to do so over a surprisingly brief period.⁴ More recently, critics have argued that Smith wrote the book but did so under divine guidance. For example, Anthony Hutchinson feels “[t]he Book of Mormon should be seen as authoritative scripture.” He adds, “God remains the author of the Book of Mormon viewed as the word of God, but Joseph Smith, in this construct, would be the book’s inspired human author rather than its inspired translator.”⁵

3 The most recent argument in favor of Joseph Smith as the sole author of the Book of Mormon is Earl M. Wunderli's *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013). See my review of Wunderli's book in *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014), 33–47. See also Wunderli's response to my review, “Book of Mormon on Trial: Wunderli,” at <http://rationalfaiths.com/book-mormon-trial-wunderli/>. My response to Wunderli's response, “Book of Mormon on Trial,” is found at: <http://rationalfaiths.com/book-mormon-trial-bob-rees/>.

4 Louis Midgley has summarized the various attempts to explain the book into four categories: 1) “Joseph Smith wrote the book as a conscious fraud,” 2) “Joseph Smith wrote the book under the influence of some sort of paranoia or demonic possession or dissociative illusion,” 3) “Joseph Smith had the help of someone like Sidney Rigdon in creating the book as a conscious fraud,” and 4) “Joseph Smith wrote the book while under some sort of religious inspiration.” “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 104. As I summarized in my original article, “Taken together, these explanations show Joseph Smith as a country bumpkin and a brilliant sophisticate, as a simple self-delusionist and a complicated conspirator, as an idiot and a genius, and as Devil-inspired and God-inspired.”

5 “The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture,” in *New Approaches, to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1993), 1, 2.

In my original article, I spoke of what Melville scholars refer to as his “try works.”⁶ The image found in Chapter 96 of his great novel, *Moby-Dick*, refers to the two large kettles or “try pots” situated on the decks of nineteenth-century whaling ships that were used to “try out” or reduce whale oil by boiling the blubber. As with many of the elements and episodes in the novel, try-works can symbolize various things and Melville clearly intended that as readers we see into his multi-level symbols and extended metaphors whatever we are able to bring to them of our imagination and experience. In fact, Melville includes a specific episode to illustrate his symbolic intention. As I explained in another article,

Ahab, in his megalomaniacal quest for the white whale, nails a gold doubloon to the mast of the *Pequod* as a reward to the first man who sights the whale. As they seek the elusive leviathan, each of the characters on the ship comes up and looks at the doubloon, and each sees something different. For Ahab it is the prophetic emblem of his quest; for Starbuck it is a Puritan sermon; for Stubb it is an almanac of the zodiac; for Flask, the pragmatist, it is “but a round thing made of gold. . . . worth sixteen dollars”; for Queequeg it is merely “an old button off some King’s trousers”; for the dark and ghostly Fedallah it is the sign of the Devil; and, finally, for the mad black boy Pip, it is a reflection of the mad world itself: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look. And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats.” As Ahab says, “This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.”⁷

One of the ways in which *try works* functions is as a symbol of the process of writing, the fire of discipline and imagination necessary to boil away the rhetorical blubber that plagues most authors, especially in their early years. In this sense, it stands for the process a successful writer must go through in order to refine and perfect his or her writing. Thus, for Melville, the five novels he wrote prior to *Moby-Dick* (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*), constitute the try works that prepared him for the more complex rhetorical style, universal themes, and timeless scope of *Moby-Dick* as well as the subtleties and other stylistic felicities that constitute the novel’s amazing ontological density.

6 See Kingsly Widmer, “The Learned Try-Works: A Review of Recent Scholarly Criticism of Melville,” *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), pp. 117–124.

7 Robert A. Rees, “Forgiving the Church and Loving the Saints,” *Sunstone* 16:1 (February 1992), 18–27..

Melville was aware he had written a much deeper, more profound novel, which is evident in his response to Hawthorne's praise of *Moby-Dick*: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. I would sit down and dine with you and all the gods in old Rome's Pantheon. It is a strange feeling — no hopefulness is in it, no despair. ... I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling. ... I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces."⁸

My intention in my original article as well as in this one is to consider the respective intellectual, emotional, and cultural state of these writers and the circumstances and conditions under which they created their most important works — those for which history most remembers them. Let's consider each in his turn.⁹

Emerson (1805–1882)

Emerson was likely the most influential writer and thinker of his generation. Today he is remembered as a poet and quasi-philosopher, but during the period in which he flourished, he was recognized as somewhat of a prophet and sage, which is why this period is sometimes referred to as the Age of Emerson. Emerson was fortunate to be blessed with conditions conducive to producing an accomplished writer. He had an excellent education at the Boston Latin School and Harvard College (from which he graduated at age eighteen) and Harvard Divinity School (age 22), published his first article at age nineteen, travelled to Europe when he was twenty-nine, and gave his first public lecture when he was thirty. He published his first major piece, *Nature*, when he was thirty-three. In addition, he was an indefatigable keeper of journals (running to some ten published volumes) and prolific correspondent, and he worked out many of the ideas and expressions for his writing and speaking

8 Melville to Hawthorne, 17 November 1851, www.melville.org/letter7.htm.

9 While any standard critical biography presents the facts of the compositional evolution for each of the respective authors of the American Renaissance discussed here, the reader is referred to F.A.O. Matthiessen's groundbreaking *American Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960). For more specific information, the following are excellent sources: Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Hyatt Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955); Hershel Parker, *Melville: A Biography: Vol 1, 1819–1851; Vol 2, 1851–1891*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 2005).

through such journaling. For the next nearly four decades he was the most popular lecturer in America, delivering some fifteen hundred lectures throughout the northern, New England, and midwestern states as well as in Europe over the course of his lifetime.

Further, Emerson lived in one of the most creative and intellectually stimulating environments in American history. He was at the center of an amazing array of poets, artists, philosophers, educators, innovators, explorers, adventurers, and other luminaries. He was heralded not only in America but in Europe, where he met other writers who influenced him — people like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Eliot, and Carlyle. Although Emerson never produced a singular major work, his collections of essays (1841, 1844, and 1846) and poems (1846) mark him as a major American writer. Thus Emerson had a long apprenticeship before he produced his most mature work in his late thirties and early forties. In addition, having been the recipient of two inheritances, he lived a life of relative comfort and leisure, giving him the time to develop his expressive talents. Since he was at the hub of a cultural revolution, he was also fortunate in associating with luminaries in the political, social, and cultural world of Boston and beyond.

Thoreau (1817–1862)

Like Emerson, his fellow and older townsman (by twelve years), Henry David Thoreau was well educated, having attended Concord Academy (where he later taught) and Harvard College. Like Emerson, he was an avid journal writer. However, in contrast to Emerson's extensive travel and lecturing, Thoreau was an autodidact and immersive student of nature. Noting with intentional irony, "I have traveled much in Concord," he set out to know the microcosm of his own environs. A wide reader and deep thinker, Thoreau published poetry and essays as well as a memoir, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849, age thirty-one), before producing one of the most important and influential works of American literature, *Walden Pond* (1850), the following year. Thoreau lived for a time in Emerson's house and tutored Emerson's and (at Stanton Island) Emerson's brother William's children. He enjoyed the association of a number of other writers and thinkers, including Hawthorne and Whitman. He lectured in Concord and published several essays, including the influential "Civil Disobedience." Although in many ways different from Emerson, Thoreau benefited from Emerson's friendship, as Emerson did from his. What one sees with Thoreau, as

with Emerson, is a significant apprenticeship as a writer from the time he was a teenager until he published *Walden Pond* at age thirty-two.

Hawthorne (1804–1864)

Nathaniel Hawthorne showed an early proclivity for writing when at age sixteen he wrote and published *The Spectator*, a short-lived newsmagazine. The next year, he entered Bowdoin College where he was classmates with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the future US President Franklin Pierce. After graduation, Hawthorne withdrew from the world to devote full time to becoming a writer. He published his first novel, *Fanshaw*, at age twenty-four and began publishing short stories under a pseudonym. His most famous and influential collection of stories, *Twice Told Tales*, was published in 1837 when he was thirty-three. In 1842 Hawthorne moved into Emerson's ancestral home in Concord with his new bride, Sophia Peabody, of the prominent Peabody sisters and an excellent critic and editor of her husband's works. For the next several years Hawthorne had one of his most creative and productive writing periods, producing additional stories, children's stories, and a novel, *Mosses From an Old Manse* (1846). In 1849, Hawthorne began work on his major novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which he published the following year (1850) at age forty-six. What followed were additional novels, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860). In addition to writing, Hawthorne served as US Ambassador to Liverpool for four years (1853–57) during which time he interacted with distinguished British writers. Thus the time between his first novel at age twenty-four and *The Scarlet Letter* at age forty-six, was twenty-two years.

Melville (1819–1891)

Herman Melville's formal education, which began when he was five, included attendance at the New York Male School, Lansingburgh Academy, the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, and Albany Academy. As pointed out earlier, Melville had a long literary apprenticeship before he undertook to write *Moby-Dick*. His life as a sailor and his extensive travel, often to exotic places also prepared him to write about universal themes. In addition, his formal and informal education provided both breadth and depth to his writing, which began in his adolescent years. According to Merton Sealts, Melville's "study of ancient history, biography, and literature during his school days left a lasting impression on both his thought and his art, as did his almost

encyclopedic knowledge of both the Old and the New Testaments.”¹⁰ One sees the influence of Melville’s education in his fascination with Shakespeare. In a collection of the Bard’s plays he purchased in 1849, there are nearly five hundred markings, and Shakespeare’s influence can be seen in many places, including some prose passages in *Moby-Dick* that scan iambic pentameter. As David Cope observes, “That Melville’s *Moby-Dick* contains nearly measureless references to the reading of Shakespeare is an old story featuring the whaling epic’s persistent Shakespearean verbal echoes, the composition and sequencing of scenes, and the construction of Ahab as a tragic hero-villain. ... The verbal echoes pop up so often that Shakespearians may look forward to enjoying the variety of uses to which Melville put the bard.”¹¹

Perhaps equally influential was Melville’s intimate, sustained relationship with Hawthorne, the writer with whom he had the greatest affinity and whose imprint on Melville’s imagination was indelible. The point is that in the long space between the completion of his formal education (1837) and the publication of his first novel, *Typee* (1846), Melville had ample time to develop his skills as a writer of fiction. Additionally, in the five-year span between *Typee* (1846) and *Moby-Dick* (1851), he published four additional novels. What is also relevant, after *Moby-Dick*, he continued to publish stories, sketches, novels and poems (including a long poem, *Clarel*, on the Holy Land). Two of his masterpieces, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, were written in his later years (although the latter was unfinished at his death). Thus, from the beginning to the end of his career as a writer, one can see the progressive unfolding of Melville’s literary gifts and talents.

Whitman (1819–1892)

Unlike Melville and the other writers discussed in this article, Walt Whitman did not have a substantial formal education, a rich family culture, or intellectual community in which he could develop his literary talent. His father took him out of school when Walt was eleven, at which time he began working in printing, journalism, and the various trades he pursued during his lifetime. In 1848–49 (age nineteen–twenty) he established and edited the Brooklyn *Weekly Freeman*, which, among other liberal causes, opposed slavery.

10 Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville’s Reading*. Revised and Enlarged Edition (University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 18

11 David Cope, “Melville/Shakespeare.” http://cms.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/shakespeare/contemporary/melville_shakespeare.pdf

Although he was a journalist and dabbled in fiction, Whitman's real love was poetry. In 1855 he anonymously published the first edition of his revolutionary collection, *Leaves of Grass*, a work he would continue to revise and expand throughout his life. During the Civil War, Whitman worked as a nurse in a military hospital in Washington, D.C., was employed at several federal agencies, and continued to expand and polish his great poem. After the last edition (1892), Whitman exclaimed, "L. of G. *at last complete* — after 33 y'rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old."¹² *Leaves of Grass*, which Whitman expanded and revised almost literally to the end of his life, from the dozen poems in the first edition to the nearly four hundred in the last, chronicles the evolution not only of American's greatest poem but its most accomplished and most influential poet. In a sense, Whitman spent most of his adult life as a writer.

Each of the writers under discussion here had the ample time the writing of significant literature takes. Thus Emerson, who was relatively wealthy, had long periods of time for contemplation, reading, and writing. For the most part he could choose to spend his time writing. Thoreau was an independent spirit who came and went as he wished. He lived at Walden Pond with entire seasons devoted to observation, reading, and writing.; Hawthorne secreted himself in his mother's house while he worked out his literary style and was reclusive for long stretches of time during other periods of his life, which he devoted to composition, including writing *The Scarlet Letter*. Melville lived his life essentially as a writer although at times he struggled to find the time and money to support his profession. As a single, independent man, Whitman was able to devote substantial time to the writing and revision of his major work throughout his life.

What is true of the authors under discussion here could also be said of many other literary figures of the period, including Edgar Allen Poe, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Emily Dickinson. Although none produced a single major work on which his or her reputation rests, all produced a substantial body of literary expression whether poetry or prose. In addition, in comparison with Joseph Smith, all had superior educations, sustained periods in which to develop their mature work, and, with the exception of Emily Dickinson, enjoyed supportive critical environments.

12 David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman: A cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 5.

Joseph Smith (1805–1844)

Just as we have with Joseph Smith’s contemporary writers, it is important to consider his life in the years preceding the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 when he was twenty-five years old. In other words, what was he doing when Emerson, Thoreau, and their fellow writers during comparable periods of their lives were keeping journals, going to school, starting their professions, travelling, and mingling with the leading lights of their respective intellectual and cultural communities? According to Richard Bushman’s award-winning biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, two years after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph, speaking of his family, wrote, “We were deprived of the benefit of an education. Suffice it to say I was nearly instructed in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmetic which constituted my whole literary acquirements.”¹³ Bushman adds, “Joseph may have attended school briefly in Palmyra, and a neighbor remembered the Smiths holding school in their house and studying the Bible.”¹⁴ While some have challenged the extent and degree of Joseph’s education or exaggerated what his “home schooling” might have entailed,¹⁵ the contrast between his education and those of the writers discussed above, with the possible exception of Whitman, is striking. Harvard and Bowdoin, though not colleges or universities in the sense we think of them today, offered the best classical education available in the United States and exposure to gifted teachers, a rich library, and other resources.

What we find in the historical record is that the hardscrabble life of the Smith family in general and of Joseph in particular seems to have left little space or leisure for the kind of thinking and writing necessary to produce a manuscript of the length and complexity of the Book of Mormon. Before Moroni’s first visit in 1823 and Joseph’s

13 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 41–42.

14 Ibid.

15 The anonymous author of “Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon,” *Mormon Think*, <http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm#introduction>, avers that Joseph, “was home schooled quite extensively,” without any supporting evidence to either describe what such “schooling” might have entailed or to back up such a claim. While it may have been true that the Smith family had the rudiments of basic educational lessons in the home, what the Smith children got was nothing close to what Emerson and Thoreau got at Harvard, Hawthorne at Bowdoin, Melville at the various academies he attended, or likely even what Whitman got during his curtailed formal education.

acquisition of the plates in 1827, Joseph was preoccupied with the family's declining fortunes, working the family farm and hiring himself out as a laborer, as, in his own words, "it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family."¹⁶ Thus, the idea that Joseph had time to read broadly, undertake research, construct various drafts, and work out the plot, characters, settings, various points of view, and multiple rhetorical styles that constitute the five-hundred-plus page narrative of the Book of Mormon is simply incredible (in its original Latin sense of "not worthy of belief").¹⁷

Further, according to his wife Emma, who was well acquainted with her husband's compositional, expressive, and literary talents at the time he was translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph was still somewhat of a rustic when it came to writing: "Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating [*sic*] a book like the *Book of Mormon*."¹⁸

Although some critics have suggested that Joseph was somehow composing and memorizing the text he was dictating to his wife and other scribes, Emma testified, "He had neither manuscript nor book to read from. If he had anything of the Kind he could not have concealed it from me."¹⁹

Joseph's life just before and during the time he was translating was hardly conducive to writing. As Bushman states, Joseph "was entangled with the money-diggers and struggling to scrape together rent money for

16 Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 41.

17 An example of the uninformed, facile arguments about the composition of the Book of Mormon all too common these days is: "Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon?" The anonymous author argues, "First, translation of the BOM did not take place in less than three months; it spanned a time period of over a year and Joseph may have been working on the text for years. Second, the 'most correct of any book on earth' has undergone more than 3,000 textual and grammatical corrections. Some of these corrections included significant changes in doctrine. Third, a large portion of the BOM simply quotes the Bible, including translation errors unique to the King James Version. Fourth, stories in the BOM directly parallel stories from Joseph's life, such as his father's dream of the tree of life when Joseph was five years old. Fifth, the BOM is no more complicated than other works of fiction, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and related works. Finally, the ideas in the BOM bear strong parallels to ideas popular in New England at the time and several other books. Sixth, Joseph may have had help." *Mormon Think*, <http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm#introduction>.

18 Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 70.

19 *Ibid.*

his family.”²⁰ Also, during this period, as Bushman documents, “Joseph had to provide for Emma while attempting to translate in a house that her parents reluctantly provided as a place to work.”²¹ It was also during this period that “Emma gave birth to a son after an exhausting labor.” Bushman reports, “Whatever happiness the child brought was short-lived. The baby, named Alvin after Joseph’s older brother, died that very day, June 15. . . . Emma came close to death herself, and Joseph attended her night and day.”²² It was shortly after this great sadness that Joseph was thrown into despair over Martin Harris’s loss of the first translated pages of the Book of Mormon. It is hard to imagine less ideal circumstances under which one might try to compose a lengthy manuscript!²³

Where are the “try works” of the Book of Mormon? There are none that we know of or evidence that there might have been. In other words — and this is important — whereas we see copious journal entries, essays, letters, lectures, and other writings revealing Emerson working out his mature expressions in poetry and prose; whereas we see Hawthorne’s significant volume of early fiction (short and long forms), journals, and other writings leading up to and illuminating the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*; whereas we see Thoreau’s copious journals, notebooks, essays, lectures, field notes, and other writings as preludes to *Walden*; whereas we see Melville’s many novels, stories, and other writings preparing him to write *Moby-Dick*; and whereas as we see Whitman’s journalistic writings, poetry, and numerous drafts of his major poem *Leaves of Grass*, we have practically nothing of Joseph Smith’s mind or writing to suggest that he was capable of authoring a book like the Book of Mormon, a book that is much more substantial, complex, and varied than his critics have been able to see or willing to admit. We need to remember that the Book of Mormon is considered one of the most influential books in American history and one that has occupied the serious consideration of scholars for over a century.

20 Ibid., 69.

21 Ibid., 63

22 Ibid., 66–67.

23 In an article entitled “For Authors, Fragile Ideas Need Loving Every Day,” the novelist Walter Mosley says that interruptions and distractions (such as those Joseph Smith had in abundance) cause the life to drain out of your writing: “The words have no art to them; you no longer remember the smell. The idea seems weak, it has dissipated like smoke.” He adds, “Nothing we create is art at first. It’s simply a collection of notions that may never be understood. . . . But even these clearer notions will fade if you stay away more than a day. . . . The act of writing is a kind of guerrilla warfare.” (*New York Times*, 3 July 2000, B2).

Although we have ample examples of early writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and other writers of the time and a history of their evolving from immature to mature writers, we actually have very little of Joseph's writing before the publication of the Book of Mormon. In other words, there are no writings that demonstrate that Joseph was creating the major characters of the Nephite and Jaredite history and working out the major themes and ideas found in the Book of Mormon, nor is there any evidence that he exhibited any proclivity to compose large narrative forms or differential styles or much of anything at all like the complex, interwoven, episodic components of the Book of Mormon.

What do we have from Joseph's pen before the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830? According to Dean C. Jesse's *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, very little: a note summarizing Martin Harris's experience with Charles Anthon, possibly written in 1828, and a letter to Oliver Cowdery dated 22 October 1829. His handwritten account of the First Vision written in 1832 is ungrammatical, is written with little sense of punctuation or compositional structure, and, though sincere and authentic, shows little evidence of stylistic or compositional competence or confidence. Certainly there is evidence of the beginnings of an eloquent voice, but that voice is tentative and immature.

Because the Lord directed him to begin keeping a record of his experiences, Joseph commenced keeping a journal in 1832 following the completion of the Book of Mormon, but he was anything but a regular or systematic record keeper. Joseph was more likely to dictate his words to scribes. The reason, according to Jesse, was Joseph's insecurity in expressing himself in his own words. As Jesse explains, using Joseph's own language, "A complicated life and feelings of literary inadequacy explain his dependence. He lamented his 'lack of fluency in address,' his 'writing imperfections,' and his 'inability' to convey his ideas in writing. Communication seemed to him to present an insurmountable barrier. He wrote of the almost 'total darkness of paper pen and ink' and the 'crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.'"²⁴ This is a stark contrast to the articulate, fluent, and confident style of Emerson and other writers of the period. Although Joseph eventually gained confidence as a writer, he continued to rely on the words and rhetorical styles of others more than on his own. Jesse provides an example of the significant contrast in rhetorical styles between Joseph's own writing

24 Dean C. Jesse, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), xv.

and that of his clerk Willard Richards, the one (1835) ungrammatical and unpolished and the other (1843) quite the opposite.²⁵

Over the past five decades, a number of scholars have documented the complex, complicated, and at times even convoluted structure of the Book of Mormon. In his excellent study, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (2010), Grant Hardy has identified the reason the Book of Mormon cannot be read as critics have been reading it for nearly two hundred years: rather than the book revealing the style and point of view of a single author, it is instead told through the point of view and style of three primary narrators/editors — Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni — each of whom has a unique and distinctive expressive style.

As I summarized in a review of Hardy's book, "By focusing on the three major narrators of the Book of Mormon, Hardy is able to demonstrate that each has 'a particular point of view, a theological vision, an agenda, and a characteristic style of writing, all of which can be found within the confines of the text itself.' Such a 'narrator-centered approach. ... opens up the Book of Mormon to literary appreciation.' Although it traditionally has been accused by outside critics of extreme incoherence, what emerges from this approach is a clear demonstration of rhetorical and spiritual coherence both within the sub-narratives as well as in the book as a whole."²⁶

In a previous article I have tried to demonstrate that the proposition that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon under some kind of a spell or through the process known as automatic writing simply does not stand up when one compares the book with other texts claimed to have been written in this way.²⁷ In another article I tried to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon contains abundant evidence of highly sophisticated rhetorical and dramatic irony, evidence of which is absent in Joseph Smith's known writing both before and after the publication of the Book of Mormon.²⁸ Elsewhere, I make an argument similar to the one in this paper, although in addition to comparing Smith's and Milton's education, cultural background, and literary talent, I address the further

25 Ibid.

26 Robert A. Rees, "The Figure in the Carpet: Grant Hardy's Reading of the Book of Mormon," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31:2 (Fall/Winter 2011), 137

27 Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15:1 (2006), 4–17, 68–70.

28 Robert A. Rees, "Irony in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (Fall 2003), 20–31..

issue of dictation, a process used in the composition of both the Book of Mormon and *Paradise Lost*.²⁹

While one could argue that it is impossible to compare Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon with Smith's contemporary writers and their major works, nonetheless each constitutes a major compositional achievement, a major written composition, whether autobiography, biography, fiction, history, philosophical treatise, poetry, or some other genre, each with a significant cultural and compositional history and context. This is why Emerson, holding a copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for the first time, could say, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty."³⁰

Had Joseph Smith sent Emerson a copy of The Book of Mormon when it came off the press in 1830, though perplexed by its content and style, Emerson might have said something similar — it "must have had a long foreground somewhere." He certainly would not have believed that it was created out of whole cloth, especially by a writer as uneducated, inexperienced, and unsophisticated as Smith was at the time of the book's publication. While the "long foreground" of *Leaves of Grass* as with the other masterworks under consideration here can be established from available historical and critical evidence, that of the Book of Mormon cannot. Further, to explain the book as a consequence of its author's purported deep and thorough acquaintance with the Bible is to understand neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon.

Each of the writers of each of the masterpieces under consideration here, with the exception of Joseph Smith, had a long gestation period during which he "tried out" his ideas, metaphors, allusions, coloring (tone), points of view, personae, and rhetorical styles before tackling a larger, more complex, and more sophisticated form, whether as a collection of poems and essays (Emerson), an extended personal narrative (Thoreau), a novel (Hawthorne and Melville) or a major poem (Whitman). There are no parallel try works for Joseph Smith, nor any evidence of his apprenticeship as a writer. In fact, all evidence points in the opposite direction. Unless and until some hitherto undiscovered record demonstrating that Joseph Smith did in fact leave evidence of the

29. Robert A. Rees, "John Milton, Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 54:3 (2015), 7-18.

30 R.W. Emerson to Walt Whitman, July 21, 1855, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1860/anc.00038.html>.

reading, thinking, writing, and imaginative expression — the try works — required to write a book like the Book of Mormon, we are left with the choice of accepting his explanation of the book’s origin or making the case for some alternative explanation, which to my mind no one has done satisfactorily. Such a case would seem to require consideration of the main argument of this paper, i.e., examining the biographical and authorial history of any proposed author or authors in relation to what we understand of the compositional process required to produce a book like the Book of Mormon.

Robert A. Rees (born November 17, 1935) is an educator, scholar, and poet. He teaches Mormon Studies at Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley. Previously he taught humanities at UCLA and UC Santa Cruz and was a Fulbright Professor of American Studies in Lithuania (1995-96). Rees is the author of *No More Strangers and Foreigners: A Mormon-Christian Response to Homosexuality* (1998), *“In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See’: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium”* (2000), *“Requiem for a Gay Mormon”* (2001) and, most recently with Dr. Caitlin Ryan, *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* (2012). He is the editor of *Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings In Honor of Eugene England* (2005), *The Reader’s Book of Mormon* (2008), and *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons* (2011). Rees has served as a bishop, stake high councilor, Institute teacher, and a member of the Baltic States Mission Presidency. He is the co-founder and current vice-president of the *Liahona Children’s Foundation*, which addresses malnutrition among Latter-day Saint children in the developing world.

