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ABSTRACT

Because half of all students are female, and because role models are important in forming ideas and images, more attention should be devoted to finding books with heroic, tragic, or significant female characters. Good literature by women can be found in an increasing number of anthologies of women's literature that are now being produced. When teaching women's literature, teachers need to consider their own reactions and those of their students to the differences between men's and women's writing. Women's writing may often be about domestic situations and/or family relationships. The literature may be in the unfamiliar form of journals, diaries, and letters. Also, women's writing may differ in tone, emphasizing more minute details or more intimate emotions than is usual in men's literature. One of the most interesting and least threatening ways to introduce more women's writing into the curriculum is to pair books so that different gender points of view can be compared and contrasted. A future NCTE project might be to publish a list of women's literature that has been taught and proven its worth as good literature. (An extensive reference list of anthologies, commentaries, and contacts for more references are appended.) (SRT)

MAY 1987

STARTER SHEET

SLATE
Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

TEACHING BOOKS BY AND ABOUT WOMEN

Including in the curriculum more women writers and more books about girls and women should be an important priority for English departments. Most literature teachers believe that role models in books, as in real life, make an important difference to readers' lives. As English teachers, we have generally agreed that the images of human character revealed in books are an important factor in deciding what to teach. Usually we look for heroism of some degree, journeys of self-discovery, ethical questions arising from conflicts in human relationships, and resolutions emerging from personality characteristics. All of these contribute to our understanding of the human condition, which has been an accepted major purpose of literary study.

However, when we look at the most frequently taught book titles in grades 9 through 11, we find that as many as 90 percent, if not more, of the main characters are male, and that in those cases where women are represented, they tend to be shown in only family or romantic situations. One happy exception is *The Miracle Worker*, but this stands almost alone among such titles as *A Separate Peace, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Catcher in the Rye, Of Mice and Men, The Human Comedy, The Sword in the Stone, Lord of the Flies, Deathwatch, Tex,* and *I Am the Cheese.*

Most of these are considered to be "good books," that is, well-written and raising significant questions for discussion, as well as offering both heroic and villainous images, though only of men. Because half of our students are female, and because role models are important in forming ideas and images, we need to devote new attention to finding more titles with heroic, tragic, or significant female characters.

Further Insights into the Problem

Sandra Gilbert, professor of English at Williams College, recently presented a paper at Yale entitled "The Education of Henrietta Adams." She, too, lists typical titles that "Hen" has studied in high school, such as *Oedipus Rex, Great Expectations, The Great Gatsby,* and *The Bear.* Gilbert writes,

> Why then, did Hen experience an odd sensation every time she opened a book? She had, after all, learned to "submit" herself to the "established truths," so clearly stated by the texts she read. . . . As Pip, she had learned never to trust a femme fatale like Estella Havisham but rather to lower her expectations and make her own way in the world; as Huck Finn, she had lit out for the territories, escaping both the false gentility and constricting domesticity of a slave-owning society ruled by fussy ladies like Aunt Polly; as J. Prufrock, she had worried about "the overwhelming question" toward which flighty women who "come and go/Talking of Michaelangelo" might paradoxically lead her; as Nick Carraway, she had admired the Faustian intensity of Jay Gatsby and deplored the selfish aplomb of Daisy Buchanan. . . . Why, then, did Hen feel anxious about literary study?

Gilbert goes on to answer this question with references to Judith Fetterley's (1978) provocative study on the "resisting reader," where the author points out how regularly, in male literature, women readers are asked to identify against themselves, that is, to adopt the male perspective about women characters. Once awakened to the gender bias, or base, of such a vast majority of assigned high school reading, readers will realize, usually with great shock and surprise, just how different are books by women such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, the Brontë sisters, Sylvia Plath, and Toni Morrison, all of which are recognized by high school teachers, but rarely taught to whole classes, and almost never with any reference to a difference in outlook.

What to Teach

The question that usually arises is how to find classic literature by women, and/or whether such classic literature which would

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be worthy of all-class attention even exists. Isn't it our responsibility, the rhetorical question goes, to pass on the great books of Western culture, the recognized literature of the past as identified by the critics?

But who are the critics? Have many titles become classic because critics best understand and appreciate the male perspective? Do we now need to review the vast body of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature with different value standards, values based on the representation of both genders? At the college level this is already happening. At recent conferences of NCTE, distinguished presenters from many universities have spoken about their revised curricula, which have progressed from the former women's studies courses to well-integrated survey courses that balance almost equally writing from men and women.

Outstanding among the new anthologies of the last few years is the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Gilbert and Gubar 1985) that offers a wealth of material by women writers over the centuries. The book includes selections by such authors as Jean Rhys, Anaïs Nin, Doris Lessing, May Sarton, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Eudora Welty, Maya Angelou, Flannery O'Connor, Marge Piercy, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, Maxine Hong Kingston, Alice Walker, and numerous others.

Another excellent anthology is *By Women* (Folsom and Kirschner 1975). This collection would make an excellent text for an individual course at the high school level. It includes stories, plays, and poetry, mostly of the twentieth century, but does not attempt to be as inclusive as the Norton book.

Differences in Content, Genre, and Tone

Because women's writing is often different from men's writing, teachers will find it helpful to think about some concerns their students may express. Many of us have experienced resistance, especially from boys, to reading "girls' stuff." Many teachers themselves may find they need to adjust their ideas, in terms of values, to accommodate the differences.

First of all, women's stories may often be about domestic situations, and/or family relationships. Traditionally, these may seem less important, or less vital in some way, than stories about war or chasing whales. If this is true, we need to examine our own values and perspectives and ask if, on second thought, we still believe this to be true. Women, of course, are writing about what they know, and a good deal of the time, especially in the nineteenth century, this means about the need for a new home (as in "The Revolt of Mother," by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman), or the distress of a young mother after the birth of a child (as in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman). These stories are about the deepest feelings and troubles experienced by women in their roles at that time. They are as full of life and death, and the meaning of life, as more familiar male selections might be. We need to ask our students, before they read, if these settings in themselves are any less significant than a battlefield or a sailing vessel.

Second, women's writing may be different in genre; that is, especially in the nineteenth century, material will often be available as journals, diaries, and letters. In fact, dozens of documents by frontier wives and mothers have been discovered in the past decade. They offer new insights, not only to history, but to literature as well. As the bibliography suggests, such books as *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (Schlissel 1982) and *A Day at a Time* (Culley 1985) reveal thoughts and feelings that penetrate to the core of the human condition as well as a novel might do. Students may need to be reminded, also, of the imminense changes that birth control made possible in women's lives, suggesting at least one reason for the fewer full-length novels in the last century. Alice Walker's (1983) book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* presents several essays/articles that would also be useful in considering women's creativity in general.

Third, women's writing will sometimes differ in tone. In some cases, women may emphasize more minute details or more intimate emotions than we are accustomed to reading in male literature. A single sigh or a few simple words may be enough to turn a plot, and students may need a fair amount of discussion to understand what change has occurred. An example of this might be in a story such as Alice Munro's "Forgiveness in Families" in which the main character comes to understand something about herself, something that is expressed almost entirely between the lines.

These differences become sharper and more perceptible as we read more and more of women's work, and consider our own responses; that is, whether we like it or not, and why. To our ears accustomed to the voice of male writers, women's voices at the other side of the range may sound strange at first. The differences raise many issues concerning literary criticism and standards of judgment, and these can lead us and our students into new critical positions.

Methods of Introducing Women's Writing

One of the most interesting and least threatening ways to introduce more women's writing into the curriculum is to pair books so that different gender points of view can be compared and contrasted. For example, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* could be read at the same time as selections from Frederick Douglass. The essays of Margaret Fuller (Chevigny 1976; Myerson 1978) could be studied along with the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Rebecca Harding Davis's urban-factory novel *Life in the Iron-Mills* could be contrasted with a close contemporary from rural areas, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

Regional contrasts could be made between Sarah Orne Jewett's work on life in Maine and that of Bret Harte on life in the far West. Other twentieth-century pairs might include *The Human Comedy* and *My Antonia*, *Black Boy* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or *Summer of My German Soldier* and *Catcher in the Rye*.

If resources are limited, English departments may begin on a small scale to introduce women's writing by selecting a set of short stories. Two excellent examples exist in *Women and Fiction* (Cahill 1975), available in two volumes, and another more advanced anthology called *The Experience of the American Woman* (Solomon 1978). Finally, an excellent collection on a senior high school to college level would be *Images of Women in Literature* (Ferguson 1986); it has extensive commentary.

The first step is to *buy* some books by women writers. Once they are in the department, curious readers, both teachers and students, may explore them further, and eventually include them in the classroom.

Possible Adoption Titles

Other less familiar but still excellent titles include Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. The first focuses on a woman's life in India, and the second on a young woman's life in Nigeria. Either would work well in a world literature course or in a regular tenth- or eleventh-grade curriculum.

Junior and senior high school students with good reading ability could be directed to Harriette Arnow's outstanding novel *The Dollmaker*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, or Sigrid Undset's Nobel prize-winning classic *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

A future NCTE project might be to publish a list of titles of women's writing that have been tried in the classroom and have proven their worth as fine literature. As we explore such different books as *The Mists of Avalon* (Marion Zimmer Bradley), *Clan of the Cave Bear* (Jean Auel), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston), and the collected stories of Muriel Spark, Jean Stafford, Alice Munro, and Laurie Colwin, we begin to understand the richness available in the English curriculum.

—Margaret Carlson

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Contact the following for more references on literature by and about women:

The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 311 East 94th Street, New York, NY 10128.

Sex Equity Office, Title IX, 101 Pleasant Street, Concord, NH 03301.

Virago Press, c/o Doubleday and Company, 501 Franklin Avenue, Garden City, NY 11530.