

## Teaching Feminist Approaches to the Classics: An Experiment with Multicultural, Student-Centered Pedagogy at an Urban University

*Batya Weinbaum*

I taught English full time as a tenure track professor at Cleveland State University for five years. The course I intend to focus on from this experience here is Feminist Approaches to the Classics, a class offered at the 300 level which introduces students to feminist criticism and which turned out to be one of my best classes. We read an overview of different kinds of interpretations and reclamations from Greek classical literature, one contemporary novel re-defining Greek myth, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. So far my experience has been good, with a class of about 15 regulars out of the originally registered 20, of which I believe 5 dropped due to cross registering. (Many of them had signed up for Studies in Classical Literature and were not interested in, ready, or prepared for the feminist approach of the class, as was expressed the first day.) The class seemed to congeal and participation and discussion was quite lively. Papers, quiz work, group projects, reports, and interest in outside field trips have been remarkably good.

My teaching both in this course and in general is always very student-centered and based on constructivist practices of pedagogy. I was also influenced by liberation theology. I studied the philosophy of de-schooling society at CIDOC in Cuernavaca, Mexico with Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, George Dennison, and other experimental educators in the seventies. In class, I create a community of learners, involving visits from community people and specialty scholars as well as field study or experiential learning outside of the classroom on the part of students. For example, in a multicultural literature class, I led a field trip to *salsa* clubs in the city that put white suburban students in direct contact with a small pocket of the Spanish-speaking Latino community during our Chicano unit. I engender the acquisition of theoretical tools practiced on texts or materials we examine in common. Then I nurture self-starting projects of students individually or in teams where learners get to apply those analytic tools acquired in the classroom on their own, to report back to the group in oral as well as written form.

Often I play the part of active learner, listening to the students as they teach me as well as others in the classroom. Thus I am as far from the banking method of education as could possibly be imagined, which doesn't mean that I don't teach. I do require theoretical readings, but then I encourage learning-by-doing on the part of the students. I teach by responding actively as an informed and educated listener, providing the deep attention needed to develop intellectual self-confidence and mastery. This practice was in part developed as I taught in innovative programs such as the Adult Degree Program at Vermont College, or the Independent Degree Program at Burlington College. Both of these programs operate on the student-contract model, which means that students propose ideas to mentoring faculty who then support them on a six month research project of their own choosing. The practice was also influenced by my participation in small group discussions in the women's movement, where we established the foundation that learning by hearing all voices led to a new form of knowledge that was more grounded and practical than inherited concepts. Another source of influence of this teaching philosophy was my participation in re-evaluation counseling based on the similar theories of facilitating self-growth through deep attention. It works; my evaluations consistently attest to the remarkable kind of energy created in the classroom where students feel engaged to discuss and participate beyond the norm in a university which has a more traditional norm of educational practices.

I always introduce a concern that when we discuss cultures other than our own, we acknowledge how our own social identities mediate information. I am concerned with constructing classrooms that reflect awareness of pluralistic perspectives. The focus on participants' learning rather than on individual teaching, a feminist practice described above, helps to bring such a pluralistic engagement about. I maintain a concern with the bridge between cognitive and affective apprehension, and influenced and supported by writers such as Peter Elbow and bell hooks, I create opportunities for active participation rather than passive consumption. I create opportunities for peer group structure that allows students to challenge internalized attitudes and assumptions. I take the focus off myself as a teacher, and on to discussions with each other. Although celebratory self-discovery cannot be the entire basis of a learning experience, it is definitely a component that my teaching philosophy endeavors to include. I encourage students to connect their own experiences or the experiences of significant others to the texts and subjects that we are studying, and to bring these texts into their own lives — to claim them as their own.

In his practice of teaching literacy, Paulo Freire advocated codification of the oppressed. That is, he felt that if the pedagogical goal was to teach someone to read, one needed to listen carefully and observe first, and then teach the vocabulary he or she expresses the desire to know. I am aware of feminist and other critiques of Freire. Nonetheless, I advocate a similar process of codification on another level, as I work towards the goal of many institutions of higher learning, that of cultural pluralism, and the higher degree of more sophisticated political and cultural literacy

that students now are required to undertake. I lead students to discover, from wherever they are at, hoping to mentor self-actualization and intellectual exploration rather than absorption of facts. This non-hegemonic structure is important to me as I create and nurture any class experience, and is also reflected in my on-going research that I also share with any class, stylizing myself as a learner for students to model as they pursue their own work.

### Course Goals

The goal of this particular course was to situate the context of western indigenous myth in relation to western classical literature and to indicate possible reasons for its reclamation in contemporary American culture. Specifically, we examined and explored the myth of the Amazon as it first appeared in western civilization. We looked at how contemporary feminists have reclaimed that myth, and then explored the possible remnants of indigenous matriarchal myth in classical literature not usually read with that purpose until the development of feminist classical criticism.

Pedagogically, my goal was to offer students the chance to develop patterns of reading literature for context clues. I showed them literary criticism, from a variety of perspectives — including feminist, Marxist, Jungian, psychoanalytic, and Jungian — and then involved them in developing their own by having focus groups that read difficult texts for specific self-selected purposes. I also had the goal of inspiring them to take a topic that interested them, and explore it further. This they did by volunteering to do class reports or “footnotes” on references, goddesses, myths, etc. that seemed important to understand more fully to pursue the text. Third, I had a goal of involving as many levels of “multi-intelligence” as described by Howard Gardner, so that they learn to approach difficult works in deeper, more synaesthetic ways that brings pleasure to reading as well as greater comprehension or more long-lasting absorption. Thus I encouraged group and non-traditional responses to the texts, such as painting from images, mask-making, dramatic interpretation and costuming.

### Methods, Activities, and Evaluation Techniques

My teaching methods included the setting up of small focus groups to help the students read difficult classical texts. Although I proposed topics, I let the students generate their own, as talking over and deciding how to approach the text on their own was an educational experience for them individually and in the group, as well as in the small groups. During the *Iliad*, one group chose to focus on images; another on the differences between various translations; another on Greek names and their continued use today in different contexts. Still others formed on images of women in public and private sectors, versus images of men; and another on the difference between classes of women.

Using Howard Gardner's multi-intelligence methods mentioned above, I involve students in painting from the images and mask making of the gods and goddesses in order to deepen comprehension of specific aspects of the text. In the section on the *Odyssey*, a costume group formed. One of the members danced to music in a yellow dress wearing long red leather gloves, using one of the masks from the previous section to dance out the phrases referring to Dawn as she arose from her golden throne and spread out her rosy fingers. Other students in the class found the Dawn quotes and recited them, to cue her dancing.

Mid-semester, I posted five mid-term evaluation questions, which they answered. The answers were turned into the Center for Teaching Excellence and typed, with overwhelmingly positive responses.

In terms of evaluating the students, and not just the class, there was one quiz, and two short papers. Although the quiz and the papers might not seem in line with my methods, actually they were. When the students came in with the papers, the papers were placed in the middle on a desk. As we sat in a circle, one student would take the paper on the top and read it aloud. Then we discussed the paper, and took grade nominations. As a classmate nominated a certain grade, he or she had to provide the rationale for the nomination. In the course of discussion the basis for the nominations, much interesting discussion occurred, stimulating deeper analytic perceptions. Only after a grade was voted on would the author of the paper be revealed. Then that author would read the next paper. And in terms of the quiz, I posted 15 questions of which each student only had to answer ten. Then small groups were formed, and the papers were distributed. The names were written on the back, and privacy had to be respected. In the small groups, the students went down the list question by question and discussed the answers and decided whether each answer would count or not. Then we came back into the large group and pooled the small group discussions. When different answers were given, there was discussion until we reached consensus on how much credit should be given and why. Again, interesting discussion occurred which sharpened analytic interpretive skills through the debating that had the purpose. Although in the end I assigned the grade after reading through the entire packet, the pedagogical technique of debating the proper answers was stimulating and enjoyable to all, including myself.

I also modeled debating from different perspectives for them by asking two senior colleagues to my class on the same day. Both colleagues had over 15 years experience of teaching the Classics. One had read some of my writing on the topics discussed in class, as had the students. The students were able to ask these colleagues for their opinions on certain issues and topics, and to observe the interchange between us as we both agreed and disagreed with each other. I had offered an original interpretation of the origin of the classics in Greek women's lamentation, and the theory of oral poetry performance and composition were evoked and discussed, as well as the issue of collective versus individual authorship. Since I was the only female in this adult/professorial debate, I set a good example for women students

who had never seen a woman stand up for herself in a discussion with men who actually listened to her as well. I did this to provide balance, offering to the students differing perspectives than my own; but also to demonstrate that the processes they were being encouraged to undertake in the class were similar to the discussions that mentors and teachers carry on among themselves.

Another technique was having students do a footnote, as mentioned above, which meant offering to read a book, or to develop a report on an archetype or a concept. This brought the students with questions for further research into the library, and back into the class with a hand out for everyone on a particular topic. This centered the student in the class as an expert on a particular topic, edifying the others on something special and new, contributing to classroom discussion. One of the footnotes was a guide to women in classical art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the student led a group field trip.

One project, the Homer Springer Show that one of the focus groups taped and presented for their oral interpretation, showed that the students were ready to take the extra time to meet outside of class twice to prepare for class work, not generally thought of as within the realm of possibility at an urban commuter campus. The way they creatively adapted the essence of the classic text into a take-off on contemporary popular culture was ingenious, and showed that they were benefiting greatly from the class methods. Homer Springer was dressed in a red toga, and hosted the guests Penelope, a suitor, Odysseus, Calypso and one of her nymphs as they debated about whether Penelope was a saint or a slut, and whether Odysseus had been faithful or not. They even intercut the show with commercials, one for a scholarly book on Penelope in which the author was interviewed; and another for Dawn Detergent in which Dawn dressed in yellow with long red gloves and danced into a kitchen to help a housewife, illustrating the theme of one of the focus groups on how vestiges of the Greek classics are still with us in every day life. Their adaptation of a hidden camera which showed Odysseus arriving on the beach and being brought by the nymphs to Calypso was a very creative improvisation which showed they enjoyed studying the text; and which also laid the basis to discuss the function of the text in its original performance as entertainment at banquets, in a time before television talk shows took over as the main low-culture medium. Taking their cue about the bawdiness they discovered in the text, I led into a discussion of how low culture products of one culture can become high culture products of another, which was very enlightening for all.

The liveliness, preparedness and involvement of the students were evidenced by student questions and evident to the visiting senior colleagues. One claimed, “these must reflect in part Prof. Weinbaum’s teaching.” He “was also impressed by the results of the pedagogical device, called ‘footnotes’ by the class, used briefly at the beginning of the session: in earlier readings and discussions, students had come up with questions which Prof. Weinbaum had asked them to answer and present what they found to the class.”

## Reflections for Improvement

I learned greatly through teaching this sort of course in a particular type of environment. One of the lessons learned was that I needed to create more equity to create a balance of structure between individual and group learning. One older woman in particular seemed to feel estranged and inhibited from participating in group projects with other members of the class, although she did surprise me by registering for a subsequent class with me scheduled for the following semester, and going on to take several more as well as to work on my journal with me. She did her own play at individual creative response time that took up one hour for the rest of the class to read. But in the small groups, she would sit off to the side and listen rather than participate herself. Those using such techniques need to be aware and sensitive to the fact that some of the more mature students might be put-off by some of the game-like techniques.

Second, I discovered a need to make clearer in the syllabus that a student cannot turn into my class something they have generated for another course, trying to get double mileage out of a particular research or creative project.

In student evaluations, other suggestions for improvement were made. One student suggested more structure; another more focus in the groups. I tried to address these problems raised in the mid term evaluations by discussing them in the group as a whole. I would suggest that teachers using such approaches pay more attention to making sure that each person's voice is heard and that each gets a chance to develop their ideas and talk, not just the more self-confident and assertive among them. This could be done simply by requiring that a different individual take the role of reporting out each time from the small group. In the beginning, when everyone's paper was read out loud, hearing all individual voices was more ensured.

I also discovered that there was a need to working on finding the balance between controlling the class to make sure that all voices are heard, and to allow spontaneous emergence of ideas and leadership from the class itself. During the small group meetings, I floated between the groups which gave me an opportunity to sit with each group and hence to talk with each student individually, to draw each out about his or her ideas, insights and concerns. There is one woman, the older woman I mentioned before, who sometimes sat apart from a group, or even when she sat with the group remained silent. When I tried to encourage her to participate, it became awkward. She said she has blurred vision, and ms; she left early three times in the class, twice after these discussions and once ducking out in a transition. While I let her know that I was aware that she might be missing out, I didn't know how to broach to her what learning style would work best for her. I could benefit by learning how to work with those students for whom small groups don't work so well. I might need to structure mid-term conferences to catch students who don't appear to participate as well. Conferences one month before the final grade to show each student how he or she was doing, in case a student

wants to do something extra to improve his or her grade, became important. Perhaps I would try such meetings earlier.

Furthermore, I needed to explain clearly that when group work is going on, that I am not running a competition between the groups; or, I need to use the notion that teams are competing with each other that inevitably emerges from these sorts of classes in order to discuss just exactly what my learning methods and goals are, other than sponsoring competition. There was some anxiety provoked, for example, by the great lengths that the Homer Springer group went to in creating its video-taped talk show; other groups felt that their presentations would pale by comparison. When the next group did its presentation on the lines of Dawn waking the sleepers and Athena putting them to sleep, I invoked a class discussion on what could be improved. They came in to perform a second time with more costumes, music, and more conscious use of staging to high light the Greek chorus aspect of their performance design highlighting the poetics of the lines. After the second class presentation, I had the rest of the class break into twos so that each couple of students comes up with performance improvement ideas, to encourage the notion that we are learning from and with each other rather than competing as groups with fixed completed products.

We also discussed the problem of too much reading. We read one contemporary novel, and my text of criticism (*Islands of Women and Amazons: Representations and Realities*, University of Texas Press, 1999), and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Some students thought this was too much, and that slowing down and reading only one of the classical texts would gain more. Although I know there are some courses organized around one novel, like *Invisible Man*, I am not sure that this is the solution but it is something perhaps I should consider experimenting with in the future — going more slowly and thoroughly through one major text.

## The Syllabus

### FEMINIST APPROACHES TO CLASSICAL LITERATURE

ENG 330 T/TH Sec 1 1-2:50 MC 318

Professor: Dr. Weinbaum RT 1832 , RT 6870; office hours 3-5 T, Th.

The purpose of this course is to situate the context of western indigenous myth in relation to western classical literature and to indicate possible reasons for its reclamation in contemporary American culture, with an interest in the social construction of women's identity at the intersections between patriarchal and other world views. Specifically we will examine and explore the myth of the Amazons as it first appeared in the classics of western civilization. We will look at how contemporary feminists have reclaimed that myth, and then explore the possible remnants of indigenous matriarchal myth in classical literature not usually read with that purpose until the development of feminist classical criticism in the 1970s initiated by Sarah Pomeroy.

Assigned readings are available at the CSU Bookstore, MacBooks in Coventry, and various on-line order sites such as amazon.com. Any translations and editions will do of the following required books:



## 122 Teaching Feminist Approaches to the Classics

Ellen Frye, *Amazon Story Bones (ASB)*

Batya Weinbaum, *Islands of Women and Amazons: Representations and Realities (IWA)*

*Iliad (I)*

*Odyssey (O)*

Although not required, you might want to hunt down Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin's *Feminist Theory and the Classics* to pick an article to report on in the creative response section.

Your grade will be based on 20 points each for (a) 7 pages of writing assignments due at 1 p.m. in class on the day assigned, (b) one in-class quiz, (c) one take-home exam, (d) class participation (such as in focus groups and oral interpretation), and (e) one creative response presentation demonstrating that you have grappled with the issues and texts explored in class in any way you choose. This might include theatre (writing and performing a skit), creative writing, creating an art work, bringing in historical representations of Greek myth, reporting on the same themes in classical literature or mythology or folk lore of another culture; reporting on another classical title not explored in class, providing background research on the period, coming as a character germane to the texts we read (in costume); analysis of classical images and myth in popular culture; or presenting about a critical article or book that came up and interested you in the assigned readings. Your selection of your creative response must be negotiated with the professor prior to Ap. 4. Five points will be deducted for each absence, each need to leave before the class is through, each time you fall asleep in class, each demonstration of failure to prepare, failure to negotiate creative response by Ap. 4, and each late entrance. And each attempt to argue with these policies after the first week!

T. Jan. 18. Discuss and define concepts. What is classical literature? What do we mean by "feminist" and "approaches?" What do contemporary feminists have to gain by seriously re-examining classical texts and myths? Can there be more than one feminist approach?

Th. Jan. 20. Read ASB, a contemporary feminist work that takes as its starting point the pre-Greek classical period. Discuss how this reading changes your view of western classical literature. What questions does the author want you to bring to a reading of classical texts?

T. Jan 25. Read in IWA "The Amazon Archetype" (3-15). Goal: to understand the range of recreation of the "Amazons" only briefly glimpsed later in I. Take notes on categories of analysis. Where would you place ASB? Why? Write a **two page paper** to explain, using support from the text with examples.

Th. Jan 27. In IWA read "Latter Nineteenth Century uses," 16-19; "Early Twentieth Century..." 19-25; and "Between the Two Wars," 25-30. How does ASB contrast with such uses? Write a **two page paper** discussing, comparing and contrasting these appropriations to contemporary feminist uses.

T. Feb 1. Read in IWA "Post War Appearances" 30-60. Pick any title (article or book) on these pages. Track it down. Write a **three page paper** contrasting to ASB, utilizing IWA categories of analysis.

WED FEB 2. Five extra credits for non-mandatory attendance of dramatic reading and presentation of IWA at Coventry Books in Cleveland Heights. Kids welcome.



Th. Feb 3. Read in IWA "Amazon Archetype" pp 61-73. In class quizz: no notes.

T. Feb 8. Read in IWA pp 77-90. "Problematizing the Greeks." Make a list of what you would like to look for when you read I and O. Be prepared to state how and why.

Th. Feb 10. Read in IWA "Homeric and Pre-homeric Origins" 91-113. Continue your questions lists, which we will utilize to form "approach" focus groups in class.

T. Feb 15. Read "How the Amazon Enters World Lit" 114-120 in IWA. Continue lists. Meet in focus groups. Decide how to approach the reading for the next time.

Th. Feb. 17. Read the first 25% of I. First half of class, meeting in focus groups. Second half: report from focus groups.

T. Feb. 22. Read the second 25% of I. Ditto Feb. 17.

Th. Feb 24. Read third 25% of I. Ditto Feb 17.

T. Feb 29. Read final 25% of I. Ditto Feb 17.

Th. Mar 2., T. Mar 14, Th. Mar 16, T. Mar 21. Read O in the same manner.

Th. Mar 23, T. Mar 28, Th. Mar 30, T. April 4. Approach groups take turns: oral interpretation of selections.

Th. Ap 6, T. Ap 11, Th. Ap 13, T. Ap 18. Individual or group creative responses. Sign up ahead by Ap. 4.

Th. Ap 20. Evaluation: What can we learn from feminist approaches to classical literature? How did these approaches impact our view of classical literature? Of contemporary society? Contemporary education?

T. Ap 25. Class catch-up, party.

Th. Ap 27. Come to RT 1832 to pick up take-home exam.

May 4, 3 p.m. Exam due in hard copy at RT 1832. No exceptions. No faxing. No email submissions.

*Batya Weinbaum was an assistant professor in the Department of English at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio. She currently edits FEMSPEC, an interdisciplinary feminist journal published by Lexington Books.*