
Feminist Theory in the Classroom: Choices, Questions, Voices

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Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she "talk back" to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint?

Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 49

Recently, my friend Kayla took over a high-school American-literature class for a colleague on leave. She inherited twenty-four sophomores, a cabinet filled with handouts and lesson plans, and a curriculum that matched almost verbatim the curriculum we had been taught fifteen years earlier in the American-literature classes we had taken. There they were again: The Great Romantics (Irving, Hawthorne, and Thoreau); The Great Poets (Whitman, Pound, and Eliot); The Heroes of Fiction (Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck). Plus a little Dickinson, but only a little.

While Kayla wrestled with the "givens" of her curriculum, I was taking a graduate course in feminist theory, reading the Brontës and Woolf, Walker and Morrison—all for the first time. It was an exhilarating experience, seeing women's lives in print, hearing women's words and voices in ways I had never known existed. Yet when I laid my reading list next to Kayla's inherited syllabus, I could see that women's voices are still seldom heard by high-school or even college students, for the literary canon—our unofficial list of the "Great Writers" and the "Great Works"—has not only excluded female voices in the past, but also continues to ignore them, even in classrooms of the 90s.

Kayla saw one way to begin correcting the injustices of her curriculum: cross out Mark Twain, insert Willa Cather. It was, of course, a necessary first step toward rethinking the traditional androcent-

ric (and Anglo-centric, which is another topic) literary canon. However, substituting a female author for a male is only the first step in bringing women's works and words to our classes. Feminist theory recognizes that questions of *what* we read are inseparably linked to questions of *how* we read. Therefore, a discussion of implementing feminist theory in the classroom must deal not only with issues of texts and selection but also with reading strategies themselves.

Before such a discussion can begin, however, it seems necessary to address a basic issue in understanding feminist theory. When discussing "women's writings," "women's readings," "androcentric literature" and the like, it is important to acknowledge the biological and cultural complexity of the terms we use. Obviously, authors themselves are either female or male. At the same time, texts are "gendered" as well, and frequently the gender of the author and the gender of the text are not the same. Many (biological) women write in a (culturally) masculine mode, and conversely, (biological) men may also write in a (culturally) feminine mode. Thus, within this discussion, when adjectives such as "feminine," "masculine," and "androcentric" are used in connection with literature, they will refer to the style rather than the gender of the author. Nevertheless, some conflation of the terms is nearly impossible to avoid.

The Female Reader and the Literary Canon: *What We Read*

The impact of a curriculum that excludes women's writings is profound, and it affects all students, both female and male: literary alternatives to the canon are not encountered; the range of human

experience and understanding is only partially represented; students see male voices as the only voices of lasting literary value and "greatness"; and the literary past is presented from only one perspective—a perspective that is usually white and almost always male. In addition, perhaps the greatest consequence of an androcentric literary canon is that such literature "structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader" (Schweickart 1986, 41). Reading the "great" texts requires that students identify with a male point of view, regardless of their own gender as readers. Consider the following account of one woman's experience with reading the traditional canon.

The first result of my reading was a feeling that male characters were at the very least more interesting than women to the authors who invented them. Thus if, reading their books as it seemed their authors intended them, I naively identified with a character, I repeatedly chose men; I would rather have been Hamlet than Ophelia, Tom Jones instead of Sophia Western, and, perhaps, despite Dostoyevsky's intention, Raskolnikov not Sonia. (Edwards 1972, 226)

When reading within an androcentric literary canon, men are able to see themselves (or possibilities of themselves), while women are forced to become Other—to adopt a male persona, to see themselves as male, and to participate in an experience that can never be theirs. Judith Fetterley has put it well: "As readers and thinkers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values . . ." (1978, xx). To rephrase Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's metaphor, the Queen is made to think and to read like a King.

The androcentric literary canon and the masculine mode of reading both *result in* and *are the result of* patriarchal literary standards—standards which insist that to be considered Literature, writing must "be attractive to, embody the values of, masculine culture" (Lauter 1985, 31). In American literature this affects, first of all, a writer's choice of topic: masculine literary sensibilities have dictated that issues of art are "fundamentally distinct from the concerns of the domestic sphere" and therefore have dismissed as artistically inconsequential much of what has occupied the lives of most women, female writers included (31). As Schweickart points out, "the theoretical model for the canonical American novel is the 'melodrama of beset

manhood,'" and "to accept this model is also to accept as a consequence the exclusion from the canon of 'melodramas of beset womanhood,' as well as virtually all fiction centering on the experience of women" (45).

Yet, in addition to choice of topic, there exists a patriarchal style of writing as well—a style that is unified and authoritative, single-voiced, organized, tidy; well-groomed, as it were. This "masculine" writing, this literary tradition, is often set in direct opposition to the writings and the voices of

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women—voices which frequently have been criticized for being multiplicitious, fragmented, not tidy, perhaps even "mad." As a result, women have been placed outside the masculine literary tradition of the canon, while at the same time their own literary tradition has gone largely unrecognized. The voice of the Queen, it seems, has been doubly silenced.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf begins by apologizing both explicitly and implicitly to those who would have her speak according to masculine literary standards. She will not answer their question directly, she says; she will never reach a conclusion; she will leave the great problems unsolved; she will not tell the truth (but her lies will be filled with truth and her fiction will be laden with fact). She refuses to name herself, creating for herself an identity that contains multiple names and multiple voices. She is, in a very real sense, resisting masculine modes of reading and speaking; her lecture looks much more like a "notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings" than it does her male counterpart's outline overseen in the British Museum—a well-organized outline that contains neat abstracts and is headed with an *A* or a *B* or a *C* (1989, 30). Woolf's lecture refuses to be held by traditional authoritative notions of genre, of style, of character, of linear development. As Woolf sets forward what she is *not* doing in her lectures, it is not as much an apology as it is a political literary statement: this piece is *not*—will not be, cannot be—constructed or understood ac-



ording to patriarchal literary standards or masculine literary tradition. This is women's writing; it must be read differently. It does not answer male questions; it does not conform to male expectations. As a result, to read this piece as a man (which is, of course, different from being a man reading this piece), to attempt to shape this piece with a patriarchal interpretation or to insist that it conform to masculine literary standards and answer

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masculine literary questions is to entirely miss Woolf's point; it is to ignore, to co-opt, to silence the voices of women by reinforcing a masculine definition of literary value.

Thus, Woolf calls attention to the vicious circle in which female readers and writers are caught: an androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretive strategies, which in turn favor the canonization of androcentric texts and the marginalization

of gynocentric ones. To break this circle, feminist critics and teachers must fight on two fronts: surely they must seek the revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women; in addition, they must develop reading strategies that are consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute women's texts (Schweickart 45).

This is, of course, the second step in the discussion of feminist theory and its application in the classroom: feminist strategies for the reading of women's (and men's) texts.

The Female Reader and Pedagogical Practice: *How We Read*

The question of *what* we read is inextricably linked to the issue of *how* we read. Literature cannot be separated from the questions that form and inform it. As a result, feminist theory insists that our methods of reading, our position in relation to texts, and the questions that guide our understandings are as motivated as the selection of our canon of texts. The questions we ask of literature (and the questions we expect students to ask as well) are not innocent: whether we intend them to or not, they arise from where we stand, they make visible and invisible, they define and refine our position. Not only do our questions *fit* the canon we have created—they *shape* that canon as well. And the questions we have been taught to ask of literature are as inscribed within a white patriarchal system of values as our long-standing notions of a canon have been. Traditional questions (questions of genre, of plot and character and theme, of conflict and symbol and form, and all the rest) represent an attempt to master the text. They give readers the illusion of control; they support the pretense that readers only construct and are never constructed by the text. In their effort to dominate language they reinforce authoritative (masculine) modes of reading.

Consequently, it is not enough to "correct" our canon by substituting Cather for Twain. Part of our attempt to rethink the traditional "masculine" canon needs to begin on a deeper and more fundamental level: we must begin by challenging the very way we think about texts and the questions we bring to them. Once we have begun to formulate different questions and to practice different modes of reading, it becomes possible to adopt "revisionary tactics" toward literature and the canon—tactics which are not merely theoretical moves, but

which enable students to see women and their experiences, and which provide female readers and writers (including those in our classes) with a context and a tradition connecting them to a larger community of women. As Adrienne Rich puts it,

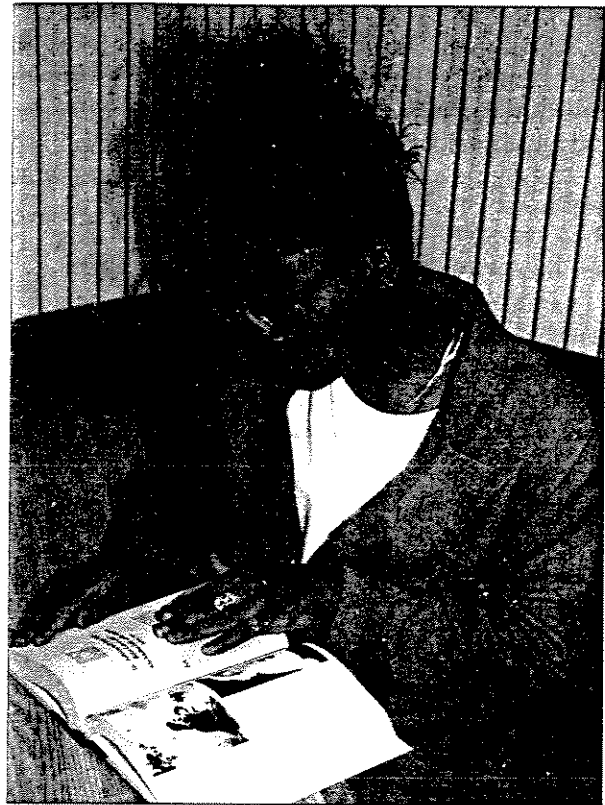
Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. (1979, 35)

Reentering texts is much more than an exercise in reading technique, for the silencing of women is part of a larger oppression, and the “literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power” (Lauter 19). The texts we select and the questions we ask to legitimize those texts determine whose story in a society is worth telling and whose voices are worth hearing. Thus, by asking different questions of the text—hearing different questions in the text—we can begin to value women’s writings, and we can allow our students to do the same. Texts are freed from their service to linear logical organization; clarity is dethroned as

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the highest goal for communication; and writings are liberated from their obeisance to the categories of genre, plot, character, conflict, symbol, and all the rest. Re-writing the questions allows us to re-envision the text and to value anew women’s words, women’s sentences, women’s language itself. At last we can hear that the Queen has a voice, a vocabulary, and a viewpoint of her own.

If, indeed, female texts and female readings speak outside the canon, if they construct and are constructed by different questions, and if they depart from traditional masculine literary standards,



then how does a reader recognize and approach such texts? How do we as teachers provide our students—both female and male—with alternatives to patriarchal modes of reading? How do we let them hear the Queen “talking back?”

Wide Sargasso Sea: A Model of Feminist Text and Strategy

Jean Rhys’s novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), is an example of nondomesticated (female) writing that, I believe, is accessible to most high-school students. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys constructs the story of Antoinette Bertha Cosway, a young woman growing up in Jamaica and Dominica during the 1830s. She eventually marries Mr. Rochester—the Rochester from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*—and in the course of the novel, Antoinette is gradually transformed into Bertha, the infamous “madwoman” in Rochester’s attic. Rhys divides her story into three sections: the first part describes the childhood of Antoinette in the heroine’s own words through flashbacks and conversations; the second section is narrated by Rochester, telling through a mosaic of memories and fragments of letters (his own and those of others) of his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage to Antoinette, and

the subsequent deterioration of their relationship; and finally, the third section begins with a brief narration by an unidentified voice (perhaps Grace Poole, a servant at Rochester's Thornfield Hall), then shifts to the voice of Antoinette herself, who is now a prisoner in the attic room. Throughout the novel, Rhys reminds readers that Brontë's "madwoman" has a name, a history, and a voice of her own.

As an example of "female" writing, the text of *Wide Sargasso Sea* contains many voices that meet in a shifting space and time. The perspectives are multiple and fragmented; the plot unfolds in spurts and starts rather than in a linear progression. Rhys's style is intentionally circuitous and difficult; she seems to purposefully resist neatness and clarity, striving instead for the unfamiliar. As a response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* works at once with and against the earlier novel. Rhys attempts to work within the gaps of *Jane Eyre*, yet *Wide Sargasso Sea* stubbornly resists the very text it is meant to illumine. The voices that speak in *Wide Sargasso Sea* not only speak within the novel, but they also speak across and outside the novel as well.

If we as readers find it necessary to question Rhys's novel in terms of consistent identifiable characters, if we attempt to plot the conflict and action according to peaks and valleys, or if we feel the need to trace the development of a theme throughout or to reduce the novel to a tidy summary, then we will fail miserably. The characters defy and escape us. The plot leaves great gaps when we expect it to connect, and it folds in upon itself when it seems it should progress. The theme resists summary or reduction: it teases and beguiles, shifts

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and undermines itself; like the language that speaks it, it refuses to "lie down meekly." Asking the usual (traditional) questions of this novel proves fruitless and frustrating; if "good" texts conform to our established methods of inquiry, this text resists conformity and consequently lies outside the bounds of canonical literary acceptability.



Yet, when *Wide Sargasso Sea* is freed from the artificial constraints of narrative structure, point of view, character development and such, the text invites multifaceted exploration and discussion. Consequently, it seems beneficial to identify a few ways of reading and questioning that supplement, challenge, or replace the dominant authoritative mode so prevalent in literary inquiry.

For example, instead of tracking down and labelling themes in this novel, perhaps we should encourage students to listen for voices—voices within and around the text that engage each other and that engage other authors and texts. These voices connect and undermine, overlap and gap; they articulate "themes," and they resist them. Reading with an ear for these voices—the speaking and the spoken, the central and the peripheral—may allow students to hear not only what the text says but also what the text leaves unsaid. Whose stories are not told? How are voices given or denied power? What is being spoken against? What do silences convey?

In addition, while the identification and evaluation of character types may prove counter-productive in a text such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, refocusing this question may allow readers to ask *how* charac-

ters are constructed and deconstructed and perhaps *why*. Where do our sympathies lie at various moments? Whose skin do we feel ourselves inside? Do issues of gender affect our identification? Whose words do we trust? Whom do we doubt?

Finally, instead of insisting upon a linear narrative progression of plot in the novel, it may prove more interesting to rethink how plots include and exclude, how they reveal and conceal the spaces and layers of a text. How is Rhys reading *Jane Eyre* as she writes? What stories could be written in the spaces Rhys creates? What simultaneous narratives do we as readers construct? Where, in the end, do we stand as we read? How do writers and voices shape *us*?

Questions, it seems, contain enormous power, for the questions we ask of texts and the standards we bring to literature help determine both how we construct and how we are constructed by a text: whose voices we hear, which details we attend to, which perspectives we take as our own. Ultimately, our questions inform and are informed by political issues, and the matter of reconstructing the canon is therefore much larger than simply learning to "assimilate some long-forgotten works or authors into existing categories" (Lauter 37). Challenging the traditional canon involves more than inserting Cather for Twain. Ultimately it means that as teachers of literature, we confront the task of learning to re-envision texts, to reposition ourselves, and to re-imagine the traditional questions that have included white men and excluded women (and men of color) from full participation in a literary tradi-

tion and from the larger system of social power itself. Our classrooms must allow the Queen to give up trying to sound like the King; we must listen and inquire in a way that enables us, and enables our students, to hear her speak.

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