

Old Dominion University

**ODU Digital Commons**

---

English Faculty Publications

English

---

1990

## Teaching Literature in the 1990's: Meeting the Challenge

Nancy Topping Bazin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs)



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

## Teaching Literature in the 1990's: Meeting the Challenge

Nancy Topping Bazin

English teachers are currently beset by a variety of political forces vying for their attention. Education has become big news again for the first time since October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union inaugurated the Space Age by launching Sputnik, the first man-made satellite. In 1957, astonished at the Russians' success, Americans panicked and decided that their math, science, and foreign language training was inadequate. Recent surveys showing the superiority of Japanese and European students over American students have provoked serious concern about the quality of education going on in American public schools and in our colleges and universities. The current panic focuses primarily on the humanities where ideological differences are likely to come into play when the issues are discussed. Although most colleges have already gone back to a core curriculum and although a recent study done by the Modern Language Association proves the literary classics are, in fact, being taught in most public high schools, reactionary administrators and teachers are using this sudden concern about quality to lash out at progressive scholars and critics who have, with some success, been advocating the feminist approach to literature along with other concepts in literary theory that challenge the status quo.

A literary curriculum or canon that excludes women, minority, third world, and Asian writers is just as political as a curriculum that includes them. The question is not whether to permit politics to inform what we teach but rather which politics to choose. I vote for a literary curriculum and a literary canon that is democratic and multicultural rather than a curriculum that is elitist and exclusive, so exclusive that it define works as inferior unless they are written by white men. William Bennett, Alan Bloom, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Lynne Cheney (her NEH core curriculum includes only three Afro-Americans and very few female writers) are voting for a return to the traditional curriculum—one designed prior to the political movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

In the debate raging on the pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, false either/or dichotomies are presented, such as, "Should we have excellence

or diversity?" "Standards or representation?" (Giroux & Kaye). In fact, we can have both excellence and pluralism. There are few novels as perfectly crafted as, for example, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Furthermore, are the certified-as-great works by white males all without flaws? Or were they, too, accepted for what they contributed to literary history or for what, despite flaws, has excited our imagination or intellect? The 1988 revisions in Stanford University's Western culture program represent a step forward; yet the then Secretary of Education, William Bennett, called the reform "an unfortunate capitulation to a campaign of pressure politics and intimidation" (quoted in Lazere). Is William Bennett's point of view really "neutral, balanced, and unbiased?" As Donald Lazere points out in *The Chronicle*, Bennett uses a "rhetorical stance of neutrality" to mask his "own bias in favor of conservative ideology" (Lazere).

Just as the conservatives in this country are monitoring the reading lists in the public schools, the Bennetts of the education world dislike developments like those at Stanford, which require professors to give "substantial attention" to the issues of race, gender and class, and to include the study of works by women and minority-group members" in what was formerly called a course in Western culture; henceforth, the teachers of what is now called "Cultures, Ideas, and Values" are also to select works "from at least one non-European culture" (Mooney A,1). This change in the curriculum to which the media have given so much attention was provoked by students' questioning the traditional reading list. They asked: "What. . . did the term "Western" mean? Whose culture were they studying? And how could any culture of which they were a part be represented by a core reading list with no works by women or minority-group members?" (Mooney A,11).

Changes similar to Stanford's are occurring on other campuses. "American University includes current scholarship on race, class, and sex in every course in its new general-education program." At the University of California at Los Angeles, "the perspectives of women and minority groups are included in several anthropology, sociology, and geography courses." Ramapo College is creating on its campus a "global village" that will emphasize not only international education but also "the variety of cultures that contribute to American society" (Heller A,16). Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, stands on the forefront with these national models, for it, too, has integrated scholarship about women, minority, and non-western peoples into its general education program. As the enrollments of minority students increase on many campuses, pressures mount to revise curricula to affirm their existence and their heritages. At UCLA, the minority-group members make up 62 percent of the freshman class and "half of the undergraduate student body" (Mooney A,11). Furthermore, 51 percent of students in college today are female. Women of all races and classes have a right to learn

---

*Nancy Topping Bazin, a Professor of English at Old Dominion University, is the author of Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision and articles on such writers as Doris Lessing, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Edith Wharton, Marge Piercy, and Margaret Atwood. She coedited Conversations with Nadine Gordimer, just published by the University Press of Mississippi.*

about their own history and culture; their existence and perspectives must be acknowledged in the courses they take.

The Modern Language Association's 1988 study showed that in the public schools "the classics of the Western world are being taught pretty much as they were 30 years ago"; but John C. Maxwell, former executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English laments its simultaneous revelation that "efforts over the past 20 years to incorporate works by women and minority writers have not been successful" (Leonard D,3). Maxwell observes that contemporary works are neglected in the public schools, because the classics are safer. He adds, "I think Shakespeare is as dirty as anyone, but because he's Shakespeare, he can get away with it." If contemporary works are avoided, it is not surprising that works by women and by minority and third world men are not being read in the numbers they should be. Indeed, according to a recent report, "only two black authors—Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright—appear among the 50 books most widely assigned by high-school English teachers" (Gates). Still, it is surprising that the concern with racism and the potential for racial violence on school premises has not had a greater impact on the curriculum. Moreover, women's studies have been almost totally absent from the public schools. Just as women's colleges were among the last to develop an interest in women's studies because they failed at first to notice that even female faculty teach from a patriarchal perspective, public school teachers in their predominantly female (but usually male-dominated) environment have been slow to acknowledge their need for training in women's studies. The harm done to both male and female students by training them ideologically to fit comfortably into a patriarchal power structure is less apt to be recognized than the threat to physical safety created by racism.

The situation on the college and university level is somewhat different for several reasons. For example, because sexism and racism usually envelop the few female and minority male professors on campus, they are more likely to see the need for women's studies and minority studies. Furthermore, they are freer to design courses about women or minorities and to choose the books they teach. Public school teachers are frustrated by the threat of parental censorship, by more rigid controls over what books they are allowed to teach, and by inadequate funding for buying additional books. They usually need the consensus of a large group before changes can be made, because in most cases everyone teaching at a particular level will use the same reading list. Lack of trust in the individual teacher, fears of public reaction, and budgetary constraints have led to a conservative curriculum in the public schools.

Since 1968, the wedge of freedom created by topics courses in most American universities has allowed women's studies to flourish in the United States as it has nowhere else in the world. Elsewhere rigid traditions concerning what courses may be taught and rigid examination systems make change virtually impossible. The power of the standardized examination

cannot be underestimated. Whether or not the "new literatures" are included in the examinations is, therefore, highly important. Hence, teachers and administrators should take action to get standardized tests changed. An English teacher at Menchville High School in Newport News, Virginia, Page W. Roberts pinpointed this connection when she told *The Virginian Pilot* that the public schools will emphasize "the works of minorities and women" when "standardized tests start testing for it" (Leonard D,3). The Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, has to hear not only from college and university administrators who want Advanced Placement and assessment examinations to reflect the progress made in general education courses on their own campuses but also from high school teachers and administrators of Advanced Placement examinations. If ETS receives a sufficient number of letters, it will be forced to update its tests to include the "new literatures." Unless change occurs within approximately two years, Old Dominion University will cease granting credit to Advanced Placement students who cannot demonstrate that they are products of a multicultural, multiracial curriculum.

Thus, Advanced Placement credit for the beginning literature courses at Old Dominion University will soon be available only to high schools where AP students do read literature written by women and minorities. Similarly, community college credits will no longer be transferable to Old Dominion University if women and minorities are not brought into those courses. To help motivate change, the university's English Department offered a faculty development institute last summer for community college teachers. It consisted of three intensive weeks of lectures and discussions—one week each on women writers, black and native American writers, and third world writers—and a fourth week of workshops for revising courses to incorporate this new material. This project was funded by the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia. If additional funding is available, future faculty development institutes will include as participants teachers of Advanced Placement literature courses in the high schools. To further faculty development in such nontraditional literatures, Old Dominion University has also offered regular semester courses on women writers, minority writers, and contemporary world literature for the Virginia Beach and Hampton school systems. It has offered one course a semester for each school system for four consecutive years. Curriculum supervisors Lorna Roberson from Virginia Beach and Betty Swiggett from Hampton deserve special recognition for their efforts to make this possible and beneficial. Such faculty development projects should serve as models for faculty and administrators at other universities, community colleges, and high schools.

But where did the ideas for such faculty development projects come from, to help us transform the literary canon and the literary curriculum? Seeds for these ideas were present in the Afro-American Studies programs created in the late sixties and early seventies. But it has been the Women's Studies programs that really launched the concept of curriculum transformation,

that applied for grants to do faculty development, and that set this as a national goal of the National Women's Studies Association, currently housed at the University of Maryland in College Park.

In 1968 when the first women's studies courses were taught, many of them began in college English departments. Before the impact of the women's movement and women's studies encouraged research on women, there was almost no information about women in any of the other disciplines. Almost all scholars in psychology, anthropology, or sociology had interviewed or worked with men only. History ignored women almost entirely; certainly, it ignored the struggle from 1848 to 1920 to get the vote. In 1971, neither the Suffrage Movement, which went on for seventy-two years, nor the names of its leaders appeared in indexes of American history textbooks. In contrast, literature did provide insights about male-female relationships; even male texts could be used to examine the power relationships between the sexes.

I taught my first women's studies class, entitled "Male-Female Relationships in Literature," in 1971 at Rutgers College, one of the five colleges that then made up Rutgers University at New Brunswick, New Jersey. No required text was by a woman, and the class consisted of eighteen men from Rutgers College and three women from its female counterpart, Douglass College. Rutgers College was beginning its transformation from an all male to a coed school by adding a few women to the normal freshmen class of men. Women were not permitted to displace any men who would otherwise have been accepted. At that time few women writers were taught other than Emily Dickinson, the Brontes, and George Eliot. In 1971, the literary canon was still very white, very male, and very upper class.

Since 1920 when the study of literature moved out of genteel ladies circles into universities, the canon of works read has become increasingly narrow. Backlash following the Suffrage Movement was found in articles like Joseph Hergesheimer's entitled "The Feminine Nuisance in American Literature." In this article, which appeared in the prestigious *Yale Review* in 1921, Hergesheimer said: "Literature in the United States is being strangled with a petticoat" (Quoted in Lauter 447). Similarly, the male professoriate was concerned that "truly American art be attractive to, embody the values of, masculine culture" (Lauter 449). In a 1948 study done by NCTE, only three women writers appeared on ninety syllabi in American literature; in the NCTE study conducted in the late 1950's, still only three women and no black writers were taught (Lauter 439, 440). Although the journal *American Literature* was founded in 1929, no article about even a black male writer appeared until 1971 (Lauter 445). Moreover, the situation for women prior to the creation of women's studies was summed up by the famous literary critic Bakhtin when he concluded: "I finally accept what many feminist critics have been saying all along. Our various canons have been established by men, reading books written mostly by men for men, with women as eavesdroppers" (Quoted in Stimpson 43).

Thanks to the rebirth of the women's movement and the beginnings of women's studies in 1968, gradually more and more women writers, who had been obliterated from the history of literature books and the anthologies, were rediscovered in the 1970's, put back into print, and added to the reading lists. By the mid-seventies, enough women writers were known to devote entire courses to women writers. Today one could easily conceive of doing a whole Ph.D. in women's literature.

As yet no comprehensive history of women's literature exists, but histories and evaluations of women's literature in particular periods are being written, and several are already in print. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Norton Anthology of Women's Literature* is the first major textbook of women's literature in all genres through the ages. Since 59 percent of all Ph.D.'s earned in English now go to women, there is hope that this trend will continue and that we shall not return to what the "good ole boys" call the "good ole days." This 59 percent figure is up from women earning 20 percent of the Ph.D.'s in English in 1920 and only 10 percent of the Ph.D.'s in the 1950's.

What has been learned from all this is that the literary canon is "a social construct" which "encodes a set of social norms and values." It is "a means by which culture validates social power" (Lauter 452,435). What has been learned, too, is that "gender is a social construct, not something 'natural' or God-given, but constructed, patterned, by every society for its own purposes and according to its own ideology" (Flemming 47). Gender had not been "a key factor of scholarly analysis" until recently, because in the past "culturally-constructed gender roles were perceived as natural and inevitable," a view useful for maintaining patriarchal power (Aiken xiii).

The impact of women's studies on the field of English has been pervasive and constantly expanding. Feminist criticism has found "a submerged female literary tradition," and it has initiated "a wholesale reinterpretation of all literature, including works by men as well as women, and works with anti-feminist as well as feminist implications" (Boone). In a 1986 survey of English doctoral programs, 87 percent of them "ranked [feminist criticism] as important" (Kolodny). A leading contemporary critic, Jonathan Culler, says feminist literary criticism "has had a greater effect on the literary canon than any other critical movement and . . . has arguably been one of the most powerful forces of renovation in contemporary criticism" (Culler 30). Another critic, K. K. Ruthven, wrote in his book *Feminist Literary Studies*:

What was called (misleadingly) the "feminist perspective" was imagined to be something which trendies would take up and troglodytes put down, and which the rest of us might mention from time to time if it seemed relevant to the interpretation of a particular text. But feminism claims to be much more than a perspective, and the growing volume, sophistication and acuteness of feminist criticism—together with its strategic alliance with the most disruptive critical theories of our time—have placed it at the center of critiques of English studies as traditionally conceived. The feminist intervention strikes me as being incontestably the most important

challenge faced by English studies in the twenty or more years I have been associated with it. (7)

Feminists began their challenge to the field of English studies by asking fundamental questions like:

- Who writes literature?
- Who decides which literature gets into print?
- Who decides which literature is good and which is bad?
- Who decides which literature gets taught?
- Who decides which literature is included in the literary canon?
- Who decides how we read literature?

And they decided that the people who do all of that have power.

Therefore, feminists seek not only to transform the literary canon, that is, those literary works generally included in basic high school and college courses and textbooks, but also to transform how we read. Reading is a learned activity. Scholar Judith Fetterley points out that, "as readers and teachers 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, one of whose central principles is [much too often] misogyny" (xx). Women must, therefore, become what Fetterley calls "resisting" readers (xxii). When they read literature by men, they acknowledge but do not necessarily accept the ways in which women have been depicted in that literature. Taught to read as if they had no perspective of their own, women have been victims of what Kate Millett calls "interior colonization" (25). Hence, many women have been experiencing a need to read everything all over again from a new perspective. They engage in what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision"—"the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35).

A feminist perspective changes not only what we read and how we read, but also how critics write. Male critics are becoming aware that there are feminist critics in their audience. Elaine Showalter points out how oblivious Irving Howe was of any female listener when he wrote of Thomas Hardy's opening of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to escape not by slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold. . . and thus to wrest, through sheer amoral willfulness, a second chance out of life—it is with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins. (Quoted in Culler 43)

A feminist perspective, then, challenges what we read, how we read, and how critics write; moreover, feminist critics strive through their own interpretations to correct the distortions, biases, and omissions in what Mary Ellmann calls "phallic criticism." But even beyond that, it questions the very definition of literature (does it include letters, diaries, autobiographies?); it questions the characteristics of literary periods set up by scholars who

fail to take women's writing into account when making generalizations; it challenges the labels under which literature becomes classified and categorized; it questions literary histories that ignore women's contributions, for example their role in the development of the novel; it challenges aesthetic standards and judgments that only male subject matter is great enough to be judged excellent; it probes into the interrelationship between ideology and education. Susan Aiken notes the blindness of one of her colleagues to his own political ideology when he became irate at having a supposedly comprehensive list of works to be read for a Master's degree examination questioned; he passionately defended the list with these words: "I don't care if there are no black writers on this list! I don't care if there aren't any Indians! I don't care if there aren't any women, for that matter. I think we all know what the really important literature is. That's what we want our students to have studied! I get so tired of people using literature for political reasons!" (Aiken 292). Aiken also cites J. Hillis Miller's "highly-charged. . . profession of faith" in a 1979 speech: "I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton than to read Borges in translation, or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf" (Miller 12). Aiken wonders what energizes this "combative" resistance" and speculates that "the strength of such emotions suggests that a good deal more than just the canon is at stake" (Aiken 292).

Teaching amidst such debates and passionate outpourings requires the English teacher to take some kind of stance in order to decide how to proceed with his or her class. If she goes with rather than against the "democratizing" of the reading list, she begins to teach for change rather than for supporting the status quo. If she begins to question the "transcendental truths" or "universal truths" as defined exclusively by men, she becomes a subversive reader rather than the docile reader she was probably trained to be.

In addition, since feminists want to improve the status of women, their commitment must be to all women. Both the women's movement and women's studies have been themselves challenged to be inclusive rather than exclusive. This means caring about women who are lower class, minority, lesbian, handicapped, third world, or non-Western, and caring even about those who are privileged and white. Moreover, a fascination with women's studies lures teachers into interdisciplinary and international studies to understand the problems faced by the world's women. Venturesome readers may even end up studying the lives and literature of African or Chinese or Japanese women as I have. Furthermore, faculty development in minority studies, Asian studies, third world studies, or lesbian studies, all become relevant. "Hence, the perspectives, values, and interests of all the other liberation movements are interwoven with those of the women's movement" (Bazm 189). Such a wide web includes, too, the perspectives of the men's

liberation movement. Out of such a multi-cultural feminist perspective could emerge a curriculum that would actually encourage students to attain and retain a respect for the preciousness of all life. Even ecological issues become part of a shift from a hierarchical to an egalitarian world view (Bazin 189). As Rosemary Ruether concludes: "There can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (204).

Meeting the challenge of teaching literature in the 1990's will not be easy. The conservative climate nationally, led by bright and forceful personalities, make the local "good ole boys" more confident about speaking out. We must preserve the gains we have made and continue to move forward. The canon question (namely, what books should we teach?) falls within the larger context of "what kinds of knowledge and forms of pedagogy can be adopted that enable, rather than subvert, the formation of a [truly] democratic society?" (Giroux & Kaye). It is important to vote for democracy in the books we teach, the insights we convey, and the teaching methods we use. Our future depends upon it.

### References

- Aiken, Susan Hardy. "Women and the Question of Canonicity." *College English* 48.8 (March 1986): 288-301.
- Bazin, Nancy Topping. "Emerging from Women's Studies: A New World View and a New Goal for Educators." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 4.2 (Summer 1982): 187-92.
- Boone, Joseph A. "How Feminist Criticism Changes the Study of Literature." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 8 July 1987: 76.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Ellmann, Mary. *Thinking About Women*. New York: Harcourt/Harvest, 1968, 27-54.
- Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978.
- Flemming, Leslie A. "The Mainstreaming Experience in Retrospect." *Changing Our Minds: Feminist Transformations of Knowledge*. Ed. Susan Hardy Aiken, et al. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. 39-58.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Academe Must Give Black-Studies Programs Their Due." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 20 September 1989: A,56.
- Giroux, Henry A. and Harvey J. Kaye. "The Liberal Arts Must Be Reformed to Serve Democratic Ends." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 29 March 1989: A,44.
- Heller, Scott. "Colleges Told to Stress Tradition and Shared Views Even As They Bring More Diversity Into Curricula." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 4 October 1989: A,13 & A,16.
- Kolodny, Annette. "Respectability Is Eroding the Revolutionary Potential of Feminist Criticism." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 4 May 1988: A,52.
- Lauter, Paul. "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties." *Feminist Studies* 9. (Fall 1983): 435-63

- Lazere, Donald. "Conservative Critics Have a Distorted View of What Constitutes Ideological Bias in Academe." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 November 1988: A,52.
- Leonard, June. "English Teachers Go on Book as Preferring Classics." *The Virginian-Pilot* 11 September 1989: D,1-D,3.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time." *ADE Bulletin* 62 (1979): 10-18.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970.
- Mooney, Carolyn J. "Sweeping Curricular Change Is Under Way at Stanford as University Phases Out Its 'Western Culture' Program." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 14 December 1988: A,1+.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971). *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1979*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Ruether, Rosemary. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.
- Ruthven, K. K. *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Stimpson, Catharine R. with Nina Kressner Cobb. *Women's Studies in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation*. New York: Ford Foundation, 1988.