

On Teaching 'Women and Literature' to Grade 13 Students

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'La Femme et la littérature' au niveau de la 13e année

Cet article consacre une expérience pédagogique sans précédent dans la vie de l'auteur. Elle nous offre également un résumé du cours et quelques conseils pour d'autres professeurs.

During the school year 1977-8 I had the joy of teaching a course on 'Women and Literature' to a group of high-school students. In describing the format here, I'm offering a few guidelines for a high-school course in this area. But I also want to commemorate a teaching and learning experience which was wonderful for the students and for me as well.

I taught 'Women and Literature' for students at SEED (Shared Experience, Exploration, and Discovery), an alternative secondary school within the Toronto system. SEED students organize their own courses, and the impetus for 'Women and Literature' came from a group of female students some of whom were also involved in putting together a course on Feminism for Grade 13 credit. All the students wanted to do our course.

I suggested to them a reading list, arranged chronologically from the eighteenth century to the present, which would represent writing by women rather than images of women as shown in literature. The framing book for the course as a whole was *A Room of One's Own*. For students who know little history of literature, much less the history of literature by women or women's history, Virginia Woolf's little masterpiece is indispensable.

We began with Joan Goulianos's anthology *by a woman writt*, rich in eighteenth-century excerpts from writings of Margaret Cavendish, Anne Finch, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley. We dipped into the female Gothic through *Frankenstein* and *Northanger Abbey*. Then we entered the mainstream of nineteenth-century English fiction: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. Kate Chopin's *The*

Awakening signalled the coming New World for us, followed by *To the Lighthouse*, *The Bell Jar*, *The Golden Notebook*, and *Lives of Girls and Women*. At the end of the course we read contemporary poetry (by Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, Marge Piercy), and also Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* as an example of female science-fiction writing.

The class format was established at the beginning and remained constant. We met for a two-hour block each week, in my living-room. The location became very important for the students; they all commented on the sheer presence of real life around them as they talked about the lives, and the problems, of characters and authors. The sequence of readings was tightly organized, as were essay assignments and reports. Generally, I opened each class with remarks and large questions pertaining to the text or the period. Often, students had topics to add to the points we wanted to cover at each meeting. I kept the students on a fairly close rein in discussion. These matters concern the course not as one in Women's Studies, but simply as a high-school course in which students were being shown how to read better, think critically, and express themselves coherently.

The Women's Studies emphasis showed in the discussion topics and the essay topics. Why should Lady Mary Wortley Montagu advise that female learning be kept secret? Based on reading *The Mill on the Floss* or *The Bell Jar*, what choices can we say were open to women in those periods? Could one, for example, choose not to marry? Essay topics ran from external critical discussions ('Woman as Artist in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Golden Notebook*') through to revealing internalizing topics ('Have Mr Rochester's Bertha Mason tell her own story'). This last topic was a very successful way for students to explore their own ideas about sexuality and confinement.

(The course concerned women and literature, but we didn't neglect more general literary questions. How and why does Emily Brontë manipulate landscape details in *Wuthering Heights*? For what reasons might an author have written *The Awakening*? But questions of this kind were part of the larger enquiry into writing by women.)

The Women's Studies emphasis also showed in the atmosphere of the class. The issues obviously mattered very much to seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds who were encountering ideas in books which they either had not yet encountered in life or had not yet known how to name. While a few students in the SEED class noted basic similarities between the eighteenth century and now for those born female, others highlighted the remarkable improvements in conditions and possibilities for women. All the students were enriched by hearing a voice from an earlier age which they could recognize and to which they could feel akin. Everyone loved Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet as much as they loved Alice Mun-

ro's Del. They were, after all, meeting characters often the same age as themselves, on thresholds and at crossroads.

A course of this kind is, in my view, fully possible for Grade 13 students. They get training in the traditional skills of reading, writing, and critical discussion. They get their eyes opened about attitudes. (One student wrote in her evaluation that the course uncovered the rigidity of her own ideas about a 'good' marriage, a 'good' wife, and a 'good' mother.) They get a historical understanding of what it might have felt like to live in an earlier period. And they get their wits sharpened on what it is like to be female — in books and in life.

Women's Studies: A High School Program

Michelle Clabrough



Photo by Sharon Ladd

Les Etudes de la femme: programme au niveau secondaire

Cet article définit les buts et la méthodologie d'un cours sur les études de la femme donné au niveau du secondaire V dans un collège parallèle de Montréal. (MIND; moving in a new direction). L'auteur donne un compte-rendu détaillé de ses références et les modes d'évaluation utilisés dans son cours.

In the past few years many universities and colleges have begun to offer women's studies programs in recognition of women's changing roles and needs in today's society. However, in spite of the tremendous need to raise teenagers' consciousness, the same progress has not been accomplished at the high school level. At MIND (Moving in New Directions), the only alternative high school under the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, such a course has been offered successfully for the past three years.

Before discussing the course content, it is necessary to examine the basic premises and goals behind the course, for it is my firm belief that in order to succeed specific conditions must exist. First one must be convinced of the need to prepare teenagers for a changing world, in which not every woman will necessarily marry, have children, be dependent on a husband, and be happy forever. It follows, therefore, that one of the major aims of a women's studies course at the high-school level must be the exploration of myths and stereo-

typed roles that have been imposed not only on women, but also on men. This entails a self-exploration process whereby all students, male and female, are required to analyse and understand the origins of the roles they play, their own misconceptions, prejudices, and biases.

The course that I teach is not a 'women's lib' course, as some often like to nickname it. It is not an 'interest' course, but a matriculation course in senior English, which gives students the same number of credits as any other course. The course has equal academic status to others on the curriculum. This is the basis for success in attracting students to it — those who are genuinely interested as well as the skeptics. Once the relevance of such a course has been established, half the battle is won.

Exploring teenagers' attitudes is a complex task that must be systematically approached. Using a sound-slide set from the Centre for Humanities entitled 'Man and Woman: Myths and Stereotypes', the topic of male and female roles is introduced as the first unit of the course. Students are expected to discuss thoroughly in small groups the audio-visual material presented. I prefer to use group rather than individual discussion because I have found that most teenagers are reluctant to express themselves freely as individuals. Creating an unthreatening atmosphere conducive to free discussion is essential since the format of the course is based primarily on the results of student discussions. Once this has been accomplished, one can begin to explore 'real' feelings — i.e.