Winter 1972

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Recommended Citation
Small, Judy, "Closeup: High School Feminist Literature Course" (1972). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/57

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CLOSEUP: HIGH SCHOOL FEMINIST LITERATURE COURSE

[The following account was organized by the editor from materials prepared by Judy Small who, with Mary Heen, team-taught an experimental course for women students at The-School-Within-A-School of Brookline High School in Massachusetts last spring.]

The course met one night a week for two to three hours at various students' homes. The informal setting encouraged personal exchanges and helped students see each other as people rather than classmates. Sometimes students arrived overflowing with topics to talk about (experiences with sexist employers; plans for a school abortion conference). At some point, we would suggest discussing the reading.

We decided to focus on material that was short but rich—pieces that could be read quickly and discussed for hours. Thus, we chose "Odour of Chrysanthemums" rather than *Women in Love*, "Rappaccini's Daughter" rather than *The Scarlet Letter*. The six novels on our list were brief or easily read: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Old Mortality* by Katherine Anne Porter, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* by Richard Farina, *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac, *The Abortion* by Richard Brautigan. We also read some fourteen stories and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

With the exception of the novels, most of the material we used was by writers approved for high school reading. Many of the stories are included in popularly-used anthologies (Moffet and McElheny's *Points of View*, Crane's *Fifty Great Short Stories*).

With a few important exceptions we chose works we liked—works which, however enraging, would hold up as pieces of writing even after being demolished as examples of sexism. (Of course, not all works were sexist.) In taking literary value into account we had our own comfort in mind; we wished to spare ourselves poor writing which, however provocative, stung us to the core of our English-teachers' souls. But a different, less personal case can be made for examining good and great writing. The more powerful the writer, the more complex and potentially insidious the image he/she creates.

While we took literary value as a general requirement, we waived it in the cases of Kerouac, Brautigan and Farina. We felt their works pompous, full of unfocussed, self-consciously youthful energy, and page after page of bad writing. In short, we don't like them, yet felt they were in some ways the most important books on our list. More than Updike or Lawrence, these writers are being read enthusiastically in colleges and high schools, where they are advertised as earthy, rollicking mentors of liberation. Yet the conceptions of women revealed in their novels are among the most oppressive we have encountered.

Our entering questions, open and descriptive, yet provocative, usually followed a pattern as simple as the following:

How would you describe _____ (a female character)?
How does she feel about herself?
How does she feel about other women in the story?

Why does she act the way she does? (e.g., in Joyce's "Eveline," why does Eveline stay at home?)
What external influences are important?
What kind of family does she have?
What do you think of her upbringing?
Is religion important to her? How? a source of strength? or does it work to her disadvantage?
What internal motivations are at work?

These questions can, of course, be asked about male characters.

At a point after the first hour of discussion, when we thought we had come to understand the reading as well as possible, and before the conversation had begun to move of its own accord away from the reading, we asked the following basic questions:

Have you ever known any women like _____?
Does she seem real to you?
Have you ever had any feelings like hers?
Quite consciously here, we brought our own personal experiences into the discussion, especially if students seemed reluctant to talk openly about theirs. Usually, few such cues were needed after the early classes, though we continued to contribute personal experiences for less tactical, more spontaneous reasons.

As we had hoped, the course succeeded in several respects. Encouraging students to ask the questions—how are women depicted and how is the portrayal related to my experience—contributed to their willingness to discuss difficult material closely and with excitement, for they understood that writers might have something to say about their lives. Second, encouraging students to share their experiences and feelings with others led to solidarity within the group, stronger than ordinarily powerful cliques. Eventually the class became a group to which students could bring personal problems (an abortion, the pros and cons of virginity) and a place where they could receive support and help from others.

Despite the success of the course, I would like to move beyond a class in which students are understandably afraid to express tensions and hostilities. These have to be explored if we are to transcend simple yea-saying and back-patting. This year I am working to develop a group in which anger as well as warmth can be expressed and worked out constructively.

Judy Small

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