Summer 1975

Women in High School English Literature

Phyllis Arlow

Merle Froschl

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/218

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
The literature which is taught in secondary schools is used not merely as a tool for improving reading, written expression and general information. To a great degree, literature defines values and reality. The effect of reading material on the beliefs of students is immediate. While all are not in agreement, at least one study using reading content as a means of changing attitudes has demonstrated that these attitudes change in a positive direction with positive character presentations, and in a negative direction with negative character presentations. Considerable evidence supports the fact that not only are females portrayed differently from males in secondary school literature, they are portrayed as inferior, less capable or less significant beings. It is therefore important for educators to recognize the messages which secondary school literature is transmitting to adolescents.

In the fall of 1973, The Feminist Press began to develop plans for producing materials to supplement existing high school English and social studies textbooks. While a number of studies had already clearly established the sex-bias of high school English and social studies texts, we decided to review these theses and as many of the most widely used books as possible, with the aim of writing our own report.

The Feminist Press examined for evidence of sexism those anthologies now in use in the secondary school English curriculum. We examined those textbooks which according to the National Council of the Teachers of English were the most widely used in secondary school English classes in the United States. Our main focus was on the portrayal of female character in these anthologies. We examined the number of male and female authors in the anthologies now in use, the overall focus of the books, the language and editorial comments describing them, and the inclusion of minority women in selections. Finally, we correlated our findings with other surveys and studies which included both anthologies and other supplementary reading selections. Our report is a compilation of the research that reflects the most recent thinking about the portrayal of women in literature presently in use in the secondary school English curriculum. Our findings are presented here in two parts: the maleness of literature and the portrayal of female character.

THE MALENESS OF LITERATURE

Overview

As our study of secondary school literature progressed, it became clear that we could not begin to discuss the female image in literature without first noting the overall "maleness" which characterized every anthology we examined. Most of the literature taught in high school classrooms, whether in anthologies or in supplementary readings, is male-centered in imagery, theme and characterization. Literature which focuses around the endurance and courage of men is plentiful, while almost no literature presents women who are physically strong or courageous. Stories about male athletes are abundant; those about female athletes are rare. Similarly, men who are successful in their work outside the home are portrayed often in the literature examined, while almost no literature presents women who are engaged in work outside the home. The fact that one-half of the adult female population is presently in the labor force, and that many women are responsible for the support of their families is almost totally ignored. Women are still portrayed as perennial cake-bakers, too fragile and dependent to do the important work of life. Even in their role as wife and mother, women are not portrayed in these books as people capable of intelligently caring for and guiding the lives of children.

Our study of secondary school literature corresponds with the findings of such researchers as Broverman, Reisman, Griffin, Maccoby and Horner who have shown that the traits identified as feminine are valued less than those considered to be masculine. According to these psychological studies, the masculine image is synonymous with that of the healthy adult person—inde­

peditent, aggressive, competitive, task-oriented, assertive, in­

novative, active. The feminine image—passive, fragile, yielding, dependent, empathetic, non-aggressive, supportive and graceful—is antithetical to that of the healthy adult.

Language

The language used in anthologies is also male-centered. The editor assumes the reader is male, rather than both male and female. The allegedly generic "he" and "man" are used consistently in editorial comments, questions to students and in chapter divisions. For example, in the introduction to one eleventh-grade textbook, masculine imagery prevails:

Gertrude Stein

and dependent to do the important work of life. Even in their role as wife and mother, women are not portrayed in these books as people capable of intelligently caring for and guiding the lives of children.

Our study of secondary school literature corresponds with the findings of such researchers as Broverman, Reisman, Griffin, Maccoby and Horner who have shown that the traits identified as feminine are valued less than those considered to be masculine. According to these psychological studies, the masculine image is synonymous with that of the healthy adult person—inde­

peditent, aggressive, competitive, task-oriented, assertive, in­

novative, active. The feminine image—passive, fragile, yielding, dependent, empathetic, non-aggressive, supportive and graceful—is antithetical to that of the healthy adult.

Language

The language used in anthologies is also male-centered. The editor assumes the reader is male, rather than both male and female. The allegedly generic "he" and "man" are used consistently in editorial comments, questions to students and in chapter divisions. For example, in the introduction to one eleventh-grade textbook, masculine imagery prevails:

We begin by assuming that literature is controlled energy. The energy is man's need to express himself. . . . Control . . . is a
Another anthology divides its contents into two sections, "This Man, This World" and "Man's Destiny, Man's Choice."9 In another text, published in 1974, the editor refers to the author as "he" throughout, whether the particular author being discussed is male or female.10

**Woman as Author**

A disproportionately small number of female authors appears in anthologies currently in use. This is true whether the content is limited to twentieth-century fiction, or expanded to include European and American literature from its beginnings to the present day, and whether the book was published in 1974 or earlier. The Oregon Curriculum, for example, includes 69 male authors and 3 female authors in one volume; and 62 and 9 in another. In *Adventures in Appreciation*, there are 63 male authors and 4 female authors. Other studies revealed similar findings. A NOW survey of 171 anthologized selections counted 147 male authors to 24 female authors.11 The most comprehensive survey involved 400 selections: of these, 306 were written by males, 94 by females.12

It is not uncommon for textbooks to include the same popular women writers—for example, Emily Dickinson and Willa Cather—while more contemporary female writers like Doris Lessing or Mary McCarthy rarely, if ever, appear. Yet, many unknown or undistinguished male writers like Mickey Mantle, George Freitag or Clifford Simak comprise a large part of the majority of anthologies. Furthermore, no attempt is made to represent women writers in various historical eras. *Adventures in Appreciation* includes four women writers (out of sixty-seven authors) who lived at approximately the same time (1830-1933) despite the fact that this book includes European and American literature from its beginnings to the present day.

The woman writer herself is regarded as an aberration. She is often depicted as a recluse, a mad woman, childless and unfulfilled. In one anthology, a page devoted to Gertrude Stein sums up her career in the following manner: "Miss Stein's experiments make her unintelligible to the general public."13 Her most important contribution to literature is described as the stimulus she gave to other writers, notably Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson. Despite the fact that this page bears a portrait of Stein upon it, and that a few sentences are initially about her, the real subject of praise is Hemingway, whose achievements are discussed in great detail. Of course, the selection that follows is by Hemingway only.

**Female Main Characters**

Characterization is also male-dominated. In many stories, there are no female characters at all, and in the majority of selections, there are no female main characters. Females may appear briefly, but they are not developed as whole persons, and they are not integral to the plot. Often, the categories which are chosen (sports, war, nature) are those which have traditionally excluded female participation. For example, out of the eight divisions of one book, five of them (Survival, Spaceways, Mystery, Decision, Battleground) contain no female characters at all.14

In order to determine whether this male-centered pattern is balanced by supplementary readings, we consulted Scarvia B. Anderson's comprehensive study of the major works most often assigned in high school.15 According to this 1964 survey conducted in 691 high schools throughout the United States, the most frequently assigned books are *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, followed by *Silas Marner*, *Great Expectations*, *Tale of Two Cities*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Return of the Native*, *Our Town*, *Red Badge of Courage*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*. This rather extensive reading list is hardly representative from any point of view. Almost all of the main characters are male, all the authors but two (Jane Austen and George Eliot) are white males, and only one item was written in the twentieth century. With the exception of *Our Town*, this list could have appeared 70 years ago as well as today. Why, for more than half a century, these Shakespearean plays and nineteenth-century novels have been read consistently in high schools throughout the United States is a matter worthy of scrutiny by educators. (*Silas Marner*, for example, was a daring choice once when the Harvard-Yale reading list for the year 1887 required a modern novel.) Whatever the original reasons, much of the literature now being taught in our schools is not necessarily useful to adolescents today.

**PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTER**

**Findings**

Women are relegated to secondary status in the literary curriculum not so much because they are omitted, but because of the distasteful way they are included. Female characters are stereotyped either by the roles they fulfill or by the personality traits with which they are endowed. The majority of the stories in anthologies depict women in the traditional roles of wife and

*Harriet Beecher Stowe*
mother. Their roles are secondary ones—they are supportive of the male main characters. Often, they are the servers bringing in the tea or dinner. In “Alone at Sea” by Hannes Lindeman, for example, an adventure story of a man’s struggle against the elements, the only female appears at the beginning in her role as server:

Now Ruth is preparing breakfast for me. Fried eggs, sunny side up, on an ocean of butter, to give me more energy before taking off.16

In another story, “Astronaut Away” by Russell A. Apple, Lt. Walker mentally reviews telling his wife and daughter about his mission:

His daughter Peggy would be home from play, dinner would be cooking; he could talk to both of them. And what seemed more important; he would like them to hear his voice at least once more.17

In this story, the wife, Beth, and the daughter, Peggy, receive virtually the same treatment, so that one must constantly check names to be certain if the author is referring to the wife, or to the little girl. For example, a statement like, “Beth had waved from the window as usual when he left home,’ could apply either to the adult female or the child.18

In “Leaves from a Surgeon’s Journal,” a story by Harvey Cushing, women appear only in the following sentence: “Red Cross nurses were serving them hot soup and other things, ending up with the inevitable cigarette.”19

“Papa and the Bomb” by William Iverson tells the story of a father who is a mad genius constantly having “brainstorms.” The contrast among the interests of father, son and mother is noteworthy—the son is telling the story:

For instance, the other night I’m sitting in the kitchen doing my geometry homework, and my mother is also in the kitchen baking a honey cake, when he comes up from the cellar with this expression on his face, and I could see he had another brainstorm.20

Only one mother was encountered who was not a “server,” but she was a cruel, twisted individual. Indeed, some of the most interesting women in the curriculum seem to bear out the “witch” stereotype which is well-recognized in fairy tales. In “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” D. H. Lawrence describes this atypical mother:

Only she herself knew that in the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. Everybody else said of her: “She is such a good mother. She adores her children.” Only she herself, and her children themselves, knew it was not so. They read it in each other’s eyes.21

Although most women are not depicted as malevolent beings, many are seen as detrimental to progress. Over and over again, women’s helplessness in the face of disaster is evident. They are unable to cope—they panic, they are anxious, worried, over-protective, maudlin. The men, on the other hand, generally know how to behave during disasters—they are calm, competent, in control.

In “Fire in the Wilderness” by Benedict and Nancy Freedman, the wife is concerned with her husband’s safety during a fire, but quite unnecessarily:

... “What about you? Mike—I’m so frightened you won’t be careful!” ... “I’m fine, you know that. You do just what I tell you Kathy. Don’t be frightened, don’t get panicky, and don’t leave the river.”22

Unfortunately, despite Mike’s advice, Kathy does suffer burns, and it is Mike who tells her about them, as if she could not feel her own wounds—“You got second degree burns on that pretty face of yours,” Mike states.23

Even little children in these stories can see how silly the fears of the average adult woman are. In “Dawn of the Remembered Spring,” by Jesse Stuart, the little boy declares: “I love to kill snakes. I’m not afraid of snakes. I laugh to think how afraid of snakes Mom was . . . .”24

In only one of the stories surveyed did a woman actually know more about a natural disaster than a man. In Walter van Tilburg Clark’s “Why Don’t You Look Where You’re Going?” a woman has an excellent knowledge of the water’s depth and, therefore, the ability to save the lives of the passengers aboard a ship. However, she is no “normal” woman—she is cruel and unfeminine. In fact, she has no real name, but is simply called “the masculine lady” as in the following illustration: “The masculine young lady disagreed . . . . The other passengers rebuked her heartlessness with silence.”25

A frequent theme in literature portraying female character is the search for a marriage partner. Here can be found a variety of un-wholesome women, from nagging mothers to females who are status-seeking, pushing, interfering, sarcastic and jealous. Most of these characters appear in connection with “romantic” stories which are grouped either by theme (“Relationships”) or by genre (“Short Story”). The anthology selection “Sunday Costs Five Pesos,” a one-act “comedy” of Mexican village life, is filled with stereotypic man-trappers who compete with each other to achieve their ultimate goal—marriage. Berta is described as “very pretty, but unfortunately she has a very high temper, possibly the result of her red hair.”26 She is never described in terms of her aspirations, abilities or intellect. Salome is introduced to the reader even more distastefully: “She is 28, and so many years of hunting a husband have left her with an acid tongue.”27 These women are bitter, ugly, competitive. They tell adolescents that woman’s central goal is to find a man and to get married: the process itself is ugly, but if not successfully achieved, unmarried women become empty, hateful creatures, unfulfilled in every way.
Implications

A Member of the Wedding

females are learning harmful lessons which accentuate prejudices the most wholesome females in the curriculum.

school literature is the contribution of such texts to the under-

traits, but even here, they are often considered to be outside of competitive with each other, or as passive and childish creatures.

emotionally—such as Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird, Frankie in A Member of the Wedding or Emily in “Bad Characters.” However, they are dynamic personalities, who have an identity separate from the family or the males in their lives. They have goals and interests of their own, and unquestionably, they represent the most wholesome females in the curriculum.

Implications

It is apparent from the study that the anthologies used in high school English classes depict life unrealistically. Women are not being supplied with admirable role models, and both males and females are learning harmful lessons which accentuate prejudices and preferences for a white, male-dominated culture.

Most of the literature surveyed depicts women in the traditional roles of housewife and mother, but even here, they are characterized as inferior people. Often, women are portrayed as cruel, competitive with each other, or as passive and childish creatures. Only “tomboys” or grandmothers reveal positive personality traits, but even here, they are often considered to be outside of the “mainstream” of life.

One of the most serious implications of the study of secondary school literature is the contribution of such texts to the underachievement of the adolescent female. Most researchers are in agreement with Anne Grant West, who has stated that it is in the junior and senior high school that students idealize the sex roles prescribed by our culture, and it is, significantly, in these years that girls start to underachieve. According to a study by Shaw and McCuen:

There is evidence that girls who are underachievers in high school usually begin to be so about the onset of puberty, while for boys underachievement in high school usually has an earlier outset. This contrast is a further indication that the achievement drop-off among girls as they reach maturity is linked to the adult female sex role.

A study conducted by Mary Beaven, which sought to discover which female characters students could positively identify with, revealed that there were few, if any, admirable role models present in the curriculum. Girls wrote unfavorable comments which pointed to the dearth of favorable women characters in literature. They stated either that they could not recall reading anything at all about females, or that they were unimpressed with those they had read about. One male student commented: “We have read about so few women in English class that they are hardly worth mentioning. The few we have read about I wouldn’t care to have for a wife or mother.”

It is highly significant that most girls could not recall reading about any women they could admire and those who did, did not wish to resemble any of the characters they had read about. When they did name admirable characters, highest on the list of characters girls could admire were Hester Prynne, Scarlett O’Hara and Juliet. Although all of these women were victims in one way or another, they were singled out because at least they were main characters. In the conclusion to her study, Mary Beaven remarks:

For the most part, women in the literature read and discussed in high school English classes play minor, unpleasant roles. The few major feminine characters tend to be either passive and insipid or vicious. And the result of the survey indicated that boys and girls can relate to few of these feminine characters.

It is clear that adolescents, especially, are very much in need of the feminine contributions to consciousness and women and men need to understand and value the nature of these contributions. We need to read about what is happening to us in the context of realistic life situations and to provide learning experiences which are meaningful to our lives. Since the present texts are overwhelmingly biased, we will have to provide, for the next decade or two, supplementary materials which express the experiences of our lives with greater accuracy.

FOOTNOTES

2 For a complete list of anthologies used in this study, see bibliography.
3 Most of the literature which we surveyed was not only sexist, it was racist as well. The selections reinforce the American preference for a white, middle-class, male-dominated culture. Of the few female authors included in the anthologies in our survey, only four were black poets. When minority women are included as characters in literature, there is little awareness that strategies which may be appropriate for one group are wrong for another. There is an over-emphasis on dialect, and a tendency to assume that all low-income families are the same. According to a NCTE Task Force on Racism and Bias in the teaching of English, educational materials now suffer from the following deficiencies:

a) The inadequate representation of literary works by members of nonwhite minorities in general anthologies which serve as basic texts, and in basal readers and other Language Arts kits, including audio-visual materials, in most elementary, secondary and college English courses.

b) Representation of minority groups which is demeaning, insensitive or unflattering to the culture.
ANTHOLOGIES REVIEWED


Hurst, Gayle. "Sex Bias in Junior High Literature Anthologies." passim.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hurst, Gayle. "Sex Bias in Junior High Literature Anthologies." St. Louis: St. Louis National Organization for Women.


Kneer, Leo B., ed. Exploring Life Through Literature, p. 93.

Kneer, Leo B., ed. Perspectives, p. 164.

Kneer, Leo B., ed. Viewpoints in Literature, p. 74.

Kneer, Leo B., ed. Viewpoints in Literature, p. 158.

Kneer, Leo B., ed. Focus, p. 33.

Kneer, Leo B., ed. Focus, p. 34.


Kneer, Leo B., ed. Viewpoints in Literature, p. 166.

Hurst, p. 12.

Anne Grant West, "Women's Liberation or Exploding the Fairy Princess Myth," p. 6.


Mullen, Jean S. "Freshmen Textbooks," College English, October, 1972, pp. 79-83.


