

### 3 Genderizing the Curriculum: A Personal Journey

Not long after teaching Contemporary World Literature, I was taking graduate courses to renew my teaching certificate, and one night a week I engaged in conversation about literature and teaching with other adults. Even if a particular class was dull, I could “zone out” in the back of the room and reflect on the challenges I was facing with my own students. One semester, without thinking much about the topic, I signed up for a graduate class titled Women in Literature.

As the students and the professor took their seats around a long table and began to introduce themselves that first evening, an awareness came over me: I was going to be the only guy in the classroom, the only male in a Women in Literature seminar.

On the syllabus were books by authors I had heard of but never read, such as Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker, and many others completely new to me. As I have said, I had in the past been assigned very little literature by or about women; nevertheless, I reminded myself, I didn’t need to be worried. I was an English teacher. I had lots of academic preparation. Why should this literature class be different from any other? Certainly, I was for equal rights and equal pay for women—didn’t that mean I was a feminist? With these thoughts in mind, I decided, I should try to appear as nonchalant and as at ease as possible in my minority of one. Still, telling myself “I can handle this” was not enough to end a certain sense of vulnerability.

As my classmates introduced themselves—many were also high school teachers—I was struck by their enthusiasm. They knew some of the books already and “couldn’t wait to get into the rest of the reading.” They had been “waiting for years for a course like this.” A teacher named Shelly pointed out that we were in the 1980s and it was “about time for this class to be offered at our college.” The feeling continued that this course might be unlike others I had taken.

As the course unfolded, students made reports about the lives of the authors we were reading, and these reports played a significant role in our discussion of the literature. Our conversation found connections between

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the struggles of the heroines of the novels and the lives of the authors who had created them, and these relationships made the literary works all the more interesting. Moreover, my classmates were frequently making connections between characters in the novels and women they knew—their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, even themselves. Trained as I was in New Critical approaches, these connections between personal histories and literature were, at first, confusing. I found myself wondering about the appropriateness of family histories in a literature course. Yet, when we read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and discussed the attempts of the main character to obtain a university education in England in the 1920s, I found myself talking about the challenges my grandmother faced in trying to attend college in St. Louis at about the same time period.

In this nearly all-female class taught by a female professor and focused on women's literature, I noticed that the women students were more assertive about their ideas than in most courses I had taken before. Not that anyone wouldn't let me speak, or in any way cut me off, it was just that my female classmates were comfortable challenging and disagreeing in a way I was not accustomed to hearing from women students in literature classes focused on male authors. Was I beginning to understand that there was something inhibiting for women in traditional male-centered literature classes?

This was the class where I first encountered Buchi Emecheta's ironic Nigerian novel *Joys of Motherhood*, and I remember just how unusual the book seemed. Not only was the topic unfamiliar, but the writing itself appeared to me somehow unnatural, contorted. It seemed to me as if this book lacked the literary quality of the British classics to which I was accustomed. On the other hand, my classmates loved it and I didn't quite understand why. In the seminar I ventured to ask, "Don't some of you find the prose of this book uneven or poorly worded?"

"Could you give us an example?" the professor asked.

Although I suggested a couple of paragraphs, when we looked more closely at the text I realized that I was unable to justify my point very clearly—to my classmates the passages seemed fine, and the closer we looked, the harder it was to put my finger on inadequacies.

I realize now that this course in women's literature was introducing me to new materials, new approaches to reading literature—especially reader response and biographical approaches—and challenging the New Critical and canonical literary values I had been educated in. Even if I didn't fully understand it at the time, the seminar was causing me to reflect on my own teaching and on the literature I was assigning to my students in my high school classes. My first reaction to the new ideas and approaches had

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been to see them as somehow “lowering standards”; on this point, my view began to evolve.

Several years later I was able to realize how far this evolution had taken me, when, for a different course, I read *Joys of Motherhood* a second time. Now, after taking graduate courses in African literature and reading more literature written by women writers on my own, I could better recognize Buchi Emecheta’s treatment of her themes and her commentary on the experiences of Nigerian women. This time the prose seemed compelling. Later still, teaching the same book in my own class on homelessness made it completely clear to me that my initial difficulties with *Joys of Motherhood* were not so much the result of the text itself, but of my inexperience as a reader and the narrowness of my academic training.

This Women in Literature seminar, along with teaching about the Holocaust and my encounter with a homeless man, were experiences that influenced my development as a teacher, and as a person. Translating these moments and experiences into my own teaching, making connections with students, and reworking my goals and methods—all of this is precisely what keeps me excited about being in the classroom. Yet the process has not always been smooth or as successful as I would like.

After Women in Literature, I began, awkwardly, to include more writing by women and more treatment of “women’s issues” into my courses. My British Literature class for college-bound twelfth graders was just the place to start. Why had it not concerned me that I was teaching a yearlong literature course meeting five days a week without a single novel, play, short story, or even poem written by a woman author? My first experiment was going to be a direct borrowing from my graduate class; my department chair supported my request to order a class set of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.

The experiment didn’t turn out particularly well. If I was every bit the converted teacher armed with what I thought was a wonderful new book, the students were reluctant. Despite the connection I had been able to make with my grandmother, the book didn’t make a personal impact on them. They got the main point that it was hard for women to write fiction if they didn’t have any resources or time—or, as Woolf puts it, “a room of one’s own”—yet neither the young men nor the young women in my class saw the issues raised by the book as still relevant. “Today women can do anything they want,” Jennifer pointed out. “If women want to go to college or become writers, there is nothing stopping them,” Nathan said.

If students had a hard time connecting the book to the present day, they were more open to thinking about what Woolf was saying about the

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past. Perhaps our best discussion developed from Woolf's examination of just how far Shakespeare's hypothetical sister (a woman with her brother's talent and love of language) might have gone in Shakespeare's day.

Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. (*Room* 51)

Of course, Virginia Woolf is notoriously difficult to read, and much of the subtlety, playfulness, and irony of the essay was pretty tough sailing for most students, even with the best study questions and discussion leading I could muster.

If I didn't succeed in making the essay relevant to my students, teaching *A Room of One's Own* was still an education for me. As I taught the book and entered into dialogue about why I liked it, I began to understand it better myself. I could see how it was revolutionary for Woolf to develop the argument of her essay through the daily experience of her female characters, so that, in her hands, the academic essay form began to merge in intriguing ways with personal narrative. Writing in this way, Woolf validated the experience of women in the absence of their academic representation, in their exclusion, in her day, from participation in elite all-male universities, such as (in the book) "Oxbridge."

While teaching *A Room of One's Own* was educating me about women and fiction, it was also showing me some of the challenges of attempting feminist teaching. It was hard, at least at first, for the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old women and men I was teaching to see ways that feminist writers might have meaning for them. They were right—at least in part—that roles for women had changed since Virginia Woolf's day and that the issues in Woolf's essay, at least as I had presented it, were distant from their own experience.

I had somewhat more success addressing women's experience with my students the following year, when I taught the more romantic *Jane Eyre*. Although the students were aware of the nineteenth-century time period of the book, they could sympathize with the abuse Jane suffered from her adoptive mother, the harsh conditions of her education at the Lowood school, the importance of her friendship with Helen Burns, and the narrow range of choices open to Jane when her education was finished. These students were interested in the fact that Brontë had written under a man's name, and they (and I) found some of the passages in the novel thought-provoking:

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many

rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrowed-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (112–13)

The debate we had in class about whether or not Charlotte Brontë should have had Jane marry Rochester began to raise issues that my students were able to identify with—they had definite ideas about equality and fairness in relationships and marriages.

As the topic of women's experience entered my British Literature course, I saw myself and my students move from looking at how women were represented in literature to a wide variety of gender issues. I began connecting literature to historical and contemporary subjects in more of the texts I was teaching, not only in those written by or about women. Teaching *Macbeth*, for example, I began to see that not only was the representation of Lady Macbeth not exactly complimentary to women, but also the whole code of manhood that Macbeth adopts serves to limit and trap him. Indeed, the theme of manhood seemed to run throughout the play. We found it in Macbeth's violence, in his "vaulting ambition," in his determination to disprove Lady Macbeth's challenge to his masculine pride, and in the contrast between Macbeth and Macduff in their willingness to experience feelings of pain and loss. Thus, exploring gender roles in *Macbeth* provided an opportunity to connect the issue of gender expectations to the young men in the class as well as to the young women. Now I see this focus on gender issues in Shakespeare's plays and other works of literature as a vital part of a historically grounded cultural studies that can connect to students in the present day. I have since read Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus's *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640*, a collection of street pamphlets from Shakespeare's day that richly illuminates gender issues in his plays and could easily be taught along with them. (For more discussion of cultural studies approaches to Shakespeare, see Chapter 5.)

Although I continue to take steps toward addressing gender issues in my classes, much of what I have been learning recently has come from the new teachers I have been working with. Many of them have read Whaley and Dodge's *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High*

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*School English Curriculum*. Offering a wealth of new works and curricular ideas, this book helps us think more critically about the curriculum that is already in place. It puts forward a student-centered, reader response, and explicitly feminist pedagogy for English teaching. The authors declare:

We believe that all English teachers can and should work toward including more literature by and about women and toward a more feminist approach to teaching, empowering both young women and young men and opening up English to something more exciting and more interesting, ultimately leading students to take charge of their own learning. (2)

*Weaving in the Women* demonstrates how movements for social change coupled with new kinds of scholarship are actively changing both the texts we teach and the ways in which we teach them.

### Women's and Gender Studies

One of the most powerful forces in the transformation of English teaching at both the secondary school and university levels has been the women's movement and associated feminist criticism and scholarship. While I realize that for many a "backlash" may have given the term "feminist" negative connotations, all of us recognize the contribution that the women's movement has made—and continues to make—toward addressing gender inequality and increasing the choices available to both women and men. Of course, the teenage years constitute a vital time in the establishment of self-esteem and in the shaping of gender roles and identities. Imitating television programs and music and sports stars, being bombarded by advertising, and participating in school events and on football teams and cheerleading squads—even in chess clubs and literary magazines—teenagers and young adults are immersed in a world where gender roles are supercharged. Unfortunately, young people typically have few opportunities to carefully examine gender codes, roles, and expectations. The work of women's studies and gender studies thus becomes particularly relevant to English teachers and forms one of the most important approaches under the cultural studies umbrella.

Women like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Kate Millet, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Barbara Christian, Paula Gunn Allen, Gayatri Spivak and many others have recovered and validated writing by women, raised questions about gender equality in the traditionally male literary canon, and explored gender questions across cultures. Their efforts have helped us recognize the quantity, quality, and value of writing by women. Consciousness-raising movements, women's studies programs



and feminist scholarship have forged a history of women-centered teaching and learning, making connections between people's lives and the literature curriculum, connections relevant to both women and men.

Part of this feminist tradition consists of gender studies, an effort not so much to look at biological determinants of sexual difference or sexual orientation, but instead to examine the way that roles for men and women—and for heterosexuals as well as for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons—have developed historically and culturally, and how these roles continue to be made and contested in the present day. The distinction between “gender,” as created in a particular culture, and “sex,” as a biological inheritance, is central to the work of many feminists who point out that being a man or a woman is more than a physical characteristic. Indeed, scholars like Michel Foucault have shown that, rather than being “natural,” gender concepts and categories have changed dramatically over time. Such an insight makes it more difficult—and perhaps more interesting—to read literature from different cultures and historical periods. Like multicultural studies, gender studies urges us to become more sensitive to the way we think about and understand ourselves and others.

Feminist and gender studies have opened up awareness and created a justification for thinking of gender issues as a fundamental part of English as an academic subject. Roles for men and women, equal treatment and opportunity, family and love relationships, sexual assault and abuse, school and workplace equity—all are topics that feminist writers and scholars have legitimated for literature and language arts classrooms. Bringing feminist and gender studies into the classroom encourages teachers to take that which is vital in the lives of young people and make it intellectually meaningful to the literature we read and teach. Further, feminist scholarship provides teachers and students alike with the critical tools they need to analyze themselves and the world.

Before reading *Weaving in the Women* in my class, Andrea Doxtader says, her interest in women's studies was “already sparked.” Just as I was, Andrea was influenced by a course she had taken in women's studies. Responsible for eleventh-grade American literature in a small town in rural Michigan, she organizes her teaching around the theme of civil rights, and women's experience is an important part of the curriculum. After reading American Indian literature and African American slave narratives, Andrea engages her students in a unit on women's history and literature. I observed a class that had just finished “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin and was exploring issues in women's history before reading “A Jury of Her Peers” by Susan Glaspell.

Student groups were reading short pieces from a variety of sources, many gleaned from Andrea's women's history course. The articles included a brief history of the legal status of women from the eighteenth century to the present, a speech by educator and activist M. Carey Thomas titled the "Desire of Women for Higher Education," a speech by Mary C. Vaughan about the goals of the temperance movement, an essay by Margaret Sanger about the importance to women of birth control, and a short essay on the issue of unequal treatment of women in employment. In jigsaw fashion, one group would report on their article to the rest of the class. I observed a discussion where the students talked about the difficulties women faced in trying to go to college. I quote this discussion here not only to show how much better Andrea was able to raise these issues than I was when I taught *A Room of One's Own*, but also to show how the essays that Andrea chose created a cultural studies context that made the literature she was teaching more meaningful to her students. As you read the conversation, notice how students connect their reading about history to their experience in the present.

*Sharon:* "In those days only boys went to school. Young women prayed to God to be able to learn."

*Jessica:* "Why didn't they go?"

*Sharon:* "It was thought to be 'bad for a woman's health.'"

*Robert:* "Home Ec was probably the only class they would let girls take in those days."

*Teacher:* "Are there any students in this class who kind of like math or chemistry or biology?"

*Shelly:* "Yes, I do—I like math. I like chemistry."

*Teacher:* "What difference would it make if you couldn't study those subjects?"

*Martha:* "It seems like they tried to protect us. They thought they would protect us. Think of how dumb you would be sitting home every day."

*Andrew:* "The reason more women started going to college was that nowadays you need more education to get the same job."

*Jessica:* "We need to be able to support ourselves. Women have to go to college to be able to get a job."

*Abbey:* "You can't always count on other people to take care of you."

*Shelly:* "My goal is to get married in order to be happy, not to take care of someone."

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- Robert:* “Nowadays you can’t depend on just one income. We couldn’t live on just my dad’s wages.”
- Janelle:* “Now it is pretty equal. You can’t discriminate like you used to. So I can’t get worried about what happened in the past.”
- Brittany:* “It is totally different nowadays. Now everything is pretty much equal. It is all in the past.”
- Robert:* “I think discrimination still goes on. At my mom’s work everyone but her got the same raise, yet she works harder. It’s a Japanese company and they treat their women workers differently. We got a new truck and that five thousand dollars would have been the down payment. I think discrimination still goes on today.”
- Sbaron:* “In the 1600s women had no legal rights. They couldn’t own property or engage in business. A married woman had no rights except through her husband. Anything she earned went to the husband, not her.”
- Crystal:* “Nowadays we can be just as active as we want to be. Back then women were treated like children.”
- Pete:* “What this is all about is how the past and present connect.”
- Mark:* “In those days they finally made it a misdemeanor to beat your wife, but that was all.”
- Teacher:* “Many women believed the problem was alcohol, the ‘demon rum.’”
- Martha:* “It isn’t that bad today. I don’t think the majority of people are beating their wives because of liquor.”
- Jessica:* “Yeah, but I have seen commercials on TV about the danger of wife beating.”
- Abbey:* “Anybody heard of times when people drink too much and then do things they don’t intend to do?”
- Robert:* “Does it say why they [the women] took it? Or did they organize?”
- Kate:* “Yeah, they formed this Temperance Movement.”
- Sbaron:* “Women got sick of not being able to do a lot of things and so they started to speak out.”

This discussion shows students learning about women’s history, information that, within a cultural studies perspective, will be very helpful as they read women’s literature. The discussion also shows students attempting to make sense out of new information by processing it with what they already know. In reader response fashion, the same texts gen-

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erate differing thoughts and reactions depending greatly on what students bring to the work. In this discussion, students are testing ideas, disagreeing, learning from each other, and not simply accepting any supposedly “politically correct” viewpoint as they examine the relevance of women’s history to their experience and that of their families. Andrea explained to me after class:

Some of the guys were worried that in this unit we were just going to do male bashing—but I want us to look at the reasons people in the eras we are studying had the beliefs that they did. They were raised to think certain ways and that is something we are going to look at.

Reader response and cultural studies approaches ought to generate disagreement and controversy; that very tension serves as a stimulus to learning. This approach requires, as in Andrea’s room, the creation of trust and an openness to the full range of viewpoints students bring to the class. In this regard the modeling done by the teacher is especially important.

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The creative use of controversy was also a theme in another class I visited that focused on connecting gender studies to literature. Teaching an upper-track literature course to college-bound seniors, Missy Deer planned a unit where her students could explore the various perspectives of men and women by comparing Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy*—about his experience growing up in the South—with Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which describes a young Black woman’s struggle to find equal relationships in rural Georgia and Florida. The comparison Missy established is a rich one: critics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. have seen both novels as central to African American writing and have posited the creative differences between Wright and Hurston as relevant to divergent viewpoints between succeeding generations of male and female African American writers.

The students read *Black Boy* first. In his autobiography, Richard Wright talks about how he longed to cast down the burdens of Blackness in the Jim Crow South. Analyzing the novel, students wrote about the burdens that Wright carried and the injustices and discrimination he suffered in the public world of the playground, the street, the library, and the workplace. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston’s emphasis is not on Black/White relations but on the challenges facing African American women who seek independence, love, and respect within their own communities. Describing their dual oppression, Hurston repeatedly refers to Black women as “de mule uh de world.”

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After reading both books, the students tried to compare the portrayal of men and women. Like many of the critics at the time the novels were written, students found *Black Boy* to be a more effective exploration of the inequalities of Jim Crow than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Missy found it was difficult for students, even her African American women students, to identify with Janie, the main character. Even though Janie was kept at home and forced to chop wood by Logan Killicks, her first husband, students were suspicious of her leaving him. “What did she expect? To sit there all high and mighty?” These sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students living in a generation when many parents have divorced considered Janie’s running away to be unacceptable even if life with Killicks tore her away from all of the things she loved.

Yet as the students probed farther into the texts and continued to compare them, new insights came to light. They noticed that it was hard to find positive female characters in Wright’s book. Many students were disturbed by the corporal discipline meted out to Richard by his mother and aunts, and they wondered how the story might have been told differently if it were written from a woman’s point of view. With these observations students began to better understand the oppression of women that Hurston addresses. By the end of the unit, Kristin wrote the following:

After Jody dies, she finally has a taste of freedom that lasts only temporarily for Tea Cake comes into her life. Though his smiles and laughs were lighter than a feather, he too took her over as his own. All three men ultimately display their possession through physical abuse by hitting her. . . . Janie led a difficult and ever-changing life. The burdens that she carried not only made her feel like a puppet, but a beautiful woman who was beaten by a society that restrained her from doing what she desired most.

As Kristin describes, Janie’s persecutions took place within the context of personal relations; they were more “private” than the “public” segregation described in *Black Boy*. Yet the student’s examination of these two books demonstrates that the private sphere is also a place for power relationships, that, as the women’s movement argues, the personal is political. Students began to recognize how unequal power relationships are supported in the society Janie lives in. Janie’s grandmother had told her that, after all, “love comes a mere second to security and protection”—a position many of Missy’s students would seem to agree with.

Missy discovered some of the possibilities and challenges of helping students to appreciate women’s experience in literature as she explored

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the complexities that arise when issues of gender and race come together. Increasingly, gender studies attends to a wide variety of complications, not only addressing the different histories of men and women but, indeed, rethinking the very categories of *male* and *female*, and exploring issues of gender identity and sexual orientation.

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It started the day Butch Carrigan decided I was interested in jumping his bones.

“You little fruit,” he snarled. “I’ll teach you to look at *me*.”

A moment or two later he had given me my lesson.

I was still laying face down in the puddle into which Butch had slammed me as the culminating exercise of my learning experience when I heard a clear voice exclaim, “Oh my dear! That *was* nasty. Are you all right, Vince?”

Turning my head to my left, I saw a pair of brown Docksiders, topped by khaki pants. Given the muddy condition of the sidewalks, pants and shoes were both ridiculously clean.

I rolled onto my side and looked up. The loafers belonged to a tall, slender man. He had dark hair, a neat mustache, and a sweater slung over his shoulders. He was kind of handsome—almost pretty. He wore a gold ring in his left ear. He looked to be about thirty.

“Who are you?” I asked suspiciously.

“Your fairy godfather. My name is Melvin. Come on, stand up and let’s see if we can’t do something with you.”

So begins Bruce Covill’s playful tale “Am I Blue?” the title story of a collection of short pieces by well-known contemporary young adult fiction writers, all, in one way or another, addressing the theme of gay and lesbian experience. Realism gives way to magic as a stereotypically effeminate “fairy godfather” appears granting three wishes. When Vince wishes that all gay and lesbian people should turn blue, he is surprised to discover people in varying shades of blue everywhere he looks—TV newscasters, football players, grocery clerks, teachers, even the school bully who pushed Vince in the mud.

One of my former students currently teaching low-track high school sophomores in an ethnically mixed inner-city school experimented with an innovative method of teaching “Am I Blue?” during a short story unit focused on the theme of fear.

Tisha Pankop always greets her students at the door; on this day, without explanation, as students came into the room she handed out to more than half of them a blue triangle with a circle of tape. Some students said, “Hey, give me one!” Others barely noticed what their teacher was doing. Seeing the blue triangles but not knowing their purpose, two boys

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often at the center of class attention went into action before the period even began. Tony took several blue triangles from other students and began sticking them on himself. Jamal, with a triangle on his back, danced around the room singing repeatedly to an upbeat rhythm, "I'm blue. . . . I'm blue . . . . I'm blue. . . . I'm blue. . . ."

Tisha began class with a brief discussion of the question: What does it feel like for those of you who do not have blue triangles like the rest of the students? One said, "It doesn't matter." Another, "I really wanted one." Another asked, "Why didn't I get one?" Next, the students sat on the carpet, Tisha passed out "Am I Blue?" and they took turns reading it aloud. David Martinez did an excellent job reading the part of the fairy godfather, and his swishy voice inspired some laughter. At the moment in the story when it was revealed what the color blue means, several triangles went flying across the room and landed in the center of the circle. Other triangles stayed where they had been taped. A couple of students stated: "You tricked us." "You got us." Several young women students sat with triangles on and didn't say anything.

Tisha asked, "Why did some of you throw your triangles off?"

"I'm not gay. I don't want anybody to think I am."

"It's OK for girls to be gay, but not guys."

Caprice, a girl who had her boyfriend's initials painted on her face commented, "It's fine with me if they are gay, I just don't want to know."

Marcy, one of the most outspoken—and often contrary—students, said, "I have an uncle who is gay. Don't you have someone in your family who is gay?" Several students who were Catholic explained that in their religion homosexuality is considered sinful. The topic of their unit came up—"fear"—and the students began to talk about fears of homosexuality and about the fears that a homosexual young person might face. One student pointed out that the fear in "Am I Blue?" was like the fear of Olaf in the story "Big Black Man," a fear that was made worse because it couldn't be openly discussed.

The students didn't come to any final conclusion except that it was "sad about the way the kid in the story was treated." Tisha says that some students may have had a hard time with moments in the discussion, yet more careful listening seemed to take place in class that day than previously. Views were shared, different perspectives were accepted, and students were pretty much respectful of each other. As the class was ending, Langston asked if Tisha herself was gay and the class became very quiet.

Tisha responded, "Does it matter to you?"

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“No, no.”

Tisha explained to me that because she is not gay she felt safe leaving her answer to this personal question a mystery. “Straight teachers have to be there to make a stand because the teachers who are not, in a district that might not support them, are really at risk.” Teachers who “just keep quiet” on this topic are, in Tisha’s view,

helping their gay/lesbian students find their way to suicide—the four students who have come out to me in the last few years have all had those thoughts on their mind. Using a story like “Am I Blue?” means a lot to those kids. I have seen kids make a dramatic change for the better in their whole experience in school when they feel there is even just one safe person they can talk or write to.

While utilizing controversy and exploring differing points of view are part and parcel of cultural studies teaching, the topic of homosexuality remains particularly sensitive. Hoping for tenure in the coming year, Tisha noted that after teaching this story she did not get any calls or contacts from parents, though some of the students in her other classes heard about the story and asked to borrow copies. Tisha says that if she were to teach the story in an environment where parents were more critical about what was happening at the school, then it might be a good idea to clear her plan with one of the vice principals. Developing a reputation as a good teacher, informing administrators and parents, inviting diverse views into the class, creating alternative assignments, developing policies, appealing to fundamental principles of democracy and free speech—all of these are ways that teachers can create the freedom to do important teaching in addressing issues such as gender and sexual orientation. (See further discussion in the “Censorship and Teacher Freedom” section of Chapter 6.)

As we shall see, controversy and contrasting points of view are also central to the next chapter, where I explore teaching about the violence in our culture and in our students’ lives.

### **Gay and Lesbian Studies**

Almost all of us who work in secondary schools find ourselves in overtly homophobic environments. At the college level there may be more freedom, but similar prejudices and curricular exclusions exist. In either setting it may be uncomfortable for us to connect our teaching to the outpouring of literature with gay and lesbian themes, or to academic scholarship, conferences, and journals focused on issues of sexual orientation. Of course many



of the great authors that we do regularly teach in public school and college literature classes were or may have been “homosexual” or “bisexual,” including not only Plato, Sappho, and Shakespeare, but also Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, A. E. Housman, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. Many of these authors directly address homosexuality in their creative work, though those works are usually censored from our reading lists. While I recognize the difficulties we face in our buildings and communities—and the challenges involved in looking at homophobia within as well as without—I have found that discussing issues of sexual orientation is vital and important. Given the high rates of depression and suicide for gay and lesbian youth, such teaching may even be lifesaving. Moreover, exploring the scholarship in gender studies can help all students better understand gender issues, recognize and address sexism and homophobia, and break down rigid gender roles for men and women.

Like gender studies, gay and lesbian studies (sometimes called “queer studies” by its practitioners) emphasizes the social construction of sexual identity and sexual orientation. It concerns itself with much more than sexual acts or activities; it also addresses the whole constellation of feelings, relationships, and identity. Being “gay,” “straight,” “bisexual,” or “transgendered” means different things in different cultures and different moments in history. If Greeks and Romans viewed same-sex attraction as the highest form of love (see Plato’s *Symposium* for example), early Christian philosophers such as Plutarch (see his *Essay on Love*) tried to argue for the supremacy of heterosexual attraction (a topic explored in Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*). The fixed and binary classification of people as “homosexual” or “heterosexual” is a relatively new development, scholars in this field argue, taking place in medical, psychological, and social discourse only during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. The categorization of certain behaviors or attitudes as “masculine” or “homosexual” simultaneously defines and circumscribes “heterosexual” or “feminine” behavior and vice versa.

Like feminist and multicultural studies, gay and lesbian studies is also tied to broader social movements and events. The modern gay liberation movement dates from the Stonewall protest against police harassment of gay men at a bar in New York in 1969. Yet scholars of gay and lesbian studies do not confine their thinking to a sexual minority but instead see their work as important to the lives of people across the spectrum of sexuality. The literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her award-winning book *Epistemology of the Closet*, explores homoerotic desire in canonical literature by writers such as Herman Melville, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Marcel Proust. Others investigate the burgeoning new creative literature with gay



and lesbian characters and themes. As gay and lesbian scholarship, often influenced by feminist thought, explores the panoply of sexual, identity, and relational differences between people, there remain differences and disagreements about the nature of identity and sexuality, about strategies for addressing homophobia, and about approaches to examining sexuality in literature.

## The Women's Literature Canon

Gender issues are present in all literature. I list here a handful of literary works that English teachers have found particularly fruitful in their treatment of the perspective of women. There are many other more complete lists of works appropriate for teaching about gender; see, for example, Whaley and Dodge's *Weaving in the Women*.

- *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin tells the story of a woman in nineteenth-century New Orleans who finds the narrowness of her married life unbearable.
  - *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath is an autobiographical novel tracing the breakdown and suicide of a brilliant woman writer.
  - *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing is about a woman passing through a breakdown to a greater sense of wholeness. It is an ambitious and frank novel divided into four different notebooks that express different aspects of the character's personality.
  - *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë is more than a gothic romance; it is also the story of an intelligent woman who must make her own living. She confronts the challenge of maintaining her independence and self-respect.
  - *A Room of One's Own* is an extended essay by Virginia Woolf exploring the issue of women and fiction from a variety of perspectives and is an important work in the English feminist literary tradition. *Three Guineas* extends Woolf's reflections to the issue of women and education.
  - *Surfacing*, by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, is about an artistic woman who has had an abortion. She deals with the repressed memory and pain, seeks her father in the Canadian woods and, in confronting his death, becomes able to face her past.
  - Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, like many of his comedies, offers a strong and fascinating female character. This play focuses on questions of mastery in male/female relationships and its ambiguous ending creates lots of room for discussion.
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- Tillie Olson's *Tell Me a Riddle* is a collection of short pieces exploring women's perspectives. The best-known story is "I Stand Here Ironing."
- "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is told by one of early English literature's most independent-minded female characters. Her prologue offers a repudiation of classical and medieval misogynist tracts, and her tale explores the question, "What is it that women most want?"
- *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a turn-of-the-century novella by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, addresses the experience of a woman confined by her husband and driven to the brink of madness. In a more lighthearted vein, Gilman's *Herland* presents a fascinating utopian world run by women.

### Multicultural Additions to the Women's Literature Canon

Here are my suggestions for a few multicultural possibilities that could be added to the curriculum to address the experiences of women of color.

- *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by Paule Marshall is a sensitive story about the growing-up of the daughter of immigrants from Barbados.
  - *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa explores from a woman's perspective the life of the Ibo people of Nigeria before colonialism.
  - *Gorilla My Love* by Toni Cade Bambara is a collection of stories about African American girls growing up in New York City.
  - *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is a collection of prose poems telling the story of a Chicana girl growing up in Chicago.
  - *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first volume of Maya Angelou's wonderful autobiography. Addresses the topic of sexual abuse.
  - *The Line of the Sun* by Judith Ortiz Cofer tells the story of a Puerto Rican family moving to New Jersey.
  - *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is a rich and useful anthology that considerably extends the canon of women's writers. It includes, for instance, the entire text of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.
  - *Second-Class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta is an autobiographical novel about the experience of African immigrants in London.
  - *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*, edited by Paula Gunn Allen, is a collection of short stories by Native American writers.
  - *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain is a novel addressing the experience of Muslim women in India.
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- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston is a classic of African American women's writing that tells the story of a woman seeking equality in love relationships and freedom in her personal life.
- *Waterlily* by Ella Cara Deloria is a touching Native American novel about a Sioux woman in the nineteenth century.

### Works for Teaching about Sexual Orientation

- *Am I Blue? Coming Out From the Silence*, edited by Marion Bauer, is a collection of short stories with gay or lesbian themes by well-known young adult fiction writers.
- *Anne on My Mind* by Nancy Garden is a tender young adult novel about two high school senior women who fall in love.
- *The Celluloid Closet*, co-directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, is a mind-opening historical documentary film (based on the book of the same title by Vito Russo) about the portrayal of gay and lesbian characters in classic Hollywood films. It demonstrates, among other things, that various communities of people view and interpret film in strikingly different ways.
- *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene is a young adult novel exploring homophobia and violence against gay men.
- *In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth* by Mary Gray presents the thoughts of fifteen gay and lesbian teenagers on their experiences of coming out, fitting in at school, and getting along with friends and family.
- *Jack* by A. M. Homes is a young adult novel about the experience of a high school basketball player whose father is gay.
- *Ruby* by Rosa Guy describes the experience of a young West Indian black woman growing up in New York City whose attraction to a self-confident, intellectual girl inspires her ambition.

### Readings in Feminist Criticism and Gender Studies

- Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is a highly theorized challenge to the distinction between gender (as socially constructed) and sex (as biologically given).
  - "Genderizing the Curriculum" is the focus of the January 1999 issue of *English Journal* (88.3). Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* argues that women tend to base their morality in relationships with others, whereas traditional male moral philosophers have valued disembodied right and ideals.
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- *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* by Michel Foucault examines the construction of gender identity in European history.
- Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* is an acclaimed study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers.
- *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is a readable, iconoclastic landmark in the study of women's literature. It includes discussion of Austen, the Brontës, Mary Shelley, George Eliot, and Emily Dickinson in the context of nineteenth-century beliefs about women.
- *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* by Adrienne Rich is a fine and influential collection of essays on women, literature, and education.
- *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher makes the case that current social values and practices undermine the confidence of girls during their early teenage years, which are crucial to the emotional and intellectual development of young women.
- *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa collects outspoken poetry and essays that challenge Eurocentric and middle-class-biased perspectives in feminist thought.
- *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum* by Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge is a terrific resource for secondary teachers—discussed in the text of this chapter.
- *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* by Mary Belenky is based on interviews with more than one hundred women and addresses how they feel silenced in families and schools.

## Readings in Gay and Lesbian Studies

- *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines gay identity in modern culture and literature.
  - *The Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers* by Rita Kissen explores the experience of gay and lesbian teachers and the roles that their straight colleagues can play in addressing homophobia.
  - *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale, and David Halperin, is a collection of pathbreaking academic essays.
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- *Queer Kids: The Challenges and Promise for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth* by Robert Owens Jr. is a useful resource guide to the experiences and needs of young adults in the sexual minority.

### **Web Sites to Support Gay and Lesbian Teens**

- The Cool Page for Queer Teens provides good information for teens and for their parents: <http://www.pe.net/~bidstrup/cool.htm>.
  - ELIGHT is an online community for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth and young adults that provides a safe forum for people to speak out, share, and find others like themselves: <http://www.elight.org>.
  - Financial aid information for gay and lesbian youth is available at <http://www.finaid.org/otheraid/gay.phtml>.
  - The Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgendered youth resource directory can be found at <http://www.youthresource.com/>.
  - InsideOut Magazine is an electronic publication for gay/lesbian youth: <http://www.iomag.com/>.
  - The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Youth offers a Web site that includes an archive of coming-out stories, information about community role models, resources for schools, bulletin boards for teens, links to other sites, and more: <http://www.outproud.org/>.
  - Oasis is an online Webzine written by and about queer and questioning youth: <http://www.oasismag.com/>.
  - The organization Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays offers support, information, and advocacy. The site features news on national issues, family stories, and other resources. See <http://www.pflag.com/>.
  - Project YES is an educational organization that encourages the healthy development of all youth, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth. Includes outreach information for clergy and congregations. See <http://www.projectyes.org/>.
  - The Youth Assistance Organization provides information and a safe place online to engage in dialogue with others: <http://www.youth.org/>.
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