



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume III: American Maid: Growing Up Female in Life and Literature

Introduction

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In the past 25 years, American historians have begun to uncover the voices and experiences of American women. While an occasional exceptional woman like Abigail Adams or Eleanor Roosevelt had been granted recognition by traditional historians, the focus of most historical writing on the worlds of business, politics, and the public sphere had meant that most women's lives went unrecorded. This situation began to change with the ferment of the 1960s, when young historians reacted to changes in the social climate by calling for a new kind of history, one that attended to all those who had been excluded from earlier historical writing—the poor, the working class, ethnic minorities, people of color, and women. History, it was argued, should not confine itself to those who won public acclaim (or notoriety) but should take into account as well the ordinary life experiences of ordinary people. This new emphasis on those who made up the majority, rather than the minority, of the American people came to be referred to as “the new social history,” and it made rich contributions to our understanding of the past from the early 1970s onwards.

The history of women has taken its place as a subdivision of the new social history and has developed into one of the liveliest areas of current historical scholarship. Thus this seminar, focused on historical and fictional accounts of a wide variety of American women, had extremely rich materials to work with. The backbone of the course was Sara Evans' *Born for Liberty*, a readable, brisk narrative of American women's history from the days of Native American hegemony until the early 1990s. This text was accompanied by biographical sketches, novels, memoirs, and two films.

Treating women as a group is an extremely problematic enterprise, for unlike any other so-called disadvantaged or minority group, women are a statistical majority and are dispersed throughout the population. Hence it was vital to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and to hear the stories of women of color, immigrant women, and Native American women, as well as of those, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Amelia Earhart, who, by virtue of being born into the white middle class, albeit as females, were entitled to at least a modicum of societal respect. The American mosaic was very much in evidence in seminar meetings and also in the completed units.

Although the seminar relied on the writings of historians, we found that novels could sometimes provide an immediacy and emotional connection more powerful than most historical accounts. Such was the case, for example, with *Jubilee*, a novel by Margaret Walker recounting the story of her great-grandmother before, during, and after the Civil War. Novels do pose questions of accuracy and authenticity, but when the author can provide, as Walker does, evidence of painstaking and extensive research, those concerns are laid to rest, and the vividness of the novelist's prose offers great rewards.

Sometimes, our reading offered a palliative to popular culture's mythmaking, as with the story of Pocahontas, about whom so little is actually known, but whose life in the hands of the Disney filmmakers took on dimensions quite alien to the historical record.

Episodes that loomed large at the time but have since receded into the collective historical unconscious were revived with poignancy or pleasure. *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeane Wakatzuki Houston's spare, matter-of-fact account of her family's internment during World War II, was one of a number of stories that spoke of a past not always to be celebrated. Yet it, like many others, also spoke of the courage and resilience of so many unsung people. Again and again, we seminar participants felt how greatly our foremothers had suffered and how much they had had to endure in the making of this nation.

One of the great joys of the seminar was the willingness of the teachers to share their research with one another. Some were more at home on the World Wide Web than others and brought in information and bibliography that could be photocopied and distributed. One participant showed us how she was incorporating material from archives found on the Web into her lesson plans. All were able to discuss the usefulness of the pertinent young peoples' literature that I, as facilitator, had no familiarity with.

Seminar participants tackled the fashioning of curricular units on the general topic of the female experience in this country in a variety of ways. One, Joyce Bryant, chose to introduce students to the beginnings and early development of the women's movement in the nineteenth century. Carol Penney used biographies of six women of several times and cultures in the American past (some well-known, some not) as the basis for student dramatizations, while Eleanor Willis's biographical approach used the lens of Eloise Greenfield's writings for children to focus on six women who had fought racism and sexism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nancy Skolozdra elected to explore one particular period, the Civil War era, while Susan Norwood extended her range to three historical moments—the colonial period, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War. Christine House created a unit on the experiences of women of several cultures in the Far West. Lesley Troppe chose to examine the lives of girls in three very different societies—the Amish, the Inuit, and the plantation slave South. June Gold was particularly interested in the relationship between mothers and daughters, which she examined through literature both classic (*Little Women*) and modern (*Sarah, Plain and Tall*). Though many of the units dealt with African-American women in history, two participants, Rolanda Booker and Cynthia Roberts, concentrated on African-American literature, the writings of black women novelists and poets.

Overall, what is noteworthy about these units is their concern with diversity and their cross-disciplinary scope. Some of the units can be used to teach skills in reading, writing, social studies, and even math, all in one set of lessons. Another concern of the teachers is clearly in evidence—the need to convey images of strong, courageous women to serve as models for inner-city children, especially girls. Growth in self-esteem, together with greater appreciation of the accomplishments of our American foremothers, is the underlying message of many of these units. If the students of today are to become tomorrow's women of achievement, they need to learn the stories of those who have gone before them. The history and literature our seminar explored provide rich materials for revisioning the past and imagining a better future.

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