



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume I: Women's Voices in Fiction

Sister Outsiders: Black and White Women Writing in America

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Can we ever escape our past? In their attempt to create a New Canaan, New World, New England, English settlers to what would become the United States of America brought with them the sum total of their experiences. But perusing the history texts suggests that these were primarily men's experiences. Thinkers and writers such as Captain John Smith and Cotton Mather recognized that we could not leave the flaws in human nature behind, that we bring with us who we are.

There have been periods in American literature that reflect the promise, the unlimited potential, that the earliest European settlers came to find. Indeed, our literary history is peppered with works which question what "America" means, the way we as a nation have come into existence, whether the American Dream is available to all (or any), and where, in fact, we are going from here. But the male voice tells only half the story. When we turn to the female voice in American literature, we find one of the missing pieces of the puzzle.

American women writers have many faces, and with the expanding canon and the increasing sensitivity to multicultural curricula, more American women writers (and hyphenated Americans) are being "discovered" and incorporated into our teaching. By examining American literary history from women's perspectives, we see a more complete picture of where we are going and where we have been. And when we look to black women's writing in particular, we find rays of hope, ironically, that are not always evident in writing by western European, or white, women.

When we look at American literature, if we are reading carefully, we recognize the existence of an ongoing dialogue, between and among writers. We can read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and appreciate her debt to, and her recrafting of, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Reading Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* calls to mind, in no uncertain terms, Melville's *Moby Dick*, but from a female perspective. There are others. The novelist, the poet, the short story writer, the essayist and the playwright, cannot help but use their predecessors as sounding boards, as grist for their own mills. And the conversation continues, albeit with different twists on and interpretations of what was said before. These works, and others, have associations with one another, maybe based on a common theme, a similar character, a re-telling of the same story from a different cultural perspective. By reading a work along with a newer counterpart, we engage in Rich's act of "re-vision the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). And "seeing with fresh eyes" is not merely the need to engage our students in their reading, to encourage them to make connections between their lives and what they read, but, as Rich posits, "it is an act of survival. Until we can

understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (35). Reading these newer, female voices in American literature and recognizing that they have emerged and continue to emerge from a long line of forebears will help our students to better know and understand themselves.

Expanding the Canon, Looking for Answers

Who are the "new" voices in American literature? What is it that they are adding to the conversation? What is it they are demanding from the conversation? In what directions are these writers pushing the dialogue, and to what end? These questions typify the conversations that define contemporary American culture and are forcing us as a society to come to terms with the distances which we impose between one another as a result of "otherness" such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and so on. A unit on American literature by women lends itself particularly well to this interrogative way of reading. It gives us opportunities to witness the changing landscape of the dialogue within and outside of the "canon."

The interest in women's writing and women's studies that began in the 1970s reminded us that the "American" voice (if there is indeed such a thing) is not the voice of one group, but is inclusive of and characterized by many groups. Specifically, reading black women writers alongside their more "established" white women counterparts, we see that the conversation is blown wide open. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that in order for the female writer to write, she must, without exception, have access to certain economic and physical comforts. But today, the dialogue is no longer restricted to Woolf's parameters. The women writer/artist in America particularly has access to pen and paper. She has opportunities to make a room of her own. She is not doomed to walk into the sea, put her head in the oven, overdose on pills, or live her days in the depths of psychic terror. Even in the powerful and in some senses representative black women's narrative that Morrison has crafted with *Beloved*, the author takes the terror of slavery and of a mother murdering her baby, and transforms it into the story that leads her to a version of *Paradise*. The fact that Morrison wrote *Jazz* in between suggests strongly that black women writers need to take apart the stories they have been told, and must reassemble them to make a better sense. Black American women writers, in the words of Alice Walker, "seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some larger freedom" (5). It is in these texts that we find hope.

In this unit students will examine representative pairs of American texts by women for their similarities as well as for their inevitable differences. In order to better read the "one immense story -- the same story for the most part -- with different parts of the immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives," (Walker 5) we will read: Chopin's *The Awakening* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Walker's "Saving the Life That is Your Own" and Tillie Olsen's "Silences," Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Hurston's "Sweat." Also included is poetry from Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, and songs by Lauryn Hill, and Ani DiFranco.

We read, as many woman writers have said, to save our lives. That's a loaded phrase. Certainly we "save our lives" in the sense that Rich recognizes that reading is a matter of survival. (Though it is ironic that Woolf, Plath, Sexton, et. al. were not saved by their writing.) But we also read to save the stories, to preserve the histories, to capture the experiences, and to find ourselves in the pages. We "save our lives" with each story we read, write and tell because "This," as Morrison says in *Beloved*, "is not a story to pass on" (275). Take this seemingly ambiguous statement as you will: Reading American women's writing, especially pairs of texts,

makes clear that Morrison means we cannot pass on telling the story, that it is somehow her, and our, moral obligation to share the stories, to pass them on. We cannot afford to forget, lest we forget parts of ourselves. We hope our students enjoy the texts for their aesthetic value, but we want them also to better understand the texts themselves and the issues at hand, and to arrive at a greater degree of self-knowledge as well. Reading traditionally undervalued voices black women, specifically alongside their more canonically ensconced partners, is hopefully one way to get there.

Objectives

This unit will allow students to examine the role of past individual and collective experience on the development of the writer's voice, and on their own voices as writers. Students will read works from key American women writers, and will identify similarities and differences in their themes over time, and attempt to draw some conclusions about what these findings might imply about an American women's voice. By reading specific pairings of white and black women writers, students will appreciate not only aesthetic and stylistic differences in texts, but will also be able to identify the differing strands of "the story," where they originated, and where they might be leading. Students will also compose their own writing, in both formal and informal tasks, to parallel our readings, and will have opportunities to engage in cross-disciplinary learning.

This unit is designed primarily for students in an honors American literature class. If the possibility of teaching in an English-history block, or an interdisciplinary humanities class exists, all the better. While the unit (which will take at least 6 - 8 weeks) may be taught at any point during the school year, its focus on close reading, process writing, and reading representative texts from different genres, lends itself to being an earlier, rather than later, unit of study. Students will begin the year by seeing their English classroom as a workshop, a place of inquiry and active learning. It will give students the opportunity to write, read, and discuss prolifically, as an integral part of their work.

Works from Major Genres

An Introduction to Close Reading: "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Doing this lesson toward the beginning of the year encourages students to focus on the skills of close reading, interpreting a work of literature, and discussing a text through inquiry. (Teachers' familiarity with the Great Books program will be helpful, but is not essential.) Reading and discussing "The Yellow Wallpaper" in this manner also allows the teacher to show students what constitutes a "good" discussion: listening, considering and responding to the ideas of others, contributing equitably to the conversation.

The short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is about the narrator and her husband who rent a house after the birth of their child. The narrator is diagnosed with a "nervous condition," and the recommended treatment is relaxation and solitude. This narrator is also a writer, and the story is as much about the struggling woman writer in a male-dominated world as it is about the impact the husband's treatment of his wife has upon her psychological well-being. As the story progresses, the narrator's state of

mind changes, and she becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper in the room to which her husband, a doctor, has confined her. The end of the story finds her having torn off the wallpaper, to reveal, dis-cover, and liberate the woman she sees behind it. When her husband enters his wife's sick room and sees the state of things, he faints. She circles the room continually as the story ends, and crawls over the unconscious husband who has fallen across her path.

For homework, students read "The Yellow Wallpaper." To prepare for classroom discussion, they should have a clear ideal of the basics, such as plot, character, setting, tone, and so forth. But to insure that discussion delves beneath the surface of the story, students might also come into class with two questions their reading has raised for them, questions the story leaves unanswered perhaps, or that have no definitive answer. For this 50 - minute class, students are seated in a circle, or if space constraints necessitate, in two concentric circles. The teacher is not at the head of the class, but is part of the discussion circle. For today, the teacher is the discussion leader, and keeps a "seating chart" not to assign seats or take attendance, but to keep track of the discussion once it begins. When students become more experienced with this mode of discussion, they should be the discussion leaders.

Allow students a few minutes before discussion to quietly review the story. Encourage them (or remind them) to highlight significant or interesting moments in the text, and to mark their copy of the story in whatever way will help them to participate in discussion.

After reviewing, students will complete a 5-minute journal writing in response to an open-ended question such as: "What happens to the narrator by the end of the story?" or "In what ways is the narrator's husband responsible for the events of the story?" Be sure the question is open enough to encourage discussion and varied interpretation. Allow students time to respond to the question. Then the discussion begins.

The discussion leader's role is to ask questions only, and to keep the discussion moving by involving as many students as possible. The opening question is one of the prompts above. You will want to elicit three or four different responses before asking students if they agree or disagree with what they've heard, why they think so, and most importantly, "What in the text leads you to that conclusion?" By encouraging students to return repeatedly to the text for support for their interpretations, we encourage them to cultivate good close reading and interpretive habits, which will ideally translate to the writing of critical and analytical essays about literature later in the unit.

Ideally, the discussion will take off, students will be engaged, and the discussion leader will fade into the background. With about 10 minutes of class remaining, students will revisit their initial response to the question. Have they changed their minds, based on what they heard in discussion, or have they reinforced their initial interpretation? Ask them to write a brief response to this question in their journals.

At this point, a writing assignment for homework that reinforces the skills from this day's class is appropriate. An essay of three to four pages in length (with a thesis statement, which uses citations from the text, etc.) in response to the class question is also appropriate. Having a piece of student writing from early in the school year is helpful in determining the skills students (individually and as a class) need to work on. For example, if students are deficient in using textual support in an essay about literature, that will show up in this assignment, and will provide the teacher with a focus for immediate instruction in this area. If students are weak in, for instance, certain elements of mechanics and usage, this paper will bring these problems to the teacher's attention, and again, provide focus for supplemental instruction in these areas. On the other hand, if students are strong writers, with only minor deficits in any one area, the teacher can accommodate those strengths by assigning more challenging writing and reading.

Given that our unit is focused on hearing the story from different points of view, an alternate (or additional) assignment might be to ask students to take a more "creative" approach to the writing. Students would write parts of the story that Gilman "left out." For example, what transpired between the narrator's husband and her doctor? Or, what does the narrator's husband discuss with his sister before she comes to care for the narrator? This would involve discussion about point of view before the assignment is given. By completing such a writing task, students will be introduced to the unit's goals, and they will be able to flex their creative writing muscles. This piece of writing, while not as structured as an essay, can still be used as a diagnostic tool, and might be more fun for students to undertake early in the school year.

The Writing Workshop

While a draft of the essay (and/or the creative paper) can certainly be assigned for overnight homework, ideally the teacher will allow time in class for a writing workshop. Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* is an excellent resource for conducting writing workshops in the secondary classroom. The components she structures into her students' writing, which are referred to here as "writing workshop," are the mini-lesson, brainstorming or pre-writing, first draft, peer conference, revision, second peer conference, second revision, teacher conference, final edit, and publication. While the nature of the high school English classroom might not appear to lend itself readily to this process and certainly does not for each piece of writing students will do throughout the year it is worthwhile for the teacher and students to set up workshops in this manner. By asking students to look at their own, and each other's, work for strengths and weaknesses, and to devise strategies to improve their writing, we encourage more independence in our student-writers. They become less reliant on teacher input early in the writing process. And by composing more than one draft before handing the paper in for a grade, students are raising their level of discourse, and improving their critical thinking skills as well as their writing skills.

For their paper on "The Yellow Wallpaper," students will bring their drafts to class, pair up with a writing partner, peer conference and edit, and ideally get helpful input as they think about (at least once) revising their work. If students are unfamiliar with this process, this also introduces them to a way of writing that will be common in the classroom for the rest of the year and will be the norm for their college English classrooms as well.

Reading and Comparing: "Sweat"

Now that students are familiar somewhat with close reading and inquiry as ways of discussing a text, they are ready to read another story. Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat" (1926), takes another look at a woman dominated by her husband. Delia's husband Sykes seems not to appreciate her goodness: she works hard, is faithful to him, and tries to make the best of her situation. By comparison, Sykes taunts her verbally, abuses her physically, and badmouths his own wife to his cronies in town. At the end of the story, though, Delia gets her revenge on Sykes by turning one of Sykes' jokes back on himself: He brings a snake into the house, knowing that Delia is terribly frightened of them, and leaves to spend a night out carousing. Rather than share her bedroom with the snake, Delia escapes into the hay loft in the barn. When Sykes returns at dawn, he has no idea the snake is inside the house, and becomes the victim of his own terrible prank. Delia hears Sykes' distress, but does not move to help him. The story ends with Delia acknowledging that any medical help is too far away, and that Sykes' demise is inevitable.

By reading Hurston's account of Delia's situation, and comparing it with Gilman's protagonist's circumstances, students will see that there is another way for the female protagonist to deal with her oppression. She can either, as Gilman's does, resort to or be led to madness, or she can seek revenge and assure her own

autonomy.

Given that students have participated in the above discussion about "The Yellow Wallpaper," now would be a good time to assign a student discussion leader (or leaders) to deal with "Sweat." As homework, students read the story, and each student must develop at least two good open-ended questions that they could bring to discussion of the text. Direct instruction on what constitutes "good open-ended questions" will be necessary in most classes. By thinking about the stories on an interpretive level, students will be prepared to conduct, and participate in, a lively, thoughtful conversation about the texts. Pairing Gilman's story with Hurston's allows students to see that Hurston, as one example of a black American woman writer, has an irreverent way of seeing the literature that has formed the "canon." Hurston's character does not follow the path Gilman's protagonist takes; Delia survives. This discovery about the stories introduces young readers to the possibility that there may be more than one "truth."

The quality of students' questions as well as their willingness to participate in discussion are ways to assess their progress.

Some Further Ideas for Writing on "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Sweat"

Students might write a dialogue between Delia and the narrator of "Wallpaper." Or between the husbands. Perform those for the class. This is another way to encourage students to use the text as they develop their own interpretations of the story.

Students might compose an essay comparing voice, character, tone, or some other element of fiction. This would require direct instruction around those elements, as well as around the idea of comparing and drawing conclusions as a result. Writing workshops would do well here too, as would some direct work on writing style and mechanics.

The Essay: Alice Walker and Tillie Olsen

Now that students have explored two short stories, and have compared them and analyzed them for how and why they differ, it is time for them to read the essays "Saving the Life That is Your Own" by Alice Walker and "Silences" by Tillie Olsen. Students will apply an array of skills to their reading for this portion of the unit: They will move from reading fiction to reading non-fiction; they will apply their reading of non-fiction to their understanding of fiction; and they will take their learning from reading and writing fiction and reading and writing non-fiction to further their understanding of the way black and white women writers are engaged in the conversations around the themes discussed above.

Alice Walker's essay is subtitled "The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life." Her idea of saving one's life is initially as ambiguous as Morrison's idea of not passing on the story. But as Morrison ultimately intends for her story to indeed be passed along, and not passed by, Walker sees story as a means of preserving one's life and history, as well as a way of saving one's self. This essay is particularly relevant to this unit because it is here that Walker directly addresses the unit's major theme. She says

black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story the same story, for the most part with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. . . . [F]or the most part, white American writers tended to end their books and their characters' lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle . . . by comparison, black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. (5)

But Walker does not confine her discussion to black women writers. Kate Chopin, Charlotte Bronte, and Flannery O'Connor, among others, are integral components in Walker's acknowledgment that all artists draw on those who have preceded them, and need not only to acknowledge their collective and individual histories, but must preserve them, in order to save our lives through art.

Tillie Olsen's "Silences" also addresses the importance of knowing our past in order to better understand ourselves. But Olsen's focus is on what has not been said, and why, as a way of understanding how and why artists create their art. This idea is important as a component of this unit in light of the fact that women's voices, and black women's voices in particular, in American literary history, have been silenced either as self-imposed silences, or as silences imposed from the outside for too long.

Olsen uses writers more traditionally associated with the canon to make her point: Discussions of Melville, Keats, Hardy, and Woolf figure prominently in these pages. But Olsen takes Woolf's insistence on the need for economic and physical comfort as basic necessities for the writer, and offers it up for more democratic consumption. In a very practical manner, Olsen recognizes that "substantial creative work demands time, and with rare exceptions only full-time workers have achieved it. Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences" (13). By weaving her own experiences as a writer often silenced by the necessities of earning money and raising a family into the discussion, Olsen makes the case that more artists and writers might produce more quality work and be discovered, if only they had time and means.

Reading Non-Fiction: A Strategy

Given that these essays are among the first non-fiction texts students will have read this year, it is appropriate to spend time on non-fiction reading strategies. Students can apply these strategies beyond the English language arts classroom to their other classes, and will be well served by them. One such strategy is "Radio Reading." Radio Reading requires students to read and understand a text on several levels (literal, analytical, evaluative, etc.), and works on their collaborative learning skills as well. In addition, Radio Reading provides opportunities for a student-centered classroom, requires high levels of student engagement, and demands that students continue to refine their discussion and listening skills.

Radio Reading can be used with one or both essays. It allows students to take difficult texts such as these and unravel them in small parts. At the teacher's discretion, students may read the essays independently prior to Radio Reading, or they might read independently after this class activity. This might depend on how sophisticated the readers in the class are with difficult and unfamiliar texts, and/or on how much other experience students have had employing non-fiction reading strategies.

To begin, the teacher breaks the essay into sections, and divides the class into a corresponding number of small groups. Each group is assigned a section of text for which it is responsible. In their groups, students read their section only, discuss its main ideas, tackle problems with language and concepts, and do their best to be able to describe what the author is discussing in the passage.

After the class has done its best work with its passage, the whole class comes together for the "radio" portion of the task. In sequence, each group reads its passage aloud to the class. (Their prior work on unraveling the passage's meaning will help them communicate this meaning via their reading aloud, and will assist the rest of the class in their understanding of the text.) Then, representatives from the group will explain the passage's key points and problematic moments to the class, and will give a paraphrase of the major ideas. This process continues until each group has read and discussed its section of the essay.

By the end of Radio Reading, students have heard the essay in its entirety, and have a way to supplement their own reading and understanding. Given the length of both Walker's and Olsen's essays, and their complexity, be sure to allow sufficient time for this task. Two class periods is not unreasonable, and more time may be needed depending on the length of time spent in discussion of the text.

Walker's and Olsen's essays are useful at this juncture in the unit. They not only formalize the ideas that students have been exploring around the major concerns and themes in the stories, such as the importance of a women's voice and the distinctions (if they exist) between black women's voices and white women's voices, but they also introduce students to the reading of literary criticism. As students move through their careers as students and as readers and thinkers (and most of the students in this course will go on to college), the ability to read dense works of criticism will become increasingly important to their academic success.

Given that the Olsen essay is the more difficult, reading it in class would be to the students' benefit. Walker is more accessible, and students can read it on their own. An appropriate homework assignment might be to reread the essay, and to respond to questions the teacher has developed, to summarize the author's ideas, etc.

It is important for students to see that the ideas Olsen and Walker discuss that both black and white women in American literature have often been silenced have resonance and roots beyond this unit. The notion of women re-visioning traditionally male stories, and of black women writers reclaiming those revisions and insisting on a place in the conversation, is a clear way for students/developing literary critics to recognize that American literature (and history) is alive, dynamic, and increasingly democratic. Perhaps later in the course, students can look at issues of class and race, and use the background on gender that they are laying here to better understand their reading.

The Novels: *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In many respects, though novels may seem to be the "easier" genre to teach, their scope and size make them rather more difficult. Certainly the form is one with which students are familiar, from both their classroom reading assignments and their extracurricular reading choices. However, reading a novel with students is more than moving through it chapter by chapter, explaining plot, telling the class what happens at any given point in the narrative. Reading a novel as a class requires that students be allowed the latitude they need to make their individual reading experiences meaningful, but that they are also be given structures and new ways of approaching the text to encourage them to become increasingly sophisticated and perceptive readers. Situating these two novels in the context of this unit, and at this particular point in the unit, serves these purposes. Students have read short stories and are able to articulate the unit's major concerns. Students have read essays and have applied the writers' thinking to their own writing about the literature. Now they will apply all these skills and modes of thinking and reading to their work with these novels.

The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin tells the story of a young woman's increasing self-awareness. Edna Pontellier finds herself in a loveless marriage, becoming one of the "mother-women" with whom she socializes but whom she somewhat despises. As Edna realizes there is more to life than being a "good" wife and mother, she seeks fulfillment in the arms of other men, and in the studio of artists. The end of the novel is, depending on one's reading, Edna's ultimate epiphany and consequent liberation, or the result of an unstable psyche: "[F]or the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature . . ." (189). And Edna swims out into the ocean and bids the world a final farewell with the words "'Good-bye because, I love you'" (190). Chopin's intent here may be

ambiguous: Are we to celebrate Edna's realization and her ability to literally take her life into her own hands? Or are we to mourn the unfulfilled artist and woman that Edna sees herself as, and to chalk her suicide up to yet another defeated woman in the annals of American literature? These questions and others make this novel wonderful fodder for the classroom.

Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is another version of a young woman's growing self-awareness. But as Walker says, "white American writers tended to end their books and their characters' lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle" (5). Janie, in *Their Eyes*, on the other hand, though confronted with such dire circumstances, survives. Though each of her three marriages leaves her alone, disappointed and bruised, she is not defeated. Janie eventually discovers her self as an autonomous entity. She recognizes the regenerative, rather than the destructive, powers of love: "[L]ove ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets and it's differnt with every shore" (182). And while the novel ends with Janie losing the man she finally does come to love, and who loves her, she has her self and her history with Tea Cake: "Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace" (183 - 184). Janie could have chosen, but does not choose, to end her life. Instead she makes what might be the braver choice in accepting it on her own terms.

The key questions that students will focus on during their work with these texts are: What circumstances are forced on the female protagonists in each novel? To what degree are they responsible for their own circumstances? To what degree is she a "victim of circumstance" or of the times in which she lived? What are society's expectations of these women? How does each woman's rejection of (and acceptance of, too) society's rules effect her? What are each woman's options, given these restrictions? Why do the protagonists' lives end differently? To what extent is this a result of race? class? culture? In exploring the novels for possible responses to these questions, and by examining the different places at which students will inevitably arrive as a result, students (hopefully) will move beyond the ways they have become accustomed to reading and will instead begin to recognize that each work of literature is connected in some way to a work that has come before. In an increasingly diverse society, more voices are present at the table, and the assumptions upon which we have based our thinking about what defines American culture require reevaluation.

The Poems: Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde and Others

Given that this unit centers around conversations between black and white American women writers through time, including a pair of poems by Rich and Lorde is particularly apt because they intentionally engaged in a dialogue with one another through their work. For an interesting perspective on their professional relationship, and on the way their ideas compare with those of the other writers in this unit, see "An Interview with Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" in Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Interesting pairings might include Lorde's "A Sewerplant Grows in Harlem, or, I'm a Stranger Here Myself When Does the Next Swan Leave" and Rich's "Storm Warnings," and/or Lorde's "A Family Resemblance" and Rich's "From An Old House in America." Lorde was, and Rich continues to be, a prolific writer, so there are many possible pairs to choose from and to create.

"A Sewerplant Grows in Harlem" and "Storm Warnings" both deal, in part, with women who recognize the injustice inherent in society, and the need to act to make positive change. "A Family Resemblance" and "From An Old House" address more directly the issues around women defining an identity for themselves.

Here is a chance to take the learning from the preceding classes and apply it to a more formal, more

traditional literature assignment. Students had the chance for modeling and guided practice with the above readings and discussions and writing tasks. Now they're on their own. Students will receive copies of a poem by Lorde. In small groups (3 - 4 students) they will discuss the poem and identify what they see as its major ideas and themes. They should take some time during this discussion to record their ideas in their journals. Then students will receive the companion poem by Rich. Students will then return to their small group discussions and identify the major ideas and themes in this poem. Again, they should take time to record their thoughts in their journals. They will then compare the two poems and discuss how the second poem revisits the ideas that the first poem presents. Hopefully students will discuss not only what the poems are saying, but how they communicate their ideas; however, this will depend on their skills as readers of poetry.

After sufficient time in small groups, the class comes together to hear each group's discoveries about the poems. Thoughtful discussion ensues. An appropriate writing assignment at this point might be a two page response paper in which the students compare the two works. Or, to go in a different direction, students might write their own responses, in poetry to either Lorde or Rich, to add their own voices to the conversation, or students might even discover their own pairs of poems to bring to the discussion.

Other Poets

Should teacher and students be interested and inclined to further study of pairs of poems, examining new work might be useful. There is a rich array of new poetry available, thanks to the renewed popularity of performance poetry, that specifically addresses disenfranchised groups, the importance of history and voice, and the struggle and search for identity in America.

Another possibility for study is to look at the work of Ani DiFranco and Lauryn Hill. Both these poets/songwriters are quite popular with high school students, and each woman has taken the theme of what it means to be a woman in American society today and molded it into her own medium and message. DiFranco's "32 Flavors" and Hill's "Everything is Everything" illustrate this idea handily. And DiFranco's "Amazing Grace" and Hill's "Forgive Them Father" provide a look at how each of these writers has redefined a classic text. Including popular music in this unit illustrates the reality that the themes and ideas that American writers have been grappling with over time are still of concern to today's artists. A musical interlude here might also be a refreshing change of pace, and is yet another way to encourage students to connect with the material.

Student Writers Find Their Voices through Research

Alice Walker discovered Zora Neale Hurston accidentally, in a footnote. In Walker's essay, "Saving the Life That is Your Own" (discussed above), she realizes the important role Hurston played in "saving lives." Hurston was an anthropologist, a collector of stories about people. And to her Walker is forever indebted.

Students will now have the opportunity to assume the roles of anthropologist, historian, researcher, writer and critic. The culminating assignment for this unit will be a research project. This will involve all the necessary components of teaching students to utilize the resources in the media center, including technology and the media specialist, to their greatest advantage. This sub-unit, as a result, will be quite lengthy, and much depends on how independently students will do their research. At least two class days in the media center are

necessary to reacclimate students to various resources for their research. One additional day might also be helpful to ensure that all students can access information electronically, and that they know how to use the school's technology. In total, students should have about four weeks for this project, from start to finish, including class days in the media center, writing workshops, and other necessary direct instruction on writing, citing sources, etc. Given the amount of time this will take, the assignment needs to be introduced early on in the unit. Or, the assignment can be an extension of the unit, and take additional weeks. This is definitely a timing issue, and one that each individual teacher needs to work out. [I am inclined to begin this assignment toward the end of our work on the novels, and let it run its course that way.]

The purpose of this project is for students to learn how to integrate formal research with personal reflection about who and why they are the people they are. It culminates this unit by asking students to examine how they see what is important to them as Americans (hyphenated or otherwise) and how this differs from the ways in which their female elders envision(ed) their America and themselves. They will hopefully also acknowledge that the conversation about who we are in this society and where we are headed transcends gender (as about half of our students are male), race and generational differences, and that our past is an invaluable part of our present.

Instructions for Students

Step One: Select your mother, or a female adult relative or friend from a different generation whom you feel has had a significant influence on your life, as a biographical subject for your research. Read the *New York Times* that was printed on your subject's seventh birthday. (Students will have had media center orientation on how to access this information.) Take notes on all sections of the paper: front page articles, editorials, reviews of films and plays, the classified ads, etc.

Step Two: Repeat the above research for your own seventh birthday, taking similar notes.

Step Three: Interview your adult subject about what it was like growing up. Try to solicit anecdotes and stories, observations that might suggest the influence of place as well as time. What was family life like? school life? social life?

Since interviewing is a skill, some direct instruction on what characterizes good questions, and how to probe for a detailed response, will be helpful.

Step Four: Do some directed free writing that addresses the questions in Step Three as they relate to yourself. Possible prompts might include: Remember a time from your childhood when you were aware of a historical event taking place. Or write an account of your first day at a new school. This kind of writing is a way for students recall experiences in their own lives, and to bring them to life through the written word. Students should understand that this free writing is not for a grade. It is a chance for them to explore ideas, to experiment with new writing techniques, and to probe their memories. They could spend class time sharing this writing with one another.

Step Five: Now write an essay that describes and compares the life of your adult subject to your own life. The paper may take whatever form it needs to take in order to describe the influence of time, place and person on the shaping of the self. It should, however, incorporate the research the student has done, as well as his/her thinking about this unit's major themes.

This task, in addition to the extensive instruction around use of library, media and technology resources, will

also involve instruction around notetaking, interviewing, and reviewing of "the writing process" (see above). Students may be provided with assessment lists for some components of this project (and this task may be written as a performance based assessment), as well as with samples of previous student work and similar kinds of essays by published authors.

The parameters of this project allow latitude in how much time is spent on it, as well as to the page length of the finished project. Depending on students' prowess with research processes (how adept they are with electronic searches, how available their adult subject is for interview), the research itself may take two. The writing could begin somewhere in that time, allowing students who are moving apace to work at a speed comfortable to them. Writing workshops would serve students well for this project. Anticipate paper lengths anywhere from four to seven pages, exclusive of any works cited pages.

For Further Exploration

After completing this unit, students will have insights into the making of literature that they may not have had previously. They will better understand that writers do not create their work in a vacuum, but instead they rely on posterity to help shape their ideas. By reading texts as part of a larger conversation, as Walker says, students will begin to recognize why it is essential that they too read and know important texts in, and aspects of, literary history. Giving students the tools to understand and appreciate that they too are part of this conversation is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Bibliography and Other Suggested Reading for Teachers

Atwell, Nancie. *In The Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* . Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998. While intended primarily for the teacher of the middle grades, Atwell's discussions of how reading and writing are classroom community endeavors are invaluable to the secondary teacher as well. Atwell provides useful models for implementing reading and writing workshops, along with samples of student work, to benefit the experienced and the novice teacher.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers* . London: Oxford UP, 1973. This is an excellent and essential text about the process of writing, and using writing to think. Elbow provides a useful approach to writing for the fledgling writer and for the expert. Students and teachers alike will benefit from this book.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* . New York: Meridian, 1990. This collection of essays about literature by and about black women is useful in augmenting one's knowledge of these authors and their work.

An Introduction to Shared Inquiry . Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1992. This guide accompanies the Great Books seminars (a great staff development opportunity), and is a useful resource in developing the English language arts classroom as a center of inquiry and discovery. This book includes a thorough discussion of becoming an interpretive reader, as well as instructions on how to implement the philosophy in the classroom. Also included are course materials and sample curriculum units.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* . Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984. Though primarily known as a poet,

Lorde's contribution to feminist literary criticism is key. While some of these pieces may seem dated, they are important to our understanding the place of the black woman writer in our culture.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* . New York: Vintage, 1992. This is a sophisticated, and invaluable, consideration of the presence of race in the American literary canon. It is useful as a supplement to Morrison's own novels, but also provides readers with important tools through which to view the work of other American writers.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 - 1978* . By Adrienne Rich. New York: Norton, 1979. 33 - 49. While this essay has become a cornerstone of feminist criticism, its ideas about reading and writing are valuable to a wide cross-section of readers. Rich makes a compelling argument in favor of knowing literary history in order to better know ourselves.

Walker, Rebecca, ed. *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* . New York: Anchor, 1995. As its title suggests, this collection of essays provides a look into the feminist psyche in 1990s American culture. While the essays are uneven in their quality, there are pieces here that are useful in painting a more complete picture of where feminist thought is headed in popular culture. Some of the young writers collected here (Rebecca Walker is Alice Walker's daughter) are appealing and accessible to younger readers.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own* . San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929. This essay is essential to the understanding of the development of women's voices in literature. Here Woolf asks questions about being a writer to which her literary daughters are still seeking answers.

Readings and Resources for Students

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening* . 1899. New York: Avon/Bard, 1972.

DiFranco, Ani. Dilate. *Righteous Babe* , 1996.

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Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper . " 1892. *The Heath Introduction to Fiction* . Ed. John J. Clayton. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1996. 217 - 229.

Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* . Ruffhouse, 1998.

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Walker, Alice. "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life." 1976. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* . By Alice Walker. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 3 - 14.

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