



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

Introduction

In this seminar, we read short fiction and novels by nineteenth- and twentieth-century English and American women authors. Essays by Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*), Tillie Olsen (*Silences*), and Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*) framed our discussion of the fiction, directing our attention to the ways in which women's literary voices have been silenced on account not only of their gender, but also of their race or class: through lack of access to education; by the simultaneous demands of raising children and earning a living; by the historically low value set on the words and experiences of women in general, and in particular of working-class women, women of color, and others excluded from the cultural *élite*.

Yet throughout difficulties and discouragements, women of all kinds have written, and the major contribution of women to the history of the novel has, in the past several decades, been rediscovered. The novels we read emerged from vastly different life experiences and spoke in a cacophony of voices: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is narrated by a middle-class, nineteenth-century, rural English woman; Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* by a West Indian au pair girl discovering Manhattan; Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* by a young Latina in the Chicago *barrio*. Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* also takes place in Chicago, in a pre-Civil Rights culture of racial segregation; Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* introduces readers to the stifling comfort of upper-class life in turn-of-the century New Orleans; Fae Ng's *Bone* to the close-knit community of San Francisco's contemporary Chinatown.

Despite this variety, some common styles and themes emerged from our reading. Several of the novels, notably *Maud Martha* and *The House on Mango Street*, are composed of vignettes, or brief scenes (making them particularly useful for the classroom). Madness (*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper") and suicide (*The Awakening*; *Bone*) express characters' frustration with cultural limitations. Romantic and sexual longing is a constant; maternal love, however, is often disconcertingly absent (*The Awakening*) or ineffective (Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"). Despite these commonalties, the seminar was—appropriately, I think—unable to reach conclusion about what the defining characteristic of a "women's voice" might be, or even whether such a phenomenon exists.

Not surprisingly, then, the curriculum units in this volume take a variety of approaches to the literature of female experience. Units by Francine Coss, Geraldine Martin, and Jean Sutherland explore the family—as it appears to Kindergarten-age children, in the context of Chinese culture, and through the words of African-American women writers, respectively. Sandra Friday and Dianne Marlowe focus more specifically on mothers and daughters in novels, films, and short stories. Several units place a single work in its historical context, including Sophie Bell's unit on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Lisa Galullo's on "The Yellow Wallpaper"; in its contemporary cultural context, as does Angela Beasley-Murray's unit on *The House on Mango Street*; or in its

biographical context, as does Jean Gallogly's unit on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Leslie Abbatiello pairs Black and white authors to illuminate the "ongoing conversation" among American women writers, and Douglas von Hollen turns to contemporary short stories by women to engage students' interest in the aesthetic and formal aspects of literature.

These units share one important feature: they convey the excitement and variety of the literature of female experience. I hope the texts and techniques laid out in this volume, suitable for students from Kindergarten through twelfth grade, will encourage many teachers to introduce women's literary voices into their own classrooms.

Laura M. Green

Assistant Professor of English

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