Teaching Motherhood, Madness and Murder: The Challenges of Choosing Modern American Literary Texts

Many of the classical texts of American literature by women writers present a negative image of women as inferiors in a patriarchal society. This prevents a problem for instructors wishing to choose texts as a liberating experience for both teachers and students. She looks in particular at Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “The Revolt of Mother”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall Paper” and Susan Glaspell’s “Trifles.”

By: Dr. Raja Khaleel Al-Khalili, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hashemite University, Jordan

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Challenges

There are many challenges of teaching American literary texts to undergraduate students in the United States and abroad. Many of the professional challenges in constructing a course syllabus for an American literature class have to do with choices related to the teachers’ preferences, students’ abilities and the texts’ appeal. Most instructors are aware of their research interests, their students’ needs, and the cultural values of particular institutions, but still struggle with choosing American texts for classes that are either intended for a general survey of American literature or for more specialized courses which focus on a certain genre such drama or the short story. In addition, there is a difficulty facing instructors in choosing literary works from representative historical periods and who to include as major authors of American literature. However, there is a consensus by most instructors due to contemporary changes in the Humanities in the United States and abroad to include a number of female writers in their courses because they want to provide a much-needed institutional context for understanding narratives of marginalization, which is in the opinion of many instructors an important element in an American literature class.

Other important factors also have to do with current trends in teaching American literature worldwide. Most teachers have realized that since the late eighties anthologies have undergone a surge in the number of women authors who are now canonized and frequently taught in American literature classes in the United States and abroad. The background to the factors that shape a canon can be summarized by Charlotte Templin in “Canons, Class and the Crisis of the Humanity.” Templin reviews critical opinion on canon formation, class considerations, and the shaping of a course in the Humanities. According to Templin, John Guillory in “Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation” emphasizes “cultural capital” as a more important factor in teaching literature than the canon’s representation of social groups. In other words, the canon is not as important as the school itself which makes such decisions on who fills the teaching positions and consequently what gets to be taught. Guillory, though, still believes that having women writers on the syllabus does empower women and minorities to become agents of...
change. As for most female instructors I have encountered in my teaching career, the argument about canons is fairly settled and most feel obligated to include more women writers on an American literature course syllabus.

A search on the web as well as the many course syllabi provided in English departments attest to the notion that a number of instructors do include female writers in courses dealing with American literature. Furthermore, several important anthologies have a number of female writers as part of their selections. A sample of texts which appear frequently in anthologies and are a great favorite among instructors are Mary Wilkin’s Freeman “The Revolt of Mother,” (1891) Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper,” (1913) and Susan Glaspell’s Trifles ((1916) as representatives of American women writers. However, a closer analysis of the texts reveals selections centered on respectively with thematic issues of motherhood, madness, and murder which have become in the opinion of students I have taught in the United States and Jordan as synonymous with the only topics of interest by American women writers.

Motherhood

The first choice which frequently appears on a course syllabus in a survey of American literature is Mary Wilkins Freeman, “The Revolt of Mother.” The short story is an appealing text found in most anthologies and is usually taught in both general courses focusing on American literature and in some courses emphasizing modern American prose in the undergraduate level. Generally, most students I taught in the United States and Jordan discussed ‘The Revolt of Mother’ as a narrative of a common domestic battle in an American family and the dispute over building of a barn as providing a rural setting. The short story achieved a moderate success because a good number of students were eager to point out the thematic role of motherhood in fighting male domination in a patriarchal society.

The literary criticism available on the topic which students often bring to class also emphasizes its thematic concerns of motherhood. The following critical essays reveal the story’s concern with the role of women as in Brian White “In the Humble Fashion of a Scripture Woman”: The Bible as Besieging Tool in Freeman’s ‘The Revolt of Mother,’ M. Cutter “Frontiers of Language: Engendering Discourse in ‘The Revolt of Mother’,” and Josephine Donovan “Silence or Capitulation: Prepatriarchal ‘Mother’ Garden.” The text is especially appealing to female students both in the United States and Jordan because motherhood is a universal theme. Students are surprised to find out from the writer’s biography that Mary Wilkins Freeman had not been a mother herself and yet motherhood is an important theme in her work. As for male students, a general feeling permeates among them of being left out of the discussion. In fact, one student taking a class in Modern American Prose at a Jordanian university jokingly pointed out if the choice of authors was to purposefully exclude male students from any discussion. His remark was reiterated after reading “The Yellow Wall Paper” which was the following item on the syllabus.
Madness

“The Yellow Wall Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is another favorite selection in a course entitled Modern American Prose. The text which is usually explained in a footnote as dealing with a medical condition called “hysteria” is explained in the footnote in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* as a loose word for a number of symptoms, particular to women, and indicated illness (833). Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote an essay in 1913 explaining the reasons behind writing the story entitled, “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper?’” According to Gilman, her disease was diagnosed by a famous physician as “hysteria” and the medical advice she received and obeyed for about three months almost caused her “mental ruin” (844). Therefore, her purpose is informative and “that it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being crazy, and it worked” (845). In recent medical terminology, the symptoms reveal a condition identified as “postpartum depression,” a condition prevalent among mothers following childbirth.

The short story received multiple reactions and almost all undergraduate students irrespective of year, level, gender, or culture were unanimous in their bafflement and discomfort with the medical detail and discussed “The Yellow-paper” as a feminist text promoting attentiveness to women problems or focused on the story as an example of Gothic literature. Most students regarded it as an aphorism about madness and backed up their analysis by critical works available on the topic including: John S. Bak, “Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” Carol Margaret Davison, “Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” M. Delashmit and C. Longcope, “Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper,” Janice Haney-Peritz, Janice “Monumental Feminism and Literature’s Ancestral House: Another look at ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’,” Beverly A. Hume, “Gilman’s ‘Interminable Grotesque’: The Narrator,” Greg Johnson, “Gilman’s Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in “The Yellow wallpaper,” Elizabeth Dolan Kautz, “Gynecologists, Power and Sexuality in Modernists Texts,” Jeannette King and Pam Morris, “On Not Reading Between the Lines: Models of Reading The Yellow Wallpape,” and Shawn St. Jean, “Hanging ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’: Feminism and Textual Studies.” The result of discussing madness as a major theme of the very popular short story leaves most students with a certain feeling of “depression.”
Murder

The third recurrent theme in creative works written by American female authors, or so it seems, is murder as most instructors choose to discuss Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* in courses surveying American literature. The domestic drama, *Trifles* is a favorite among both teachers and students and appears frequently in most anthologies. The play’s absent protagonist is a case of how domestic violence and/or female bonding develop among women. Numerous criticism of the play covers a wide range of topics, but at the same time the play’s thematic concern with murder is inevitably referred to in many articles as some of the following examples illustrate: Ein Karen Alkalay-Gut in “Jury of Her Peers: The Importance of *Trifles,*” Martha C Carpentier’s “Susan Glaspell’s Fiction: Fidelity as American Romance,” Suzy Clarkson Holstein in “Silent Justice in a Different Key: Glaspell’s *Trifles,*” Phyllis Mael in “Trifles: The Path to Sisterhood,” Leonard Mustazza in “Generic Translation and Thematic Shift in Susan Glaspell.” Students in their discussion occasionally refer to the available articles to supplement their argument on how the play revolves on acts of murder committed by women. Moreover, the biography of Susan Glaspell is also referred to by students and shows the impact of Glaspell’s journalistic career on her literary work. Moreover, her commitment to solving social problems that face women reveals her enthusiasm for bringing to the audiences’ attention the depressing conditions women face in rural America. However, for most students of literature, Susan Glaspell’s play leaves readers with a feeling of women writers as emotionally involved with women as being inferior in society and their literary creativity is sort of “locked up” in a limited array of thematic concerns as writers.

Combating negative values

The inability to escape the “narrow” topics of interest by American women writers of course can be justifiable in light of understanding the positions of women in society at varying historical stages in America. Students are aware of women’s inferiority in patriarchal societies both past and present; therefore, the literary work by women writers becomes an important factor in addressing women’s inferior positions. Yet, at the same time, one could not but feel remorse on how literary creativity by women is by circumstances limited to themes of inferiority and consequently students find creative work by women as substandard.

The sense of disappointment is recurrent among most students I taught regardless of their cultural background and they express their feelings concerning American female writers’ lack of creativity especially when comparing them to other male canonical writers on the syllabus who show a myriad of thematic concerns. Even when established writers in the American literary canon such as Hemingway, who gained an international status, write about male prowess, the topic attracts both male and female students. In fact, one female student stated that she enjoyed reading his work more than the other writers on the syllabus of Modern American Prose because it was painful to read the other selected female authors, which included Mary Wilkins Freeman and Charlotte Gillman. Her observation is not a new one and I have often heard it many times before by both male and female students in the United States and Jordan.

As a female instructor, however, I feel obligated to include women writers in my courses and at the same time find it difficult to expect undergraduate students to understand the necessity of
exposing them to female authors without quenching at the fact that the range of topics offered by American women writers serves to promote negative feelings and seems centered on topics related to women. However, one can not underestimate the responsibility of including female authors which is an asset to many instructors working in English Departments.

The sense of obligation to include American women writers prevalent among female instructors to include women writers in courses in literature has brought with it positive changes in colleges and universities. It spawns a growing awareness on the need to include a diverse body of previously neglected literature. It also casts lights on challenges that have not been successfully addressed in social and political institutions in the United States and abroad. After all, the increase in the diversity of the faculty and its inclusion of women instructors does not prevent negative attitudes and prejudice towards them from festering. In fact, the choice of texts by female instructors and the inclusion of neglected types of literature is an important indicator of how negative attitudes can quickly become a point against them. Therefore, female instructors should not dismiss the works by female writers as not worthy of attention especially in light of the ideological emphasis on decisions to focus on male canonical writers. Furthermore, the emphasis on choosing texts endorses a faculty member’s sense of their role in shaping their institution and in creating a sense of affiliation with the school, colleagues and students, and it also provides a ground for a truly liberating intellectual project where there would be rare chances of dichotomies and unanimous decisions would be implemented to include American women writers.

Therefore, being part of an institution that promotes including women as instructors, I feel a sense of accountability in choosing texts written by women because choices spawn a self-examination on the teacher’s role of shaping conceived notions. First, as instructors we should not evade our responsibility in considering texts produced by American women writers as integral and not renegade and the process of choosing texts as an emancipatory vision of a potentially liberating exercise for both the instructor and students. Therefore, instead of feeling as a mentor having a strident voice bewailing the inevitable current throes of prejudice, one could become an active member in combating values that were until recently discredited and considered unfit. One should not also forget that the recent incantations of inclusion by many female instructors have almost coexisted with a policy of exclusion of the near past. Therefore, teaching texts by female authors is a way of seeking recognition and respect and provides a tool against discrimination. The demand on instructors to be more pragmatic and to aspire for more comprehensive ideally diverse subjects by women writers is part of a struggle. Nevertheless, one should remain optimistic about the positive outcomes of teaching American literary works produced by women writers. After all, if literary texts by women writers impart a thematic personal devastation in a sullen mood, we as readers are forced to look on the dreadful stories and reexamine their value in their lack of appeal to undergraduate students irrespective of level or cultural background. Therefore, the choice of texts becomes an ambitious and labor intensive act presenting a set of challenges and it begins with exposing the unappealing thematic concerns as a step in initiating a dialogue on the works of women writers.

In conclusion, American literary texts written by women should be included in any American literature class even though they leave the students with the disappointed notion of female writers having a few themes in their creativity compartment. Most students eventually do
become aware of how such “limited” concerns are beyond a writer’s control and the dissatisfaction with the topics only reinforces the impact of marginalization on the creative process. The frustrations are real and as a female instructor, I can not but help sense that the selections do point to themes which I grouped as “motherhood, madness, and murder.” The most commonly selected works by female authors in courses in American literature in a general survey course or a more specialized course invoke some students to suggest that a course syllabus should probably avoid having many female authors on the list since most of the anthologized names are unappealing. The challenges are to combat conceived notions voiced by undergraduate students both male and female who propose a course should predominantly include “white, dead males” of American literature because the writers are more diversified in their topics and their themes are more appealing to undergraduate students both in the United States and abroad.

Works Cited


