

A Woman's Place in Literature

The United States has become a melting pot of ethnicities, and therefore, has become a melting pot of their cultures. This is revealed through the variety of cultures present in any high school or college classroom. However, throughout these same classrooms, educators choose their reading materials from a cannon of books written predominately by dead, white men. In doing so, they omit novels the students may relate to on a more personal level, thus allowing the students to relate to what they have read. In understanding the magnitude of including multicultural literature in the classroom, it is essential to question the impact of reading multicultural literature, to look at the significance of focusing on women's issues, and finally to determine the common issues that appeared in a variety of multicultural novels.

As each student develops his or her own sense of individuality, it is imperative he or she discovers positive role models with whom to connect and relate. These role models can be found in the student's every day life. They can also be located in the novels the students read, but only if the student can relate to the story, the protagonist, or both. For students of culture, it is not easy to relate to the protagonists in the novels from the cannon. Instead, they need to study novels from their own culture and other cultures. In her text, Crossing the Mainstream, Eileen Oliver discusses the irresponsibility of educators who ignore the cultures of those they teach.

Continuing to ignore the literatures of diverse groups is not only unrealistic and unscholarly, but also offensive to the students we teach. In a country whose demographics have changed drastically in the last few decades, it makes no sense to deny our students a look at the world through the eyes of all of its artists (7).

By recognizing and respecting the cultures present in our country and in our classrooms, educators are able to choose texts to reflect the needs of a majority of their students.

By respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students through the teaching of multicultural literature, teachers have the opportunity to broaden all of their student's knowledge base in regards respecting differences in others. This respect is necessary with the number of diverse cultures present in American schools. Joseph Brunach touches upon the concept of appreciating differences in his article, "How to Build a Multicultural Library". "Children need every kind of role model that is

appropriately available. Our children come from an incredibly wide range of backgrounds and have many different ways of experiencing the world. We need to read and experience, with authenticity, things that come from their point of view to be a fully rounded human being” (29). With greater understanding of a variety of cultures, students develop a greater acceptance and tolerance. With an open mind, created by acceptance, tolerance and understanding, students are more capable of learning.

In creating this environment, it is important to look specifically at the importance of the women’s narrative in regards to literature, and then multicultural literature. Throughout the cannon, women are portrayed predominantly by men with little understanding of their idiosyncrasies. Their works are riddled with inaccuracies and misconceptions. Throughout these novels, the woman has no voice of her own. She is portrayed as an accessory to a man with the belief that she is wrong to think of herself instead of others. And since this is how others, men, see her, this ends up being how she sees herself. Mary Belenky et al explore this feeling in women in their text, Women’s Ways of Knowing.

Women are drawn to the role of caretaker and nurturer, often putting their own needs at the bottom of the list, preceded by other people, husband, and children. At the position of received knowledge, using the either/or thinking so characteristic of the position, women believe that “to get something for oneself” is abhorrent and selfish because others are bound to be deprived as a result (77).

These same characteristics hold true in multicultural literature as well. Cultures such as Chinese, Dominican Republic, and Japanese hold their women in submissive positions. Through the women’s narrative, however, from Anchee Min to Julia Alvarez to Virginia Woolf, the readers are afforded the women’s perspective. And while the protagonists in the works written by these authors and others portray women who are subservient to men, they also show their greater knowledge and understanding of the situation. This inside knowledge is imperative for future generations of young women to read. It affords them the understanding of how things may have been in the past, but it also presents them with the realization that the women were not exactly as they were portrayed. There was something more under the surface that men were incapable of seeing, thus giving inaccurate recounts in their novels. With this knowledge, young women reading from the cannon do so with open eyes. When they read literature,

either multicultural or from the cannon, from a woman's perspective, they are given a greater understanding of what they can become.

The concept of the women's perspective appears in several novels written by women. One specific concern is the women's lack of voice. This concept appears in novels spanning various cultures. It is broached in Julia Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John, Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, Anchee Min's Red Azalea, Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior, and Isabelle Allende's The House of the Spirits. In each of these novels, written from a woman's perspective, the female protagonist is a strong, intelligent woman. Through them, readers are afforded a greater understanding of what it was really like to be woman and what women really saw and knew. Other issues that are dealt with in the above novels are female coming of age, the influence of culture and history, the repetition of the past, and the mother-daughter connection. While these are not the only issues present, they are a significant basis from which to start.

While multicultural literature is only beginning to enter the classrooms in high schools and colleges, it is a necessary part of education. It gives insight to the differences in others, thus, affording those a greater sense of understanding and compassion. With understanding and compassion comes tolerance. The reading and discussion of multicultural literature is necessary as it gives students a broader knowledge base of other cultures, of women in society and history, and finally of the themes that run through multicultural literature that assist in the development of individuals and individuality.

Works Cited

Atanasoski, Neda. "Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Color".
<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/JuliaAlvarez.html> (online) 4/24/01.

- Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule.
Women's Ways of Knowing. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Brunach, Joseph. "How to Build a Multicultural Library". NEA Today, Nov. 2000,
Vol. 19, Issue 3, p29.
- "Dominican Republic – A Country Study"
<http://www.ask.com/main/followup.asp?qCategory=GEOG&ask=dominican+republic&> Source
(online) 4/25/01.
- Forrest, David. Rafael Trujillo: The Dominican Dictator. http://www.jlhs.nhusd.k12.ca.us/Classes/Social_Science/Latin_America/Dominican_Republic
(online) 4/24/01.
- Longman, Addison Wesley. Literature Online. <http://longman.awl.com/kennedy/alvarez/biography.html>
(online) 4/24/01.
- Narins, Brigham and Deborah Stanley, ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 93
New York: Gale Literary Criticism Series, 1996, pp.1-20.
- Oliver, Eileen Iscoff. Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching Literature.
Urbana: NCTE,