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Moving Toward an Equitable Language Arts Curriculum

In her book, The Second Sex, Simone DeBeauvoir writes that “Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question . . . why is woman the *Other*?” (DeBeauvoir 37). It is a good question to ponder, especially when considering education and much of the curriculum being taught to boys and girls in the United States. Undeniably, education contributes to gender bias. Often treated differently than young men, young women attend classes as unknowing participants in a paternalistic social construct that continues to perpetuate the idea that women are indeed some *Other*. Especially for secondary language arts teachers, the challenge is to help education move away from its male center. By designing curriculum that includes a richer, more diverse selection of women’s literature, English teachers not only help promote discussion of historical and literary portrayals of women, but also challenge young women and men to consider gender and cultural equality, and how gender affects and shapes lives.

It is no secret that education discriminates against young women. Girls tend to out-perform boys in elementary schools but often fall behind in learning skills once they arrive in high school and college. In Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls, Myra and David Sadker offer research regarding educational discrimination against girls. Besides not receiving “equal educational opportunities in the classroom,”

they find women to be under-represented in classroom textbooks (Spring 116). For example, an examination of elementary language arts textbooks in 1989 showed that there were at least three times as many pictures of men than women (116). According to the Sadker's, constantly being ignored affects girls' self-perception. Generally, as they advance through different levels of school, girls tend to value themselves less, their low self-esteem caused by selective "modes of classroom interaction, the representation of women in textbooks, and the discriminatory content of standardized tests" (115). The Sadker's research indicates that accessing education appears to be a problem especially for girls, and that gender bias in schools contributes to young women learning far less than young men.

Although improvements have been made, more needs to be done to deconstruct society's patriarchal definitions of education and women's roles. For Steven Tozer, "societal definitions of gender" still affect and shape "societal and educational practices" in the United States (Tozer 396). Likewise, Carol Gilligan also sees education as a tool in a "patriarchal civilization" (Debeauvoir 171) that handicaps women by intentionally depriving them of opportunities. Along with the absence of women's literature in curriculum, Gilligan feels messages of subordination and objectification promulgated by schools continue to devalue young women – often leading to problems with girls' development. In "Teaching Shakespeare's Sister: Notes from the Underground of Female Adolescence," she says adolescence is a time when "girls are in danger of drowning or disappearing" (Gilligan 31). She makes the point that girls must remain responsive to themselves by resisting "conventions of female goodness" and question the "value placed on self-efficiency and independence in North

American culture” (31-35). While in school, Gilligan implores girls to take on the “problem of resistance and also take up the question of what relationship means to themselves, to others, and to the world”; that in order to not completely disappear, young women must enter – “enter disrupting” – a Western culture that generally defines *human as male* (35-37).

For Gilligan, Tozer, and other scholars like Allen Carey-Webb, education can change despite the fact that “societal attitudes and behaviors are central to the problem of equal educational opportunity for women” (Tozer 396). All feel there is no excuse for inactivity; as professors and experts in the field of education, each agrees that teachers share the responsibility for examining any problem that hinders learning. For Carey-Webb specifically, language arts teachers must help shift repressive cultural paradigms by taking aggressive stances when it comes to creating feminine pedagogy. By increasing awareness of the problem and looking for ways to “genderize” out-dated, male-oriented curriculum, Carey-Webb believes English teachers can challenge students to consider problems generally associated with women’s issues, thereby allowing them to “become more sensitive to the way we think and understand ourselves and others” (Carey-Webb 39).

In his book, Literature & Lives, Carey-Webb outlines a response-based, cultural studies approach to teaching English. In the chapter, “Genderizing the Curriculum: A Personal Journey,” not only does he discuss his own personal experiences and teaching approaches, but also includes worthy examples of women’s literature, suggestions for multi-cultural additions to the women’s literature canon, and scholarly readings, criticisms, and on-line resources related to gender studies. For teachers

looking to transform English teaching, Carey-Webb says feminist and gender studies can open up “awareness” and create “justification for thinking of gender issues as a fundamental part of English as academic subject” (39). Moreover, he claims bringing these issues into the language arts classroom “encourages teachers to take that which is vital in the lives of young people and make it intellectually meaningful to the literature we read and teach,” which is important because it “provides teachers and students alike with the critical tools they need to analyze themselves and the world” (39).

One author Carey-Webb strongly encourages language arts instructors to include in feminine pedagogy is Virginia Woolf. Much of Woolf’s work offers intriguing commentary and insight into the plight of Western women, particularly the essay, A Room Of One’s Own, and the novel, To The Lighthouse. Although each can be a bit difficult to read at times, both afford opportunities for teachers and students to examine fears, thoughts, and feelings commonly shared by women living during the early decades of 20th Century. For teachers looking to connect history and students’ contemporary lives, and ways to introduce culture and gender studies into a language arts classroom, both books are excellent places to start.

In Room, Woolf offers a vision of women struggling for intellectual equality. Written as an essay, Woolf outlines a history of societal and educational bias against female artists, especially women writers. Trapped by a form of masculine groupthink that considers women to be “intellectually, morally and physically inferior to men” (Woolf 111), Woolf comments on inequities hounding female writers exacerbated, apparently, by institutions of higher learning. Claiming they have had less than a “dog’s chance” (108) at attaining intellectual freedom since the “beginning of time” (108), she makes the

point that women have generally been sent to college to be “uneducated” (113). For Woolf, once women enter into schools of higher education, they are forced to survive and try to find their identities in a social institution founded on a history of male teachers, male ideas, and male literature and art. In short, what women really learn is what men want them to be.

Evidently, Woolf also feels too many women believe it is “fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman”(104). However, she is quick to chastise those who simply give up. Calling them “disgracefully ignorant,” she reminds all women that opportunities to learn exist (“at least two colleges for women in existence in England since the year 1866” (112)), and implores each to pick up and use the “thousand pens” that are “ready to suggest what you should do and what effect you will have” (113). Arguably, this is the most important lesson from the reading. As a whole, the essay is Woolf’s attempt to break down walls. It is the voice of a woman trying to escape subordination by putting on a “body which she has so often laid down” (114), a call to arms from one of “Shakespeare’s sisters” demanding an equal opportunity to think and write exactly what she wants without fear or reprisal.

In a similar way, Woolf explores society’s patriarchal effect on women in To The Lighthouse. The story offers a truly wonderful female character – Mrs. Ramsay – for teachers and students to collectively analyze and discuss. Representing older, Victorian values regarding a woman’s role in patriarchy, Woolf uses her as a model of what many during her time would consider to be a good Victorian wife – an uneducated, unemployed, upper to middle class wife, who stays at home and primarily serves

civilization by offering a soothing, civilizing voice to men. Wife of a philosopher, mother of eight, Woolf casts the fifty-year-old woman as a protector and supporter of men, “the great clan” (Woolf 3); to Mrs. Ramsay, if men were going to fight wars, negotiate treaties, and control finance, women should be supportive and understanding of their “husband’s labours” (11). By analyzing Mrs. Ramsey, especially her portrayal in the first section of the novel, students can begin to see how historical societal roles can affect women’s identities and perceptions.

Not surprisingly, Woolf starts the novel with Mrs. Ramsay politely saying “yes” to a male, her son James. Throughout “The Window,” Woolf paints her as an extremely courteous woman with the “whole of the other sex under her protection” (6), mentally providing reassurance to the men in her life, specifically, to James, Charles Tansley, and her husband, Mr. Ramsay. Repeatedly, she tells James he will get what he most desires – to sail out to the lighthouse. Despite her husband and Tansley’s rational, but negative assessment of the inclement weather, she’s seen soothing James, stroking his hair, and helping him cut pictures from magazines, all the while reassuring him that he will see the Lighthouse, saying “But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine” (4) . . . “Perhaps it will be fine tomorrow (15). In a similar manner, Mrs. Ramsay also buoys Tansley’s fragile male libido. After asking the young philosopher and guest at the lodge to accompany her as she runs a “dull errand” (9) to visit a sick woman in town, she revives him during the walk and ensuing conversation by sharing a story of another young philosopher that implies “the greatness of man’s intellect” (11) and the “subjection of all wives” (11).

As for husband Mr. Ramsey, “the greatest metaphysician of the time” (37), Mrs.

Ramsey is especially adroit at using her sympathetic skills to repair his bruised psyche. Especially in Chapter VII, Mr. Ramsey needs to be reminded that he is a genius, that he “too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world” (37). While knitting, she assures him that without doubt, “by her laugh, her poise, her competence” (38), that he is a genius, that he has not lived a barren life, rather has created a life and home “made full of life” (37). Like James and Tansley, Mrs Ramsay is able to fill Mr. Ramsay’s ears with words that make him feel restored and renewed. From the start of the story, Mrs. Ramsay goes about the business of either assuaging men’s feelings of guilt or insecurity, knitting, or worrying about her children’s welfare and the shabbiness of her home. Ultimately, she represents one woman’s attempt to fulfill a societal role historically forced on women, that of comforting wife and doting mother.

More importantly, Woolf also uses Mrs. Ramsey’s character (and later in the novel, Lily) to illustrate the psychological burden that comes with trying to fulfill these roles. Although she maintains a good Victorian appearance on the outside, Woolf repeatedly allows readers glimpses of Mrs. Ramsay’s inner voice – a voice filled at times with resentment and frustration; at other times, filled with intelligence and artistic wisdom. For example, even though she outwardly shows concern for Tansley, his life, and profession during their walk to town, readers hear Mrs. Ramsay’s resentful, inner voice calling him an “awful prig – oh yes, an insufferable bore” (12). Further, in Chapter VI, although “There is nobody who she revered as she revered him” (32), she shows signs of resenting her husband’s rather brutal rationality and frustration with her family’s constant use of her as their emotional sponge. As Woolf writes, the weight is

often too much to bare, often physically fatiguing:

Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion (38).

Lastly, during her walk with Tansley, Mrs. Ramsay interrupts him (something that men seem to do a lot to women!) long enough to point out the beauty of the surroundings. Although not a painter like Lily, she does show an artist's eye for beauty and creativity. Referring to "the soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them" (13), her observations add depth to her character.

Interestingly, Mrs. Ramsay's vision of her surroundings is "uninhabited of men" (13), a vision of "pink women" (13). It's a vision that Tansley, a man, cannot and will not be able to see or understand. Left to guess at what she sees, ("So Tansley supposed she meant him to see that the man's picture was skimpy . . . The colours weren't solid?" (13)), Woolf is clearly making the point that men are blind to the female experience. Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts and actions – her careful manipulations of fragile male egos; her ability to communicate artistic vision – not only highlight a woman's capacity for intelligence and strength, but also shows how blind men can be to the confining weight of their patriarchal code of manhood. Although many may argue that Mrs. Ramsay gives in way too easily to her supposed lot in life, it's clear that she, like so many women, is trying to do her best living in a society that traditionally devalues women.

Teachers using To The Lighthouse and A Room Of One's Own to study gender issues can focus young people's attention on historical sources of female oppression – what they are; how they started; how they are perpetuated – and the effects on individuals and society. In both books, the effect on Woolf's females is quite clear. For students in English classrooms just starting to examine culture and gender issues, the challenge for teachers is to help both male and female students explore the history behind that old, societal "cradle song" (16) Mrs. Ramsay hears every time she allows herself to think, and raise her mind above her position – a song causing a thundering "hollow in her ears" that makes her "look up with an impulse of terror" (16); a song heard in both of the aforementioned books by Woolf that continues to pervade society and much of the feminine world.

Beyond Woolf, there are other female authors worthy of inclusion in a secondary language arts curriculum focusing on culture and gender studies. Tillie Olsen's, Tell Me A Riddle, for instance, does a wonderful job tackling issues and themes still familiar to contemporary students such as poverty, family and marital relations, and how society views the sick and aging. Moreover, like Woolf, Olsen adroitly handles the feminine voice, addressing issues like girlhood, gender inequality in school, and the denial of self, particularly in the novel's first and third chapters, "I Stand Here Ironing," and "Oh Yes."

In "I Stand Here Ironing," the young eyes of an impoverished mother witness the marginalizing effect public education has on her young daughters, Susan and Emily. Readers learn that Susan often loses or doesn't do her homework; Momma says she is "lost, she was a drop; suffering over her unpreparedness, stammering and unsure in her classes" (Olsen 10). As for Emily, like a lot of young girls, Momma says Emily is

unhappy with her outward appearance, “thin and dark and foreign-looking” (7) in a time when all little girls were supposed to look like Shirley Temple. Like Susan, Emily worries about school. Apparently, Emily was not “glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn”(8); her “overworked” (8) teachers consider her slow, perhaps due to some imaginary illness that causes her to miss a lot of school. Only when she wins a school talent show does Emily become “Somebody” (10). However, Olsen paints Emily’s new-found success bittersweet. As Momma explains, even though she’s an apparent victor, Emily is still an unknowing victim – a young woman “imprisoned in her difference as she had been in her anonymity” (10); a young woman living in a world where the “prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized” (12).

Olsen highlights another somber portrait of a young girl struggling with school-related pressures in “Oh Yes.” Jennie implies that junior high school serves as a social sorting machine, separating “have’s” and “have not’s” by sex, color, or social status. For example, she tells her mother, Helen, “You have to watch everything, and what you wear and how you wear it and who you eat lunch with and how much homework you do and how you act to the teacher and what you laugh at . . . And run with your crowd” (54). After considering her daughter’s comments, Helen’s thoughts silently turn to the issue of sorting, especially the school’s practice of teaching young girls (not boys) how to appear and act:

A foreboding of comprehension whirled within Helen. What was it Carol had told her of the Welcome Assembly the first day in junior high? The models were

showing How to Dress and How Not to Dress and half the girls in their loved their new clothes watching their counterparts up on stage – *their* straight skirt, their sweater, their earrings, lipstick, hairdo – “How Not to Dress,” “a bad reputation for your school.” (54)

In fact, in chapter three, Olsen points a rather bitter finger at education and teachers as a whole. For example, she mentions a young girl, Vicky, who fights, curses, and gets expelled by a teacher who tries to wipe “forbidden lipstick” (55) off of her face. Olsen also refers to a teacher who treat students like Parilee “like a dummy” (53); she writes that “a lot of teachers don’t like Parry when they don’t even know what she’s like. Just because . . .” (61). The result is that Parry simply gives up on school altogether: “No more bending together over the homework . . . Parry brings her books home, for where is there space or time and what is the sense?” (57). Tellingly, Olsen also raises a really solid point regarding students, teachers, and homework. She writes: “What if there’s no one at home to give the help, and the teachers with their two hundred and forty kids a day can’t or don’t or the kids don’t ask and they fall hopelessly behind, what they?” (55). It’s a brutally honest observation, a powerful indictment of the teaching profession and the relationship between students, parents, and teachers that is still relevant and worthy of discussion.

In both chapter one and three of Tell Me A Riddle, Olsen looks at victims of oppression, women struggling to find a means of personal, self-expression. The repressive nature of schools in this society, according to Olsen, causes young girls to doubt their self-worth. As she illustrates near the end of the chapter three, Jenny fears

becoming too much like Vicky, a girl whose outward actions apparently belie her true, inner self, saying “Oh why do I have to feel it’s happening to me too? (61). Ultimately, she wants to forget about being a girl and questions why she has to care at all. Olsen finds her questions quite disturbing and so should readers, both male and female. Certainly, Olsen is not implying that young boys don’t face similar struggles in school. Arguably, most young men face unique, societal pressures of their own. However, it is no secret that male struggles have been well documented in literature for centuries and English curriculum continues to be mostly about male problems and male solutions. In the end, this is the point Olsen’s trying to make. She simply wants equal time and treatment for the *Other*, equal opportunity to discuss gender equality and society’s historical treatment of men and women. For teachers looking to fortify a female literature curriculum, Olsen’s novel makes a worthy addition, a poignant illustration of female perseverance.

Equally as compelling is Margaret Atwood’s novel, Surfacing. The search for one’s identity appears to be an important part of the novel, although there are other themes worthy of discussion, such as victimization; men versus women; issues related to abortion; city life versus living with nature in the country; anti-Americanization. However, it is Atwood’s seemingly simple idea of escaping into the woods to shed society’s lies and America’s dogma that is, quite honestly, the most appealing. Splashed with touches of shamanism and Thoreau’s Walden, Atwood’s novel is about personal cleansing, a transformative story of a lonely young woman battling social and personal stigmata to find herself.

In the traditional sense, Surfacing is a journey story. To find her authentic self,

Atwood's nameless narrator, the "Surfacer," looks to shed her artificial, cosmopolitan life – a life filled with honking trucks, interviews, and no-nothing jobs; people who consume but do not give thanks; submissive females, sexism, and other male-oriented, societal trappings – by heading home. Realizing that her life is predicated on lies, seeing herself as cut in two, one half dressed in a bathing suit, the other, "locked away . . . detached, terminal" (Atwood 109), what starts as a journey to find a father in a Canadian wilderness ends up becoming an initiation into nature's sorority, a way for the narrator to purge a distorted past. During a week in her family's cabin, the narrator not only describes experiences with leeches, tepid ponds, mosquitoes, smoking, sex, fish and flies, but also reflects on rather painful, personal feelings associated with men and sex, childhood, religion, superficial friends, a failed marriage, and an abortion. It is the intense, invasive power of nature that fuels and shapes the "Surfacer's" self-reflective quest, forcing her to dive deep within herself by examining her life, her identity, and the differences between truth and lies, the natural and unnatural.

More importantly, her journey and initiation into nature brings cathartic relief, a natural means for purging past pains and healing. For example, in the cabin during the early morning hours of day seven, she becomes animal-like as she violently shreds, burns, and eliminates past memories: She throws her "non-husband's" wedding ring into a fire; she burns scrapbooks, pictures of her mother and father, and her "paint tubes and brushes"; she smashes glasses, plates; she takes a big knife and slashes "blankets, the sheets and the beds," along with her mother's jacket and her father's hat (182). Moreover, by plunging into the lake, she receives nature's baptism. By peeling away the clothes of her past, by submerging and moving fluidly within nature's healing,

holy water, she finds her true self by connecting with earth and moon. Emerging from the water, not only does she surface fully aware of herself, but also realizes that she is accepted as “part of the land” and, more importantly, that she is free from her past – free from the “wrong form” that encased her; free from the “false body” she leaves floating on the water’s surface (183).

Atwood’s idea of escaping into the woods and leaving everything behind is an attractive idea. However, to say that Surfacing is only about running away does the story a great disservice. No doubt, Atwood is challenging readers to examine their quiet, desperate lives, making the point that losing yourself is often the first step in finding yourself.

The importance of finding one’s voice is also a part of Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel, The Woman Warrior, specifically the novel’s fifth section, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” Reminiscent of Amy Tan’s, The Joy Luck Club, in this section, Kingston explores identity, the effects of assimilation, and how America forcibly encourages outsiders to adopt Western societal values and attitudes. Told by the story’s Chinese-American protagonist, Maxine, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” focuses on her need to develop a voice while living in Los Angeles. As Kingston bounces back and forth between American and Chinese culture, this particular section of the novel offers an important message of perseverance not just to immigrants, but also to anyone struggling to find an identity while living in racially or sexually oppressive surroundings.

Maxine’s clash with cultural duality begins when she hears the story about why her mother severed her frenum, the pink underside of her tongue, as a young child.

Apparently as a way to assure that she will never be tongue-tied, always able to speak languages that are completely different from one another (Kingston 164), her Chinese mother (a woman staunchly believing in the importance of maintaining cultural beliefs and practices) feels cutting her tongue will help Maxine clearly speak Chinese and, more importantly, English. Although quite disturbing, the story serves two purposes: it allows Kingston to introduce the section's theme of silence and voice; it forces readers to consider the role the story will play in the Maxine's development and her eventual struggles with confusion, silence, self-hate, and increasing awareness that she is neither valued by an American culture, nor completely connected or aware of her own Chinese heritage.

Through the eyes of a child living as a minority, Kingston pursues the story's theme with passion, allowing readers to participate in Maxine's life, examining along with her the many lessons she learns as a young girl inculcated in Chinese tradition trying to adapt to America's societal norms. For example, while attending grade school, Maxine understandably has difficulty learning English. She has problems understanding how to use "I," struggling with problems like why the Chinese "I" has seven strokes, the American "I" only three. Also, she cannot understand the meanings of words like "I," "you," and "here." Like so many students, as she moves through the American public school system, Maxine learns more about the hidden curriculum than the school's pedagogy. Eventually, she associates school with failing grades, indifferent teachers, abusive Japanese kids, pictures painted in black, and constantly being told by American teachers to sit in low corners under the stairs where the noisy boys usually sat" (167) because you're not smart. Calling it a "misery," (166), it's obvious that the more difficult

school becomes, the more her ability to speak and express her identity diminishes.

Beyond school, life isn't much easier for Maxine. Childhood experiences with people in society outside the classroom also "teach" her many lessons. For example, she senses that drugstore clerks and druggists feel sorry for her because they assume she lives in the back of a laundry. Moreover, they always tell her to speak up, "Speak English" (170), and always give her the wrong candy on the wrong holiday. Nuns also chase her down in the park, warning her that she will go to Hell unless she gives up her Eastern beliefs and becomes properly baptized according to the Catholic faith. Further, when she speaks, she sees disgusted American faces looking back at her, seemingly turned off by her voice and the way her Chinese language sounds "chingchong ugly . . . not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words" (171). In the end, trying to exist in Western society as a member of the Chinese minority contributes to Maxine's contemptuous memories of childhood, a childhood filled with self-imposed silence, doubts about her sanity, identity, culture, and feelings of self-hate.

Fortunately, by story's end, Maxine does find enough voice and courage to not only confront herself, but also her mother, father, and her confusing, cultural duality -- the realization that she had been "born among ghosts, taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like (183). Armed with a list of more than two hundred things to tell her mother "so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (197), Maxine stares down her demons, successfully cooling that burning sensation in her throat -- the need to be heard -- when she confronts her parents at the laundry. Although she doesn't share the entire list -- only the "hardest ten or twelve things" (202) like she is smart, not retarded, and can get into colleges; that she's not

going to be a “slave or a wife”; that she flunked kindergarten because her parents didn’t teach her English; that she’s tired of Chinese schools and her mother’s stories; that no one will stop her from talking (201-202) – her action is a symbolic victory, a way of assuring readers that Maxine is on the path to finding her voice: the voice of Chinese-American woman who will, as a result of finding her identity, ultimately attain the power necessary to someday share her own stories, and find peace with her cultural duality.

The fifth section of Kingston’s novel, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” offers an important lesson for all young adults. The whole idea of exploring identity – of finding yourself by exploring yourself – is very positive, especially for teenagers who struggle (like Maxine) to create their own personal narratives. Without question, there are other valuable themes to explore in the novel. To raise awareness and appreciation for other cultures, values, and beliefs, students could explore the racial, cultural, societal, and sexual issues raised throughout each of the five sections. However, before young adults learn to appreciate others, they must first appreciate themselves. In the end, Maxine’s story is especially uplifting, a tale of a young woman overcoming obstacles and, because of the way that it is written, the fifth section of Kingston’s novel could be used by itself as part of cultural studies curriculum that challenges young women and young men to explore the difficulties and rewards involved with people struggling to develop personal identities.

Besides these three novels, there are other stories written by women worthy of inclusion in a secondary language arts curriculum focusing on gender and culture. What follows is an annotated list of novels from various 20th Century women writers who lend credible insight, commentary, depth, and perspective on the history of the female voice.

It is important to note that each of these novels, like the novels previously mentioned, are suggestions; it is assumed decisions regarding level of difficulty or appropriateness of content are best left to the discretion of the instructor.

The list includes:

- ***Toni Morrison's, Sula***. Set in a small community near Medallion, Ohio, called "The Bottom," Sula is a captivating novel. Drawn together from two entirely different family backgrounds, its story traces the lives of two black women, Sula and Nel. With a firm touch, Morrison explores the maturation process of the story's two protagonists with honesty, rewarding readers with a compelling statement on the importance of friendship as seen through feminine eyes. Certainly, like Atwood's Surfacing, the "journey" motif applies to the novel as do other themes such as morality and good versus evil; killing, death, and effects of war; black communities and the role of black men and women in family life; and love, death, and the nature of family relationships. However, it is the unique bond of friendship between the story's two main female characters that gives the novel its soul. With all of its love, anger, betrayal, misunderstanding, and hypocrisy, Sula is a story that teaches readers a lot about themselves and life, how lives affect others, and the importance of never taking friendship for granted.
- ***Djuna Barnes' Nightwood***. What comes through is Barnes' portrayal of possessive love, especially between the story's two female characters, Robin and Nora. The relationship is brutally honest in its portrayal, not

cliché; theirs is a love affair that fits nicely into the “love as circus” metaphor Barnes develops throughout the novel. Beginning with the chapter entitled “Night Watch,” for any man or woman who had ever loved deeply and lost, regardless of his or her sexual preference, there is something strangely familiar, something human in the novel that connects readers to Nora’s misguided attempt to love someone like Robin. Certainly, any who have love and lost can relate to Nora’s plight. This is the important point to remember when reading the novel. It is Barnes’ treatment of the love affair that is refreshing. It is a love affair between two people and there is no need to say “between two gays, two lesbians, or two homosexuals.” It simply doesn’t matter. The feelings that Barnes examines are feelings all people may, at one time or another, feel during a love affair – the initial feelings of joy; feelings of insecurity and jealousy; and, unfortunately, feelings of loss and self-doubt. In the end, Barnes’ message continues to be as important now as it was when she first wrote the story: Ultimately, as human beings, we’re all connected, and an individual’s choice in sex partners has little to do with the ability to feel love or loss, joy or pain. No one’s immune.

Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea. Set in Jamaica, the story traces the life of a young girl, Antoinette Cosway. From her difficult, lonely childhood living on a plantation, to her terrible marriage to a troubled Englishman who marries her for her money, it’s a sad story of imprisonment, the imprisonment of a young woman and her dark, life-long journey into

madness. Although it may not be a central theme, what's striking about the story is the way Rhys deals with issues related to race and culture, offering commentary on white superiority, imperialism and how white culture takes on the identity of colonizer – an idea exemplified by the cultural difference and distance that exists between the story's two main characters, Antoinette and husband, Rochester.

· ***Leslie Marmon Silko's Storyteller***. A wonderful piece of literature for language arts teachers looking to explore the power of storytelling. Essentially a collection of pictures, myths, poems, and family history, Storyteller is Silko's way of keeping her Laguna Pueblo ancestry alive. As a whole, it is a poignant work, a collection of strong statements on topics such as family, the role of women, the importance of oral tradition, racism, the plight of American Indians, and how White culture has ravaged Native American customs, religions, and beliefs. As the basis for written or verbal discussion, Silko's book is a compelling mixture of resources for students to analyze and discuss, especially the lessons Silko transmits in the stories that illustrate the importance of storytelling and oral tradition, and how both are connected to cultural and personal identity. Many of the pieces of literature in the book illustrate Silko's belief that one's self is defined by and forever linked to one's community. Her book is a testament to her Native American past and her unique cultural heritage.

In a class that I am currently teaching at Western Michigan University, a class filled with future teachers that focuses on how society affects education, I make a point

of asking students to not only consider society's views of women, but also Black Americans, Hispanics, the poor, and others who, for whatever reason, continue to struggle for equality. In short, the goal of the class is to challenge students to evaluate and look for ways to change belief systems strangling education and other societal institutions – institutions historically dominated by the thoughts and actions of white males. Because there is a need to broaden young minds, build community, and leave students with a heightened sense of themselves and others, I see no reason not to pose the same challenge to secondary language arts students. Hopefully, as they read the aforementioned women authors and begin exploring issues related to gender and culture, not only will the endeavor be “worth while” for women, as Woolf suggests, but also for anyone, regardless of sex, religion, or color, searching for a voice and room of their own.

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