

Finding about Livin': Teaching about Women Writers in Modern American Literature
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Toward the end of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Janie Crawford shares with her friend Pheoby the lesson she has learned in her life: "Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and *they got tuh find about livin* fuh theyselves" (183, emphasis mine). Seventy years after the publication of the novel, I find myself emphasizing the message to my students as we discuss female protagonists in American literature classes. Although Janie's words, in particular those concerning the need for personal discovery about living, should encourage readers to trust their own experience, there is no doubt that taking a class in literature can be helpful in the process of students' finding out about their own lives, be it by simply providing a forum where issues can be discussed, conflicting ideas can be sorted out, and new *possibilities* can take root. Above all, studying women's literature in a country where, compared to the United States, gender/women's studies¹ are still *in transition* can provide a window of new opportunities for students struggling to comprehend the complexities of their situation in the world of transformation in which we all live.

In this essay I want to discuss some of the issues involved in teaching American women writers at the University of Ostrava, Ostrava, Czech Republic. What can Czech students gain from classes focused on American women's writing? What do they learn beyond bare facts about American literature and gender issues in the United States? Can such classes compensate for the lack of women's studies courses, and, if so, in what ways? What is the general reception of such classes among students? Finally, what do any of these issues have to do with personal discovery about living? Before I proceed with the discussion, based on my recent experience of teaching American

¹ Although I am aware of the differences between women's and gender studies, in this paper, I am using the two terms interchangeably.

literature classes at the University of Ostrava, I must provide a short explanation of the current status of gender/women's studies in the Czech Republic, and a brief historical perspective on feminism in this country.

The status of gender/women's studies in the Czech Republic is unsettled. On one hand, considerable progress has been made in the last three years with the establishment of academic programs in this field at two universities—Charles University in Prague and Masaryk University in Brno—which now offer to their students M.A. and/or B.A. degrees in gender studies.² On the other hand, as Jirina Siklova, the head of the division of social work in the Philosophy Department of Charles University and one of the founders of the Gender Studies Centre in Prague, recently noted: "There just isn't much interest."³

This lack of interest deserves closer scrutiny. In her 1998 article, "Why Western Feminism Isn't Working in the Czech Republic," Siklova explains that the major reason is that the majority of Czechs equates feminism with images of radical, militant ideology or with a war on men; they "do not understand . . . that feminism is not a single, unified ideology, it is not a war of women against men. Rather it is a world opinion, a philosophy of life, and perhaps even a manner of self-identification, and not just for women but for men as well" (8).

Yet this distorted picture of Western feminism is not the only reason why feminism has not been met with enthusiasm in the Czech Republic. The roots of the problem, according to Siklova, can be found in the country's history. Historically, Czech women have always struggled for their rights alongside their men; they both had common enemies: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, fascist Germany, and the Communist regime, respectively. During their struggle for human and civil rights, "the discrepancy between men and women known as

² For more information on the two programs, see http://www.fhs.cuni.cz/gender/o_nas_eng.html and <http://gender.fss.muni.cz/english.php>

³ Jirina Siklova. Private conversation with the author. Prague, *Successors' European Youth Summit 2006*, 21 Feb. 2006.

patriarchy was greatly diminished" (Siklova, "Why We Resist," 34), giving way to higher purposes, such as nationalism. Thus, after the fall of the communist regime that left among Czechs a legacy of bitter resentment and strong distrust of ideologies, feminism could hardly win the hearts and minds of Czech women (Siklova, "Different Region," 93).

While the discipline of women's studies grows very slowly in Czech academia, one can certainly find windows of opportunity to "test the waters." For me, teaching a seminar on modern American women writers at the University of Ostrava is a case in point. In 2004, upon my return to the Czech Republic from the United States, where I earned my Ph.D. in Modern History and Literature, with concentrations in African American and African Studies and Women's Studies, I was eager to establish programs in women's studies and African American studies. Soon, however, I found out that there were too many obstacles I could not immediately surmount. While not abandoning the hope altogether, I decided to take a different approach by introducing courses with an emphasis on women's issues. Thus, in the past two years, I have developed and offered an elective course in women's studies,⁴ as well as a series of elective courses in African American, predominantly women's, literature, and transformed a mandatory course, Selected Chapters from American Literature, into a seminar on Women's Multicultural Voices. The following discussion is informed by my own and my students' observations of the successes and failures in this particular seminar, theirs recorded in their journal entries or shared during our discussions in class or in my office.

When I designed the course Women's Multicultural Voices, I had two major purposes. As I explained in the objective of the course, I wanted the students to learn about *women* writers of America, and about their perspectives on life, society, and the place of women in that

⁴ The objective of the course was to acquaint students with basic feminist terminology, ideas, issues, streams, and representative voices. A part of the semester was devoted to the question of woman's position in the world. Since the course is not relevant to the specialized topic of this essay, I do not provide a detailed discussion of its teaching.

society. Moreover, I wanted them to notice the generational and cultural differences vis-a-vis the problems and issues the women authors were addressing in their works. By doing so, I hoped that by the end of the semester, the students would have developed a broader and deeper understanding of both the American literary scene and American history and culture, as well as some basic understanding of gender issues.

The seminar is purposefully structured in a chronological way, beginning with a general discussion of the literary canon, tradition, and women's writing. As a springboard for our discussion, I use either Carolyn G. Heilburn's Introduction to her classic study, *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), in which she enumerates the different ways of writing about women's lives, and lays out the difficulties in reading and/or interpreting such works, or Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974), which deals with women's literary tradition, and spirituality as a source of women's creativity. Both Heilburn's Introduction and Walker's essay are helpful in providing the students with a sense of critical issues in feminist scholarship (for some students, it is often their first exposure to feminist criticism) and with useful terminology—interpretative tools—to employ later on in their own analyses. Thereafter, each year I change some of the texts we use in class, yet try to maintain the basic structure of using three texts by white American authors; three texts by African American authors; three texts by Asian American authors (Japanese, Chinese, Indian); at least one text by a Native American author, and at least one text by a Hispanic American author per semester. The following discussion is based on a few selected examples I use.

Often, the first text we read and discuss is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Gilman's autobiographical piece about the struggle of a woman to free herself from the constraints imposed on her by patriarchal society reveals much about the position and role of an American woman, especially a middle-class woman, prior to the twentieth century. Identified as either father's daughter or husband's wife, a woman in the nineteenth

century, students learn, did not have the right to own property, have custody of her children, sue for divorce, and gain admission to higher education or male professions; she was relegated to the private sphere, to home and household, expected, in accordance with the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood, to tend to the needs of the family and remain "pure and virtuous." As Gilman poignantly illustrates in the story, the protagonist woman, considered emotional, non-rational, and susceptible to nervous breakdowns, had to be looked after by and/or entrusted to the care of a "rational" man, who determined what was good for her. Hence John, the husband of the unnamed main character and a "physician of high standing," who "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures," decides that his wife's condition (today known as postpartum depression) is not serious but only a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (2) that requires merely taking pills and resting. John's "prescription" is influenced, to a large extent, by the well-known treatment for women's nervous diseases of the nationally recognized neurologist of the time, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the rest cure, which Gilman herself was forced to undergo. It is precisely to protest that treatment that Gilman writes her story, arguing for women's agency and right to have a career, anticipating, in many ways, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) and her rumination on "the problem without a name."

The problem of Gilman's unnamed protagonist seems to have no real name either and most students find it at first difficult to discuss, just as they find challenging to think about the issues of gender differences and formulate their own responses to my questions: Are gender differences biological or are they socially constructed, and if so, to what extent? What are the expected roles of men and women in today's society? In what ways have female agency and the relationship between the sexes changed since the late 1800s? Understandably, the students are more comfortable and secure pondering the ending of the story than discussing differences in gender, each of them working out his/her own opinion on whether or

not the heroine's final act of creeping over John, signaling her final descent into madness, can be considered as her victory, and whether or not there was any other possible option for her within the constraints of a patriarchal society that ultimately proves damaging and dangerous even for men.

This question is revisited as we read Kate Chopin's *Awakening* (1889), the story of Edna Pontellier's escape from social conventions in search of fulfillment outside the prescribed role of wife and mother. The novel is set on Grand Isle, a resort in the Gulf of Mexico, where the reader is introduced to the Creole culture, which, although patriarchal in that women are still legally powerless (and forced to accept their husbands' participation in the institution of concubinage with mulattas), does not prevent women from freely enjoying various aspects of life. Edna, who comes with her family to spend the summer at Grand Isle is, however, not part of this culture; she was born into a Kentucky Presbyterian family, far more conservative and affected by Victorian standards of behavior and the Cult of True Womanhood.

Having earlier discussed the tenets of The Cult of True Womanhood and the position of woman in the late 1800s, as depicted by Gilman, the students are now able to appreciate subtle cultural similarities and differences between her work and that of Chopin. They notice first the similarities with Gilman's story in terms of gender roles (Edna, too, seems to be at first rather a piece of property of her husband, Léonce), and then the ways in which *The Awakening* presents a more penetrating inquiry into the psychology of a woman and societal expectations. As they strive to formulate their own opinions, by no means monolithic, about Edna's actions from an ethical point of view, they are forced to consider several fundamental questions: Does a woman/mother have a right to live her own life? Must a woman/mother sacrifice herself for her family, her children? What is the measure of a mother's responsibility toward her children? Just as Edna, who, for the first time in her life, wants to be herself, is reminded by her friend Adele Ratignolle to "Think of the children, think

of them" (135), the students are reminded to think of the historical context.

Within this context, the students discover that in order to develop one's own female self at the turn of the century was a rather daring enterprise, not only because it involved going against all societal conventions, but also because there were no available models for the women to follow. In the novel, the only image of a respectable woman the society approves of is that of a mother-woman, represented by Adele Ratignolle, the perfect mother and wife; this image stands in direct opposition to that of a woman as an independent artist, represented by Mademoiselle Reisz, who is intentionally portrayed as an ugly, unfriendly being whom the society merely tolerates. Thus Edna's decision to be her own self, to find a third possible role for living a full life as an American woman at the end of the nineteenth century, is both admirable and predictably doomed to failure.

In one discussion, the students' various responses to Edna's decision to try, and, in particular, to engage in her final swimming in the sea, demonstrated that their own thinking was inevitably informed by their own experience and background. While a female student, mother of two children, argued that Edna should never abandon her children and try harder to find happiness in the familial life, the majority of single female students with no children tended to wish Edna would leave her husband for Robert and find happiness with her lover. A male student, convinced that Edna's fondness for Robert would soon pass were she left alone, firmly asserted that Robert should have never come back from Mexico to rekindle his love for Edna and destabilize the status quo of the Pontellier family. Clearly, the novel inspired the students to reexamine their own life philosophies as they pondered and related in their own ways to Edna's sexual and sensual awakening, a topic much relevant to their lives. Consequently, many of them found themselves in agreement with Edna: "It is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (135), although some of them began to question the price of the suffering: madness, suicide, what next?

The ending of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand's* (1928) does not reassure them. A moral tale as well as a penetrating analysis of black female psychology, the novel documents the historical realities of Harlem in the 1920s and presents the hypocritical world of the black bourgeoisie. Here the students discover a world they know very little about; their journal entries often reveal that this is the first black novel they have read. Unfamiliar with the concepts of "racial uplift," "color-line," and "passing" and unaware of racial stereotypes of black women and intra-racial issues in the black community, the students must first fill the gaps in their knowledge of African American history and culture in order to be able to understand why Dr. Anderson talks to Helga, a mullata, about ladyship, dignity, and breeding (21) and why Helga tries to resist the "jungle" of Harlem dance clubs with music that seems to drug her (59). It requires special efforts for the students to disentangle the complex web of issues in which Helga is caught, and to see how race, class, and gender are intertwined in her life. Would her fate be different were she a black man or a dark skinned woman, or if she had a family to claim?

As we discuss the complexities of Helga's search for identity, a part of which is her constant, almost frantic quest for kinship and a physical place to belong, the students are forced to confront the elusive concept of one's identity. What are its constituents if identity is not "merely a matter of color" but "something broader, deeper" (55), as Helga suggests? How do we define ourselves, and how do others define us? Do we need rigid categories to feel grounded? How do we respond to those who do not fit in, those who occupy (be it by their skin tone or ancestry) the spaces "in-between," those who are, like Helga, inevitably both/and instead of either/or? Having grown up in a country with relatively little cultural diversity (and yet a sad record of discriminatory practices, especially against the Romany people, also known as Gypsies, that most people will try to deny⁵), many students

⁵ It is widely known that our discriminatory practices against the Romany population were one of the major issues the Czech Republic had to address in order to be accepted into the European Union.

find it difficult to identify with Helga's tragic position in the society, resulting from her inability to negotiate the boundaries of her race, class, and gender, and to deal, simultaneously, with her sexual awakening. Attempting to relate Helga's behavior in Harlem to their own in a non-racial world, some dismiss her search for belonging as a mere quest for happiness in life, almost child-like, without proper knowledge about what happiness means or entails. Their response to Helga's actions is often negative; most of them see Helga as a nagging woman who does not know what she wants, is always dissatisfied with her life and unappreciative of what she has: beauty, education, friends, good health. As one student expressed in her journal entry: "[Helga] is never happy with anything. We should appreciate what we have and know what we really want."

Unlike Helga, Janie, the major protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* seems to know what she wants from the moment she sees the bees sink into the blossoms of the pear tree. Unconcerned, unlike Helga, about her lack of family and the color of her skin (Janie is also a beautiful mulatta), Janie wants love and is determined to find it, whether it involves leaving her first husband or, having buried her second husband, marrying a man twelve years her junior, an act meeting with strong disapproval from her community. Written in black vernacular (causing problems with comprehension for many of my students), *Their Eyes* explores class and gender relationships in the black South, while encouraging readers to question their (grand)parents' paradigms, listen to their feelings, and to follow their dreams. Thus, while for Janie's grandmother, who says I "was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut [sic] a woman oughta be and to do" (15), respectable marriage and material comfort are the highest achievements, for Janie, who has not suffered under slavery and has not experienced the degradation of black women, marriage without love and sexual fulfillment is unthinkable. The students are, once again, reminded that historical

context matters, and that it is within this context that they must also understand Jody's wish to make Janie "Mrs. Mayor," a woman high above the common folk.

By this point in the semester, the students have a better understanding of how race, class, and gender interlock in African American life and can also appreciate how Hurston, although largely sympathetic with the black common folk, is, even more than Larsen, uncompromising in depicting some of its negative sides: envious, gossipy, discriminatory against their own kin with dark skin, and no less obsessed with material wealth and high positions in the society than their white counterparts, the common black folk seem just as humanly flawed as any other. Her criticism, inevitably, leads to a series of questions that my students must confront: If we were to step outside the space *within* and see our society with a neutral pair of eyes, what would our introspection yield? What are the shortcomings of our own culture, of our own nation? How can we remedy those? Predictably, almost unanimously, the students listed Czech politics (the corruption affairs and other scandals that seem to have become daily news). To my great joy, one student mentioned gender inequality in terms of earned wages, and suggested that discrimination against the Romany citizens could be seen as a problem. The latter comment sparked a lively debate, which, unfortunately, could not be solved within the short span of time.

Hurston's text inspires a discussion not only about the shortcomings of a society we live in (and our own denial about them), but also, and perhaps, more importantly, about the values people have in their lives. How are our values shaped and tested? What informs them? What are the major values in a society with growing materialism? What are they in a religious society? The students are invited to ponder their own values, and to examine how different they are from the values of their grandparents and from those of Janie. Although many of them agreed with Janie that love is important, the majority emphasized that personal freedom, a freedom to be one's own self, is the most important value in life.

As the discussion in the classroom develops, the students admire Janie's journey to self-realization and share in her happiness, yet most do not get lulled into blind acceptance of and agreement with some of Janie and Tea Cake's actions. They question Tea Cake's gambling and Janie's too easy compliance with it—"she was not shocked at Tea Cake's gambling. It was part of him, so it was all right" (120)—and abhor Tea Cake's beating of Janie, together with his unacceptable rationale: "Ah beat her tuh show . . . who is boss" (141). The discussion inevitably leads to the topic of domestic violence in various cultures around the world, and the role the individual communities have in upholding (legally or otherwise) such a practice. While pointing fingers and hotly defending their own culture as *safe* and civilized, students are eventually forced to admit that the Czech Republic is no exception in having a record of domestic violence and rape cases, and that some Czech men still think that they are boss.

The community, its role in and power over the lives of its members, becomes the focus of our discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975), a novel about growing up female and Chinese American in California in the 1940s and 1950s. We spend considerable time on the first chapter "No Name Woman," the story of Kingston's paternal aunt who bears a child out of wedlock and is driven by her family and other villagers into drowning her child and herself. The students immediately notice the collective power of the Chinese community. Leading to this act, as a punishment for the aunt's disloyalty to her husband, and for the additional burden of another child in a time of scarcity, the villagers *collectively* raid the family's house and destroy what they find. The humiliated family ultimately punishes the aunt by never speaking her name after her death, until Kingston, identifying her aunt as her forerunner, breaks the taboo of silence by writing her tale.

The students disapprove of the act of the Chinese community as uncivilized and unethical; their cultural understanding of the concepts of shame, humiliation, and responsibility does not allow them to justify and accept without reservation both the community and the aunt's

actions, as well as the community's unwritten rules and traditions favoring males. As they ponder the position of the Chinese woman in Chinese and Chinese American societies that Kingston painstakingly tries to come to terms with, they wrestle with statements such as: "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (46) or "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls" (52). In both their journals and class discussions, they begin to voice their own questions: How can a society devalue women, who are essential in giving life, to such an extent that it denies their right to live and exist as human beings? How can women passively accept such a fate? Why don't they rebel? While we attempt to find some satisfactory answers in the history of the feminist movement and in the novel itself, I challenge them to think about the roots of such skewed thinking: Who decides that women are inferior to men and should be treated as slaves, as the Chinese word for the first person feminine pronoun, itself a synonym for *slave*, suggests (47)?

Discussing Kingston's reflections on the issues concerning gender, the students realize that Kingston refuses to accept the role of Chinese women as victims. Revising Chinese mythology by rewriting the legend of the heroine Fa Mu Lan, Kingston demonstrates in the second chapter, "White Tigers," that Chinese women do not have to remain silent and passive; they can become warriors whose words will turn into weapons. The question remains, however, about when, if ever, the society will be ready to accept them.

While the students consider Kingston's difficult negotiations of her own Chinese American identity, some of them make connections to a growing Vietnamese community living in the Czech Republic. In their journals, they began to acknowledge their lack of knowledge about its identity and culture. One student poignantly summarized: "Do we care about how they feel about living in this part of the world, far from their own traditions?" Thus, the students realize that Kingston's novel forces readers to look both around and inside themselves and question their own cultural paradigms, (in)tolerance, and ignorance.

While written words can empower, they can also be dangerous and turn against you, as Ayah, the major protagonist of Leslie Mormon Silko's "Lullaby" (1975), an old Navajo woman whose "life had become memories" (2733), finds out when she signs the doctors' papers. Her signature in English, the language of her enemy, seals the fate of her children, who are taken away to be assimilated into the white mainstream culture. For Ayah, "It was worse than if they had died" (2735), for she knows that the separation is absolute. Ayah realizes they are "being weaned from the lava hills and from the sky" (2737); they are losing the connection to what was once a part of them: their ties with the nurturing Mother Earth, their culture, and their language.

Silko's story about the tragic historical consequences of Native American assimilation and the painful relationship between the Navajos and whites gives the students a sense of Native American culture and dimensions of Native American spirituality. As the story unfolds, the students are drawn into the Native American cyclical concept of time and existence and a philosophy in which people are interrelated with nature—the hills, the sky, the snow, the wind—always together, as Ayah sings in her lullaby. Having grown up in a culture that values rational and linear ways of thinking, the students perceive this Native American concept of spirituality at first as exotic, yet soon begin to realize the profound depth of its influence. It is the source of the strength that sustains Ayah through her time of loss and deprivation.

The story, in some ways resonating with Janie's message about the need for personal discovery about living, invites each student to reevaluate her or his own spiritual beliefs and the place that faith occupies in her or his life. As the students explore what they believe in, many of them discover that their lives are, in fact, impoverished, lacking faith and devotion, while others are satisfied with a non-spiritual form of support such as that of their families and friends. One student openly confessed her Christian faith and her internal struggle to come to terms with missionary work, with particular reference to our class, concerning the imposition of Christianity on Native Americans. The question she asked seems to summarize that of many students—Do

we have a right to impose what we believe is good?—and brings us back to the beginning of my essay and my query about issues involved in teaching Czech students about American women writers.

As the previous discussion suggests, the students in my Multicultural Women's Voices seminar generally respond to the texts with open attitudes and are prepared to rethink some important issues, especially those related to gender. Contrary to Siklova's estimation, I find there is much interest among them in learning about new cultures, new ways of thinking, and concerns relevant to their lives. While a seminar with such a specialized focus enhances students' knowledge of American literature, history, culture, and gender issues, it also increases most students' self-awareness, sensitivity to other cultures, and knowledge of their own. Moreover, it can help them realize their place in the global world, as well as their relation to the natural and spiritual worlds, and motivate them to reevaluate their ethical positions.

In addition, as demonstrated, the discussions of the texts can both supplement and complement those in women's studies courses; for some students, they can provide the very first glimpse of issues of gender. As one female student acknowledged at the end of last semester: "The class opened my eyes. . . . I never knew anything about these issues; I never knew there were so many women writers! Now I see much more clearly these issues as I read other works as well." She went on to say that only now does she realize that her Czech literature classes rarely discuss women writers, and if so, their importance is somehow diminished.

It would be dishonest to say that all the students' responses are positive, however. One female student, for example, refused to discuss and write about issues she said she was not interested in, firmly shutting herself off from any, to her utterly unnecessary, exposure to difference. In response to Maxine Hong Kingston's novel—reflecting the sadly typical attitude of some Czechs towards the minorities living in our country—she contended: "I don't like the culture. And I don't want to know such a culture." Another student even told me that she

thought the class was a waste of time for her. Ironically, I find her explanation extremely valuable:

First of all, all the women [writers] seem to talk about the same thing [oppression], so why bother to read all of them? Second, we have not learned about any *major* writers, just women writers, so I can't use any of this. If someone wants to take this course, he/she should do it as an elective course because *this* does not give us anything important about the field of American literature. I don't know why you do this; nobody does this.

There are times when I myself wonder why. But then such a response gives me a clue. I teach such a course because I think my students need to know that American women writers are an inseparable and significant part of American literature, and that reading their work is not a waste of time. I do so because I hope that, while reading, the students will become more culturally sensitive and discover that, if they allow themselves the experience, they can also achieve personal discoveries about themselves and their lives. Literature helps us "find about livin'." Studying works by a multicultural and historical range of American women authors also offers meaningful insights about how race, class, and gender have intersected in the American experience, and suggests provocative comparisons and contrasts to the Czech experience. That is why I do it—we all need to keep finding about livin'.

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