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Author(s): Glenda Gill

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# Teaching Black Literature on the College Campus

GLENDA GILL

*Time* magazine in its September 27, 1971 cover story on the Attica Prison Revolt hailed the brilliance of America's black prisoners, astonished that they could write such poetry as "If We Must Die"; prisoners had left a copy of the poem lying on the ground. The magazine asserted that the men of Attica "passed around clandestine writings of their own; among them was a poem written by an unknown prisoner, crude but touching for its would-be heroic style."<sup>1</sup> Then *Time* quoted the first stanza of Claude McKay's poem, which McKay wrote to describe the lynchings in the South and which Winston Churchill read in the dark days of World War II.

*Time's faux pas* is typical of the blatant ignorance most Americans display about black writers because our schools have failed to prepare students to know about black literary figures. The minister of my church asked me for a bibliography of black literature; he admitted that he had read only Uncle Remus! While my minister happens to be white, many blacks know little more, because schools have not exposed them to black literature; many people of various ethnic groups are not even aware that blacks have written much of anything. Few people have training in black literature, and the resistance to its being made an integral part of the whole curriculum is powerful. Teachers who expose their students to black writers are often called radical, and irate parents report these "odd balls" to the dean. When I mentioned to a few people in

<sup>1</sup>"War at Attica," *Time*, September 27, 1971, p. 20.

El Paso that I was serving as a clinician in black literature for the NCTE, several highly educated people asked if this was an *all black group*. A lack of awareness permeates the profession and the public, and we must bring our fellows out of the dark ravines of ignorance and teach them a literature that helps them to face reality.

But the point of this article is not to explain *why* we must teach black literature on the college campus, but *how*. If one is not black, he may argue that he has not had the experience to teach black literature; part of the technique is being black, one may say. Daniel Dieterich in his article, "Black Literature in the English Classroom" bemoans that teachers have ignored the significant literary contributions of Black Americans. He reasons, "Most teachers have studied, read and taught only works by white authors and hence feel they are unprepared to teach Black Literature."<sup>2</sup> David Buzzard, in "Black Literature: It Won't Bite," answered that argument by saying: "I'm still waiting to meet a wooden-legged English teacher who has had the experience of hunting a massive white whale, or one who has been ostracized by his community and forced to wear a scarlet letter around his or her neck; however, I know many English teachers who talk knowledgeably about Ahab's and Hester's experiences, and who deal effectively with Melville and Hawthorne."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Daniel J. Dieterich, "Black Literature in the English Classroom," *English Journal*, 1 (January, 1973), 150.

<sup>3</sup>David Buzzard, "Black Literature: It

Teachers willing to bring the same respect and concern to black writing that they bring to white writing can learn to teach Black Literature. Such teachers should feel that their intelligence has been insulted whenever anyone says they could *not* teach a black survey course or one in black drama or black poetry or contemporary black American fiction.

But for those who are still nervous, I want to suggest a theme that one could certainly employ in a survey course—the black woman in literature, an approach that will make the course interesting and palatable to most students. While I am going to give examples of the black woman, the theme could equally well be the black male, the black middle-class, the black slave, Harlem figures (especially in the poetry of Langston Hughes), or children (especially in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks). The class could take an *aesthetic* approach, a *chronological* approach, an *historical* approach, or it might consider the development of the genres. Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are both suitable for seminars. There might be a class covering five major black writers—Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Charles Chesnutt. It's important to emphasize the *American* black writer, not necessarily the black writers of the world.

I have chosen to illustrate the theme of the black woman in literature because the black woman is perhaps the least understood of any creature on earth and because it is important to mankind's survival that we understand her. Many argue that black literature is propagandistic and of questionable literary merit—that it is bitter, depressing, vulgar, and shallow. *All* literature is propagandistic; Yeats wrote of the Irish

Rebellion; Swift expressed his dismay with political parties, Catholicism, war, old age, and women; Shakespeare exposed corruption in politics and in men (is there a more bitter man than Iago or Richard III?). Any work of art is one of depth if it helps one to understand his fellow man or fellow woman. I would certainly point out the metaphors, allusions, alliteration, and other figurative language, but the ivory towers of academe, in my opinion, have too long failed to prepare students for life, because they have not concentrated on literature's ability to enlarge our sympathies.

If I were teaching a survey course in black literature, a course in American literature, or a course in Women in Literature, I would introduce the section on the black woman by talking of Mary McLeod Bethune, educator *par excellence*; Daisy Bates, civil-rights worker at Little Rock; Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to run for President; the Honorable Barbara Jordan of the United States Congress; Vivian Malone, the first black woman to *successfully* enter the University of Alabama while Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway; Harriett Tubman, conductor of the Underground Railroad; and Arthurine Lucy who made a heroic *attempt* to integrate the University of Alabama before the 1963 Malone-Wallace confrontation. I would explain the role of the black woman in history. For those unfamiliar with her role, may I suggest Ploski and Brown's *The Negro Almanac*, Toni Cade's *The Black Woman*, and various articles in *Ebony* magazine. Calvin Hernton has quite a bit in his *Sex and Racism and Coming Together*, *Black Power, White Hatred and Sexual Hangups*. Josephine Carson's *Silent Voices: The Southern Negro Woman Today* is also of value. After my introduction, I would read selections from novels and poetry to my students (letting them have copies of the selections).

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Won't Bite," *Ohio English Bulletin*, 12 (May, 1971), 1.

One of the very first women to speak for the race was Sojourner Truth, an illiterate ex-slave. Baring her breast before a Woman's Rights Convention in 1851, Sojourner gave a speech amidst great tension because no one had invited her to speak:

Ain't I A Woman?

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women of the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman! I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? ["Intellect," someone whispers.] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negro's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women

together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.<sup>4</sup>

Then I'd move on to Margaret Walker, who depicts the black slave woman in *Jubilee*, the novel called the black woman's *Gone With the Wind*, using the scene (p. 143) in which she gives a graphic description of Vvry being whipped. Particularly pungent is the moment when Grimes, the overseer, and his men tie her to the whipping post, strip her naked to the waist, and flog her bare back with seventy-five lashes.

Not all of black literature pictures the black woman as a slave. I would read and show my students the poetry of Guy Tirolien, Waring Cuney, and Langston Hughes describing the black woman's beauty. Such poems as "Black Beauty," "No Images," and "Harlem Sweeties" convey striking portraits of black pulchritude.

Lorraine Hansberry portrays three different kinds of black women in *Raisin in the Sun*. There is Beneatha, the quasi-militant; Mama, the black matriarch; and Ruth, the bland personality who cannot build her man's ego. Walter wants a woman who will listen to him and stand behind him; in a breakfast scene, he expresses his deep longing to have a home better than the tenement in which they dwell—certainly one in which his boy does not sleep in the living room. But all his wife Ruth says to him is "Eat your eggs, Walter." There is, of course, universality in *Raisin in the Sun*. People of any race can identify, especially with Mama. She is not only the black matriarch, but the timeless matriarchal figure in general.

There is also Hansberry's drama, *To*

<sup>4</sup>Sojourner Truth's speech was first printed in *History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. Elizabeth Stanton and others (New York, 1881), I, 116.

*Be Young, Gifted and Black*. Her plays deal not only with the strained relationships between some black women and men but with the low esteem in which the black woman is held. This is brought out in the play in the scene where a young black domestic worker bemoans the fact that so many black women suffer from the stereotype image that if they are black, they must be selling. The maid indicates that she can be coming from fourteen hours in a kitchen or many hours on an assembly line, brimming with rage, but any white lad can yell, "Hey there, Hot Chocolate!"

The black woman's financial dilemma is portrayed in Langston Hughes' "Madam's Past History." I would point out that Langston Hughes was the black poet laureate—that Hughes was the only black writer to make his living exclusively from his pen, especially in an era when black writers were not in vogue. He was the most prolific of all, in fact. He describes the black woman's hard lot in "Mother to Son." Especially vivid are the images of the "crystal stair" and the mother's climbing. A survey course in black literature would be incomplete without Gwendolyn Brooks, the first black winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In "Kitchenette Building," she sketches the psyche of the black woman in the ghetto as she dreams. Teachers could correlate this poem with Langston Hughes' "Dream Deferred."

The black woman's disillusionment is lucid in the poem, "For Saundra," by Nikki Giovanni. Much in demand recently to read her poetry, Ms. Giovanni was a black woman filled with hatred at the time she wrote it. "For Saundra" describes the feelings of a woman who cannot write about trees and the sky; she reflects that these are not poetic times because of the chaotic, unfulfilled lives we lead and that instead of writing, she should ready her ammunition. Since the writing of this poem, she has modi-

fied her views.

Marian Anderson, the antithesis of Ms. Giovanni and certainly not a professional literary person but the greatest contralto until Leontyne Price, writes about her being refused the right to sing in Constitution Hall in her autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*. The poignant book describes her 1939 memorable concert; in her quiet manner, she tells how she finally stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after having been barred from making an appearance at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Of course, the policy at Constitution Hall finally changed.

The black woman's image in American literature is also Maya Angelou declaring, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or pleading, *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water Fore I Diie*. It is Sonia Sanchez realistically and defiantly saying, "Let de revolution come. Couldn't be no action like what i dun already seen." It's Mama in *Raisin in the Sun* saying, "When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is." It's the mother in *Native Son* screaming, "There he is, Bigger!" as a huge gopher-rat squeals and leaps at Bigger's trouser leg and frightens the family in the one-room tenement. It's the mother in *Uncle Tom's Children* carrying the winding sheet for her doomed son. It's Beneatha in *Raisin in the Sun* wanting to be a doctor, an ambition few black women achieve, especially against the odds of a brother who doesn't believe women should be. The black woman is Nikki Giovanni talking about those "beautiful outasight, black men with they afros." It's Shirley Chisholm in *Unbought and Unbossed*, saying, "Congress calls it the seniority system; I call it the senility system." It's Mari Evans, Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Bennett,

Yvonne Gregory, and Phillis Wheatley.

If someone asked me why I did not stress the aesthetic analysis of black literature, I would give them the same answer that a public school teacher gave about her class:

I have taught in high school for ten years. During that time I have given assignments, among others, to a murderer, an evangelist, a pugilist, a thief, and an imbecile.

The murderer was a quiet boy who sat on the front seat and regarded me with pale blue eyes; the evangelist, easily the most popular boy in the school, had the lead in the junior play; the pugilist laughed by the window and let loose at intervals a raucous laugh that startled even the geraniums; the thief was a gay-hearted Lothario with a song on his lips; and the imbecile, a soft-eyed little animal seeking the shadows.

The murderer awaits death in the state penitentiary; the evangelist has lain a year now in the village churchyard; the pugilist lost an eye in a brawl in Hongkong; the thief, by stand-

ing on tiptoe, can see the windows of my room from the county jail; and the once gentle-eyed little moron beats his head against a padded wall in the state asylum.

All of these pupils once sat in my room, sat and looked at me gravely across worn brown desks. I must have been a great help to these pupils—I taught them the rhyming scheme of the Elizabethan sonnet, and how to diagram a complex sentence.<sup>5</sup>

Literary niceties were of little use to the students just described. Black and white students need the same sympathy and understanding if our schools are going to produce well-balanced human beings instead of "educated" robots who parrot the masters and know all the finer points of figurative language but who lack compassion, understanding, and the strength to cope.

*University of Texas at El Paso*

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<sup>5</sup>Published November, 1937 in *The Clearing House*.

### In Memoriam

Richard Braddock, professor of English and rhetoric, University of Iowa, died in Sydney, Australia, Tuesday, September 3, 1974. He was struck by an automobile.

Braddock had been on leave from Iowa for the calendar year 1974 and was on a Fulbright appointment teaching in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at New South Wales Institute of Technology in Sydney, Australia. He is survived by his wife Carol and three children: Maurine, James, and Alan.

In the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Braddock served as secretary, 1962; assistant chairman, 1965; associate chairman, 1966; and chairman, 1967.