*Florida Journal of Educational Research*
*Fall 1995, Vol. 35, No. 1, Pp. 5-33.*

# Gender Bias in the High School Canon Novels: A Subversion of Power

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ABSTRACT. This descriptive study investigates gender bias in the high school canon novels as identified by Arthur Applebee (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993). An historical survey of the teaching of literature in the high school precedes the content analysis of the seven novels. The historical survey shows that most of the novels entered the high school canon during the 1960s. During the past three decades, these works have been subjected to a variety of critical interpretations, as well as assorted pedagogical strategies. The content analysis of the seven novels uses several critical perspectives. Gender bias exists in the focus on male protagonists and in the generalized idea of females as a dangerous presence. More specifically, the siren/whore image of women pervades the canon novels. Other stereotypes include the asexual older woman as pedantic authority figure. Women characters are subjected to violence, but this violence is rationalized. The high school canon novels perpetuate the ideology of the white Euro/Anglo male as oppressor.

Sociologists use Karl Mannheim's (1936) term "representational validity" to describe empowered forms of social interaction which are perceived as reality (Mannheim, p. 9). The group controlling or defining what is appropriate remains in power by criticizing, rejecting, and even punishing the behavior and the individuals of the dominated group(s). The study of English and more particularly, the study of literature, illustrates representational validity. Jay (1991), for example, has pointed out how American literature has verified "... the power and values of privileged classes and individuals" (p. 266). Weixlmann (1988) has written that "... critics are likely to defend canonical works that contain incidents or sentiments of brutality, of bigotry, of racial, sexual, or national chauvinism" (p. 277).

That such a canon exists in college literature studies has been established. An MLA study of English programs in 1984-85 and again in 1990 found such traditional courses as nineteenth century American literature, the Victorian novel, and Shakespeare

still firmly entrenched (Graff, 1992, p. 23). That this canon affirms the power of race, gender, and class has been repeatedly stated. But is a literature canon being taught in American high schools? And, if so, what are the ramifications of this canon?

**The Applebee Study**

Arthur Applebee (1993) and researchers at the National Center on Literature Teaching and Learning at the University of Albany, State University of New York have been conducting studies since the late 1980s to determine "a solid base of evidence about the characteristics of literature instruction as it is currently carried out in American schools" (p. 1). In the first study, conducted in the spring of 1988, 488 schools participated. Of the top ten most frequently assigned works, (1) Shakespeare ranked numbers 1, 2, 4, and 8 in public schools; 3, 6, 7, 9 in Catholic schools; and 1, 2, 5, and 8 in independent schools; (2) the remaining "top ten" books were novels, with the exception of *The Odyssey*, which ranked 9th in independent schools (Applebee, 1992). An earlier report published in the September 1989 *English Journal* had reported the study results somewhat differently as the top ten most frequently assigned titles in 322 public high schools. These titles were *Romeo and Juliet* taught in 84% of the high schools surveyed; *Macbeth* in 81%; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 70%; *Julius Caesar* in 70%; *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 69%; *The Scarlet Letter* in 62%; *Of Mice and Men* in 56%; *Hamlet* in 55%; *The Great Gatsby* in 54%; and *Lord of the Flies* in 54%.

The schools in these earlier surveys were case studies. Arthur Applebee's later surveys involved some 543 participating institutions. These included a random sample of public schools, achievement award schools, a national random sample of Catholic schools, and a national random sample of independent schools (Applebee, 1993, pp. 10-11). Of 27 titles appearing in 30% or more of the schools, four were by Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*), three were by Steinbeck (*Red Pony*, *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men*), and two were by Twain (*Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) (Applebee, 1993, pp. 69-70).

That literature and particularly canon literature form the texts of the English curriculum is clearly seen in Arthur Applebee's (1992) finding that as much as 78% of class time may be devoted to literature-related activities (p. 6). In addition, study of individual works is rated as the major way of organizing the literature curriculum, with guided individual reading receiving the lowest rating. Literature, then, forms the major base of school knowledge in the high school English class.

**Theoretical Framework**

Banks (1993) has discussed five types of knowledge as personal/cultural, popular, mainstream academic, transformation academic, and school. He defines school knowledge as consisting of:

> the facts, concepts, and generalizations presented in textbooks, teachers' guides, and the other forms of media designed for school use. School knowledge also consists of the teacher's mediation and interpretation of that knowledge (Banks, 1993, p. 11).

As early as 1933, Percival Symonds noted that the textbook dictates pedagogy "... to a greater extent than any one factor ..." (p. 449). More recently, Squire (1989) has stated that "our textbooks reveal much more about the current state of American schooling than our more highly trumpeted professional writing" (p. 21). Historically, textbooks have offered the student a prepackaged form of social reality, one grounded in knowledge as fixed. In addition, textbooks describe and encourage the society's power arrangements (Banks, 1993; Anyon, 1979, 1981; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). A number of strong influences operate on the development and production of school textbooks. One of the most important is the "proactive censorship" of various interest groups such as civil rightists, feminists, Naderists, environmentalists, religious fundamentalists -- groups from the left and groups from the right (Banks, 1993; Bazin, 1990; Simmons, 1981). Community pressure groups and parental censorship are concerns for high school English teachers, particularly those in grades 11 and 12 (Applebee, 1993). Other important influences on book selections include literary merit, personal familiarity with the selection, anticipated student appeal, text availability and departmental syllabus (Applebee, 1991, 1992, 1993).

In addition to the above, school knowledge as evidenced in the study of literature has been the subject of controversy among advocates of cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987), national standards/consensus (Ravitch, 1993) and multiculturalists/ pluralists (Jay, 1991) as well as some ethnocentrists. Despite these competing philosophies, however, the high school literary canon still reflects an Euro/Anglo white male tradition, although there have been some token gains by women and non-white writers in anthologies for grades 7-10 (Applebee, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993). School knowledge, then, as evidenced in published literature texts (anthologies and complete works) with ancillary study materials supports a white male power structure by virtue of racial, gender, and class bias (Banks, 1993; Anyon, 1979, 1981; Sleeter and Grant, 1988).

Since her 1938 publication of *Literature as Exploration* (and in subsequent editions), Louise Rosenblatt has written about the importance of literature. She has emphasized how ideas of "complex patterns of behavior, such as courtship, or moral and social attitudes can be assimilated from books" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 191). Incessant images of biased themes and stereotypes perpetuate particular world views. Consequently, the influence of what constitutes school knowledge in the canon novels cannot be overestimated. A canon novel carries major power as required reading for large numbers of adolescents, as a strong economic factor for publishing companies and the copyright owner, and as a subject of scholarly and critical attention (Rodden, 1991). Historically, themes in the canon have been viewed as fixed by such prestigious white male critics as Yvor Winters, Ford Madox Ford, Austin Warren, Rene Wellek, Cleanth

Brooks, and John Crowe Ransom. The canon itself is established by those who have power, i.e., critics, editors, and more recently, directors of the National Endowment for the Humanities (Hesse, 1989). Thus the whole canon question with its particular pedagogy is a slippery slope.

## The Present Study

This study is concerned with the school knowledge evidenced in the novels most frequently taught in American high schools. The canon novels rather than the plays of Shakespeare have been chosen as the focus of the study. Students may identify more closely with novels since they already have some "scripts" about life -- a script being a "genetic set of sequences against which newly encountered events are judged" (Gardner, 1991, p. 67). McConaughy (1980), for example, has found that even young children have schemata for structures of written texts. Research studies by Blake and Lumm (1986), Hoffstaedter (1987), Svensson (1985), and Viehoff (1986) confirm that understanding literary textual conventions is a prerequisite for reading/literary comprehension. Bleich (1988) has explained that while men and women respond similarly to lyric poetry, men " ... are more likely to see the novel as a unified result of someone's action ..." (p. 128). Women, on the other hand, "enter" into the text of the novel (Bleich, p. 128). Both male and female readers, however, may be infused by the world of the novel. Hawthorn (1992) states that "... even though the novel presents us with a recognizable world, we exercise our fantasy and our imagination to live within this world for short periods of time" (pp. 1-2). Novels, then, may have more impact on a reader than a play which is structured somewhat differently, certainly formatted differently, and is written with the main intention of being seen and heard instead of read.

Arthur Applebee (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992), as previously stated, has found these canon novels to be as follows: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby*. These works by white Anglo male authors (and one white female) focus primarily on white male characters. Images of females and minorities are from a white male perspective, including, perhaps, that of Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The study investigates gender bias in these texts. The hypothesis statement is that gender bias exists in the high school canon novels. That gender bias exists in American literature has been written about at least as long ago as 1923 when D. H. Lawrence wrote his scathing essay on *The Scarlet Letter*. Leslie Fiedler (1960a) has stated that "... ours is a literature of horror for boys" (p. xxiv). Adalaide Morris (1985) (among others) has explained how "the success story" and "the story of rugged individualism" exclude females and non whites. The two areas of the study concern (1) the pedagogical history of these novels, i.e., when did these novels appear as high school canon and how have these novels been taught; (2) the kinds of gender bias evident in these novels.

The focus of the study is on the institutional setting of these texts (Rodden 1991), i.e., the teaching of the novels at the high school level. Assuming that gender bias is evident, is this bias addressed in pedagogical articles and selected ancillary study guides? And perhaps more important, what gender themes are NOT discussed in the classroom? When certain social knowledge such as rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, nineteenth century categories of women, and objectification of the female body are common knowledge, they are usually kept quiet (Bhabha, 1992; Jehlen, 1986; Warren, 1984). Such omission is self-defining (Klein, 1985).

The study is descriptive. An historical overview of controversy in the teaching of literature provides a background for the study. A survey of the pedagogical articles dealing with the high school canon novels suggests possible influences on the particular novel as a school text. References to selected ancillary study guide materials sample the kinds of current pedagogy recommended for the particular work. The analytical content analysis of the works delineates the kinds of gender bias in the high school canon novels.

The study itself is biased in that the writer is a woman. Feminist criticism is acknowledged as "always political and always revisionist" (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, & Willingham, 1992, p. 185). The study incorporates several critical approaches, including mythological and archetypal criticism. Psychological, Marxist, and post-structuralist approaches are also used. These multiple strategies reflect the writer's bias as (1) a white female (2) who believes that readers construct meaning from text (3) based on sociocultural, psychological and perhaps archetypal/mythological scripts. Where relevant, references are made to Lakoff's (1987) work with conceptual categories. "Human conceptual categories have properties that are a result of imaginative processes (metaphor, metonymy, mental imagery) that do not mirror nature" (Lakoff, p. 371).

The thesis is a categorical proposition, a claim that something (gender bias) exists. Interpretations are in the tradition of negative or depth hermeneutics, the perspective of distrust, the intent to reveal what may exist below the surface (Crusius, 1991). The politics of the study are Gerald Graff's (1992) -- that teaching exposure or disrespect for canon pieces is rewarding (p. 48). New perspectives lend "new energy to our reading of literature" (Bacon, 1993, p. 512). Although there are acknowledged racial and class biases in these novels, the study refers to the racial issues only where pertinent to the gender question.

Historically, the reason given for teaching boys' books has been that of reading interest. As early as 1927, Walter found that girls spent more time in leisure reading than boys. Since the 1930s, research has pointed to the difficulties in developing interest in reading for boys (Simmons and Deluzain, 1992). Schools, therefore, have required girls to read boys' books organized around themes of *man* in nature, in society, in conflict, and the biased theme of man and himself. Yet Moffitt and Wartella's (1992) recent survey of the *leisure* reading habits of adolescents found that boys' readings

interests were more diversified. Male reading interests included fantasy/myth, science fiction and sports, but the romance novel ranked far above all other interests for females. Ludlow (1946) had earlier reported the popularity of the romance novel -- *Freckles* and *A Girl of the Limberlost*, for example, were the top sellers for the period 1880-1936 (Moffitt and Wartella, p. 4). Studies by Radway (1984) and Willinsky and Hunniford (1986) had explained the appeal of the romance novel as providing models of the nurturing female.

Yet nurturing white females, particularly mothers, are not present in the canon novels. Juana in Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is an Indian woman whose concern for her son Coyotito is a catalyst for Kino's actions. Daisy Buchanan in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has a two-year-old who rarely appears in the novel. Replacing nurturing mothers are "maiden aunts" who represent pompous and pedantic authority, quasi-crone figures with shadows of Marvell's worms. Twain's Widow Douglas calls Huck a "lost lamb," rings a bell for supper, teaches Huck the Bible and won't let him smoke. Piggy's "auntie" in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* keeps a candy store where Piggy gets all the candies he wants. Likewise Lennie's Aunt Clara in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* gives Lennie mice to pet. These women overemphasize rules of conduct and parody female nurturing by their potentially harmful indulgences. Consequently, these women are ambivalent characters with negative connotations.

Research has further demonstrated that males and females respond to texts differently. Bleich (1986), for example, reported that males are more textually objective in retelling Faulkner's "Barn Burning," while Flynn (1983) found that male college students aggressively incorporated their attitudes and beliefs onto stories by Joyce and Hemingway. Reader response research for at least twenty years (such as Beaven's in 1972) has demonstrated that female readers can identify with both male and female literary characters while male readers can identify only with male characters. "Women have become accustomed to intellectual cross-dressing" (Sharpe, Mascia-Lees, and Cohen, 1990, p. 147). But this cross-gender reading may be a double-edged sword for adolescent girls. On the one hand, identifying with the male protagonist probably works well for academic activities. On the other hand, the realization that "she" may not have the traits of the hero can be yet another confusion in gender personality. Finally, "adopting a patriarchal reading formation also invites stereotypical perceptions of females" (Beach, 1993, p. 142).

Gender bias carries strong implications. Beach (1993) cites the previously mentioned research of Radway as well as Christian-Smith's (1990) study of "low-ability" adolescent female responses to romances (p. 140). Beach states that "the two studies suggest that a female reading formation involves a continuing tension between multiple sensibilities associated with asserting independence and accepting patriarchal values" (p. 141). Lake (1988), citing research (Callahan, 1980; Garrison, et al., 1986; and Silverman, 1986), points out that gifted girls have a different set of psychological requirements from gifted boys. Among causes leading to poor self-image of gifted girls

is that of "... school conditioning which encourages passivity instead of assertiveness ..." (Lake, p. 36).

Stereotypes based on a person's group membership are highly influential in social perception and may determine (1) processing and use of information as well as (2) the course of actions based on the information (Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, & Sherman, 1992). Stereotypes have been defined as "cognitive structures" housing beliefs about group members. Hamilton has demonstrated that "perception of or interaction with a member of a stereotyped group activates that stereotype such that subsequent processing is colored by the content and evaluative tone of those beliefs" (p. 108). The masculine stereotype includes independence, aggressiveness, objectivity, and a sense of adventure. The feminine stereotype is the antonym. Male-associated traits are often viewed as preferable (Deaux, 1976, p. 15). Cook and Fontaine (1991), for example, explain that many young women experience extreme anxiety about stereotypic gender role characteristics. "This internal conflict between dependency and independence increases their level of anxiety and may result in an eating disorder" (Cook and Fontaine, p. 339).

For purposes of this study, **school knowledge** as evidenced in textbooks and ancillary study materials is specific to high school literature. The canon novels are therefore considered as textbooks for the purposes of the study. Ancillary study materials are those published discussion and activity guides and pedagogical suggestions that accompany a given novel. Ancillary study materials include questions in anthologies, separate teachers' guides or teachers' editions for individual novels, and separate "units" with student activities related to the reading of a particular novel.

In addition, **bias** is broadly defined as the discrepancy between the appearance and the reality, between what is represented as opposed to what actually may be. Bias includes character stereotypes or prototypes, the omission of particular groups of people and the values and perspectives of particular groups of people. An operational definition is that **gender bias** exists where female characters are subjugated, terminated or transformed into symbols relevant to the deep moral issue confronting the male protagonist (Barker, 1989; Weixlmann, 1988; Warren, 1984).

## Method

This was a descriptive study. An historical overview of controversy in the teaching of English provided a background. The survey of the pedagogical articles dealing with the high school canon novels suggested possible influences on the particular novel as a school text. References to selected ancillary study guide materials illustrated the kinds of current pedagogy recommended for the particular work. The analytical content analysis of the works delineated the kinds of gender bias in high school canon novels.

Ideally, the study would have included teacher-written units on the novels or departmental objectives for teaching said novels. There is no question that some teachers may be addressing race, class, and gender bias in their literature classes. There is also no question that many English teachers face horrendous schedules of five or six classes, which may include thirty or more students per class. Because of these difficult classroom circumstances, then, teachers may rely on published materials for activities relating to the study of a particular literary work. The representative ancillary study guide materials included in this study were a sampling ranging from the widely used (and abused) Cliffs Notes Incorporated publications, as well as materials from Holt, Rinehart and Winston or from McDougal Littell Company. The bibliography of selected ancillary study guide materials is included in Appendix 2.

Ancillary study guide materials offer prepackaged ideas about a particular novel. These ideas perpetuate and strengthen certain views of race, class, and gender. As such, these ideas are examples of what sociologists call "legitimation," i.e., what acceptable expectations and norms of gender are being enforced. The publications of Cliffs Notes Incorporated certainly seem the most gender biased. Hester's sin is that of "passion" rather than "intellect" according to *Cliffs Notes on The Scarlet Letter* (Dibble, 1988, p. 62). The implication here is the tiresome dichotomy of women as emotional and men as rational. The message in the *Cliffs Notes on Steinbeck's The Pearl* is even more blatant where Juana is said to have "determination" and "assertiveness," both of which are unusual in "women of this type" (Fitzwater, 1981, p. 37). Thus, the reader learns that women, especially poor Indian women, are not "determined" or "assertive."

Library research was used in this study in addition to analysis of the content of the primary materials, i.e., the novels themselves and the selected ancillary study guide materials. A majority of the pedagogical articles were taken from the *English Journal* and other NCTE publications and reports. Pedagogical articles in the *English Journal* generally reflect contemporary critical approaches to literature. In 1964, for example, Tanner used a formalist approach to explain how tone in *The Scarlet Letter* reveals complex levels of meaning. But Barker in 1989 takes a feminist approach to interpret Hester as standing apart from the other women in her society.

A number of sources were used for the philosophical, sociocultural, and critical discussions in this study. Scholarly publications in the field of literature as well as references from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics were cited.

## Procedure

A content analysis was used to determine the kinds of gender bias evident in each of the seven canon novels. Selected ancillary study guide materials for each of the novels were briefly discussed as to whether the activities addressed the issue of gender bias. The content analysis of the novels, and the ancillary study guide materials, to an

extent, used a series of questions to determine the kinds of gender bias embedded in the texts.

The umbrella term "feminist criticism" includes the issues of gender voice in writing as well as reestablishing women writers whose works have been marginalized or suppressed. This study, however, uses the perspective of feminist criticism to show how some so-called universal themes in literature are really white male experiences from white male perspectives. The feminist stance sees women in the seven canon novels as adjuncts for the male protagonists. Lacking complexity, the female characters are negative composites of traits or abstractions. Hawthorn (1992) has written that "... what we now familiarly refer to as patriarchal ideas [are] frequently linked to portrayals that debase, ridicule, and humiliate women" (p. 138).

The transaction of the feminist reader with a given text requires a brief reference to reader response theories. Beach (1993) in *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* has posited five theoretical perspectives on response as textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. In terms of cultural theories of response, Beach explains that readers at some point understand the contradictions of their culture and "... acquire the cultural practice of resisting norms" (p. 132). Citing Ebert, Beach states that feminist critics focus on "multiple or competing sensibilities associated with responses to texts" (p. 132). Since Kate Millet's now classic *Sexual Politics* (1970, 1977), feminist critics have demonstrated how male writers may "... distort female characters by associating deviance with femininity" (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham, 1992, p. 187). Fryer (1976), for example, explains that "Hawthorne's ambiguity about Hester, then, is an attempt to work out his ambiguity toward himself, as artist, as man, as member of the human community" (p. 74). Earlier, Fryer has explained how Hawthorne associates "masculine" with the world of commerce and "feminine" with the world of the artist (p. 72). And Fetterly (1978) explicates *The Great Gatsby* as "...centered in hostility to women and the concomitant strategy of the scapegoat" (p. 72).

The perspective includes consideration of the social and cultural roles of the women in the canon novels. These roles are determined by looking carefully at how the women characters are coded in the author's language and therefore how these codes would be culturally classified. Additionally, some psychoanalytic and mythic theories may be used if relevant to the argument of "universal" themes.

Coding is used in many disciplines. Beach (1993) explains how "... semiotics define the ways in which signs mean" (p. 35). A "sign" (an image or picture) serves as a "signifier" of meaning (Beach, p. 35). A simplistic example is the color red which may signify danger. This study, however, is not a semiotic study of the canon novels. Coding and categorization used in this study are based on research in sociolinguistics, sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. Many disciplines deal with the coding of language, more specifically with the coding of language to empower one group and

subvert another. Sue Lees (1993), for example, in her study of adolescent girls in Britain has written:

> It is through language that we express and reinforce power relationships and organize our political and institutional systems. It is through language that we make sense of gender relationships (p. 6).

Therefore, diverse areas have been explored before investigating the specific language which is gender biased in the canon novels.

**Language coding**

Bleich (1975) has explained how an affective response (affect) is a very basic feeling which may be accompanied by physiological reactions, e.g., anger by increased heart rate (p. 11). Bleich (1975) has maintained that these responses are understandable in terms of "associative analogies" (p. 12). An example of such analogies is that of a female student feeling "unclean" or "contaminated" after reading the pig-killing scene in *Lord of the Flies* (Simmons & Deluzain, 1992, p. 144). Class discussion determines that the feeling comes because the pig killing is analogous to a rape. "Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife" (Golding, p. 135) is easily associated with sex and the gang rape is certainly suggested in "The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her" (Golding p. 135).

Similarly, Lakoff (1987, p. 380) has argued that "... emotions have an extremely complex conceptual structure which gives rise to a wide variety of nontrivial references." In defining emotions such as anger or lust, Lakoff has demonstrated that there are numerous expressions used. Most of these are based in a metaphorical and metonymical conceptual organization (pp. 380-415).

Lakoff's discussion of anger, lust, and rape is relevant to this study of gender bias. First, "... lust is a complex concept which is understood via metaphors" (p. 409). While many of these lust metaphors equate with anger, i.e., as in heat (I've got the hots for you) (p. 410), other metaphors see the object of lust as food, i.e., "sugar," "a piece of meat" (p. 409).

Lakoff's work with lust and anger is relevant in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) have focused on the phrase "wedded to her in lust" (Golding, p. 135) during the rape/killing of the sow in the novel. Golding combines the heat and lust imagery in the pursuit of the sow:

> The afternoon wore on, hazy and dreadful with damp heat; the sow staggered her way ahead of them, bleeding and mad, and the hunters followed, wedded to her in lust, excited by the long chase and the dropped

> blood. ... Here struck down by the heat, the sow fell and the hunters hurled themselves at her (Golding, p. 135).

**Archetypes and stereotypes**

Textual evidence can demonstrate that a given female character is a "type," rather than an individual. The question of *what type*, and the origin of this composite is essential to the understanding of current gender bias in the canon novels.

The portrayal of the older woman exemplifies this issue. The various social constructions of the menopausal woman are complex and vary in historical time and sociocultural place. Medieval Europe, for example, establish this woman as procuress. Not a participant in the act of sexual intercourse, the procuress could testify as an authority in charges of male impotence (Thomasset, 1992, p. 62). Men were threatened by these "potion powers" and additionally, by the prevailing view that the female (according to Juvenal) "... could be *lassata sed non satiata* ..." (Thomasset, p. 62). Thus, the anxieties of men regarding the aging women's alleged power over nature and more real legal power (and later land power) led to the rhetorical construction of ridicule as in fablieux and debasement as in *Celestina*. Yet as Banner (1992) has pointed out,

> With regard to this issue of sexuality and power, two strains existed simultaneously and, indeed, upon occasion intertwined. The first was positive for women, involving freedom and fulfillment; the second was negative, involving debasement and finally, persecution (p. 168).

Thus the "older woman" stereotype with its contradictions is set during the Middle Ages. Ghosts of these women are in the canon novels. The "quasi crone" figures of Twain, Lennie's Aunt Clara, and Piggy's "auntie" have power, but it is power welded to an authority of rules and regulations. These parameters are drawn as constricting the male figure. All of these women indulge the male character. These potentially harmful indulgences can be viewed as a negative parody of female nurturing or possibly as a simplistic version of the power of potions. Miss Maudie in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the only older female character who is not ridiculed or debased. The ancillary study guide materials ensure that the reader views Miss Maudie as "good." Miss Maudie, however, is not intended to be read as "feminine." Rather Miss Maudie's admirable qualities according to all ancillaries are that she (like Atticus) is rational and independent. Like Atticus, Miss Maudie is without spouse or lover. In fact, Uncle Jack tells Scout that he has been teasing Maudie to marry him for the last forty years (Lee, p. 44).

Indeed, sex is missing in all the older women of the canon novels. There is certainly no medieval idea of perpetual sex (as in Allison of Bath). These women are, in fact, quite asexual in most readings. A Freudian perspective, of course, could certainly find sexual undercurrents in the soft mice scenario or in Miss Watson's

scripture lessons to Huck -- sometimes in a closet. Probably, Freudian interpretations are not commonly used in teaching the canon novels at the high school level; therefore, the more obvious traits of the older women, including the asexuality, form the school knowledge. Moreover, the pedagogical articles, as well as the activities in the selected ancillary study guide materials, do not indicate discussion of the origins of the older women's portrayal. Adolescent readers, therefore, are given little basis to question or refute these images.

Mythic/archetypal (and to some extent psychoanalytical) perspectives are often used to validate the "universal themes" in literature. Such a perspective reads *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a "quest" genre. The quest is also relevant, according to some interpretations, to *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl*. However, it is important to remember that such perspectives have been explicated by Euro/Anglo white male scholars (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Sir James Fraser, and more recently, Northrop Frye). Freudian theory, for example, as explained by Nye (1988) "... is a theory for men, a theory that attempts to solve a man's problem" (p. 160). It is also important to remember that these men have written their works in a patrifocal, capitalist context.

The foregoing issues do not quash the perspectives; rather, the issues are considerations in determining the validity of the various perspectives. The quest, for example, is that of the male protagonist. Female characters are not involved in such a quest. Unlike classical and Medieval literature where a female seer provides the male protagonist with important information or knowledge, the high school canon novels lack such characters. Mrs. Judith Loftus, at best, is a parody of the Sphinx. Furthermore, female characters often impede the quest, e.g., Curly's wife and Juana in her attempt to destroy the pearl. Additionally, there are no female archetypal figures of Virgin, Mother, and Crone. In fact, the crone may become male. Chillingsworth with his potions and diabolical advice can be read as a witch type. Jim has been read as a Jungian archetype of the wise old man (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, Willingham, 1992, p. 179). Leslie Fiedler (1960a, 1960b, 1963) has read Jim as "father-slave-beloved." Jim (sometimes in women's clothes) with his herbs, potions, and spells (like Celestina) parodies logic, science, psychology. The point here is that even with a mythic approach, the female archetype seems to have faded or crossed over to a male figure. Thus, the "universality" of themes in the work is arguable.

**Poststructuralism**

Structuralism, including Poststructuralism and deconstruction, recognize "... systems of relationships which endow signs (e.g., words) or items ... with identities and meanings, and show[s] the *ways in which we think*" (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham, 1992, p. 237). Beach (1993) points out that Saussure's "signifier" "... may represent a range of different concepts, i.e., what is signified" (p. 126). Nye (1988) sums up the Structuralism/ Poststructuralism/deconstruction theories as follows:

> Divorced from practice, symbolic structure becomes a substitute world; the theorist makes a definitive break with ambiguity, violence and death of physical existence. Language provides a textual arena where ambivalent relations can be acted out, while at the same time real life continues with its murders and cruelties. The removal from practical life which makes such a language possible is itself a practice (p. 217).

Post-structuralist theory seems especially relevant to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the layers of symbolic subtext take the reader into expanding ambiguity. Additionally, post-structuralist theory is relevant to broader issues of power relations in a particular text.

Using the foregoing as a basis, five general questions are constructed to serve as a guide for the content analysis of the study. These questions are as follows:

(1) Is pejorative language used by the author (or first person narrator) to describe the female characters. What kinds of coding is evident in this language?

(2) Are women portrayed as categories or types, i.e., stereotypes of negative traits rather than as complex characters? Are female children, for example, depicted as either androgynous or as silly little girls in frilly dresses? Are older adult women dreary, hypocritical authority figures?

(3) Are women portrayed as objects? Are women characters the objects of humor or ridicule? Are women sexual objects? Is there, for example, preoccupation with women's bodies as opposed to other attributes? Are men's bodies described as often and in the same way? Are women's bodies subjected to violence?

(4) Do the women characters act as a vehicle for the male protagonists' achieving their goals? Or are women characters seen as evil or as obstacles to some kind of male dream or goal?

(5) If women are missing from the particular novel, are there other more subtle (as in metaphorical) representations of gender bias?

Slotkin (1986) has explained that "... genres of modern literary culture may be seen as bourgeois society's chosen means of transforming and representing its mythic heritage" (p. 79). Poststructuralist criticism begins with the assumption that texts are "rhetorical performances," and as such "... legitimated finally by arbitrary forms of power ..." (Graff, 1986, p. 111). The content analysis explores the "rhetorical performances" of the high school canon novels. Is the depiction of these female characters used to legitimate a hierarchy of male power?

## Results

This investigation surveyed the historical background of these high school canon novels. Most of these works entered the high school canon during the 1960s, when teachers and scholars were trying to define English and determine the role of literature in the English curriculum. By the mid-1960s, federally funded Project English Centers included *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby* at least for college preparatory classes (Santora, 1979, p. 40). During the 1960s, the *English Journal* featured pedagogical articles such as Josephs (1961) unit on the Puritans where she paired *The Scarlet Letter* with *The Crucible*. Scholarly articles by college professors were also featured in the *English Journal* during this same decade. These critical interpretations of the novels reflected a formalist approach stressing conventions and archetypes. Examples include Harry Morris' (1963) discussion of the "everyman" motif in *The Pearl*; Veidemanis' (1964) development of *Lord of the Flies* as man's need to "mature and accept responsibility" (p. 571); and Tanner's (1965) analysis of *The Great Gatsby* as an improvisation on the story of Christ.

During the early 1970s, the proliferation of elective courses included the canon novels taught in conjunction with more contemporary works. Steinley (1970), for example, wrote about his course on the novella which included *The Pearl* in conjunction with *Lilies of the Field*, *The Pistol*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Long March*. By the 1980s, the structuralist approach was evident in pedagogical articles such as Quick's (1988) application of Barthes' codes to *Of Mice and Men*. Feminist criticism seemed to enter pedagogy only in relation to *The Scarlet Letter*, e.g., Barker (1989) and Muldoon (1991). Most of the pedagogical articles designed for the high school teacher seemed to suppress or to justify the gender bias in the canon novels.

This study investigated the generalizations and concepts in these works. References to pedagogical articles and selected ancillary study guide materials additionally sampled possible "mediation and interpretation" that Banks (1993) has discussed as part of school knowledge (p. 11). Representation in these novels is that of the white Euro/Anglo male. Other groups are presented in negative terms. The African American male, in particular, is portrayed as deformed (Crooks, Tom Robinson) or as humiliated/exploited (Jim).

Representation additionally seems class biased. The "hard work" ethic (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Scarlet Letter*) is presented as good. Those who don't work hard (Pap Finn, Bob Ewell) are bad. Yet another class-biased idea is the presentation of "good" characters who are "poor but honest" and content with their status. The Cunninghams in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are examples. By contrast, the desire to increase one's status through material goods is portrayed as dangerous. Jay Gatsby is killed. Kino/Juana lose their child. Class ideology seems evident here, particularly from a Marxian or a Poststructuralist perspective.

The focus of this research, however, has been that of gender bias. With the exception of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all the high school canon novels have been analyzed from a number of critical perspectives. At a generalized level, the high school canon novels are gender biased in that they deal with male protagonists. The stories are those of the male running to or from something. Jay Gatsby tries to escape his working class background in order to obtain a dream of wealth and status, a dream that he has largely created. George is trying to escape from being a migrant worker to owning a little piece of land. Kino wants to use the pearl to escape the poverty and illiteracy of being an Indian. Dimmesdale is fleeing the acknowledgement of his indiscretion. Huckleberry Finn runs from the constraints of adult authority. These experiences may not be relevant to females (Morris, 1985; Cox, 1988; Lake, 1988). The male protagonist as "everyman" may not, in fact, represent every woman. The focus on such male characters obligates the female reader to identify cross gender.

The male protagonist is not alone in his flight. Male pairs pervade the canon novels. Nick Carroway tells Jay Gatsby's story and allegedly learns from said story. George's relationship to Lennie seems to border on the sado-masochistic. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, likewise, may be viewed as perverse. Huck bonds (or merges) with Jim in private, but with Tom Sawyer in public. Piggy and Ralph ally against Roger and Jack. The androgynous Scout is paired with her brother Jem. Even Juana seems an adjunct or an alter ego of Kino.

Yet there are no female bonding pairs in the canon novels. The Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, as other female pairs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are foils or contrasts of ideas. Juana doesn't commiserate with Apolonia. Daisy and Jordan are often together but don't seem close. Nor are there many male/female pairs in the works. Juana seems more like a mirror of Kino than an individual who is sharing in his experience. Daisy and Tom Buchanan are rarely together unless in the company of others. The high school canon novels, then, are literary discussions of bonding men or boys who are running from some kind of constraints and/or who are confronting some kinds of dangers. In all cases, the constraints or dangers are female.

Older women, i.e., pre- or post menopausal women, usually personify the constraints/restraints of society. Lennie's Aunt Clara both indulges and berates him. Widow Douglas and Miss Watson propel Huck back and forth in their visions of the afterlife. Piggie's "auntie" restricts him because of his asthma but overindulges him in candy. These older women seem to be a contradictory representation of nurturing so often associated with females, particularly mothers.

There are, however, few mothers in the high school canon novels. Daisy's interaction with Pammy is limited. Hester's relationship to Pearl is likewise overshadowed by her needlework, her acts of charity, and her continued interest in Dimmesdale. Juana's concern for Coyotito precipitates the developing tragedy. Most of the mothers in the novels have, in fact, died (Lennie, Huck, Scout and Jem) or "left"

(Piggy, Ralph). Thus, the male protagonist and his companion[s] face a dangerous world without the love and/or protection of a mother.

Instead, women are the causes of danger for these boys/men. In the canon novels, women can't be trusted. Juana, for example, tries to throw the pearl back into the sea. Jordan Baker lies. Daisy Buchanan lies (according to Nick). Myrtle Wilson's sister lies. Mayella Ewell lies. Lee's Missionary Society ladies are colorless hypocrites. Scout, therefore, prefers the world of men. In fact, the only women who are not dangerous are, like Scout, androgynous or, like Miss Maudie, asexual.

Women's sexuality in the high school canon novels is depicted as perilous. Myrtle Wilson interferes with a marriage. Curly's wife threatens George's dream of settling on his own land. Hester/Pearl embody Dimmesdale's sin and, therefore, his reputation as preacher. Sophia Grangerford's elopement escalates the feud. Even the sow in *Lord of the Flies* has been interpreted as a disruptive presence (Dick, 1987, p. 22) and/or as a dangerous sexual presence (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor, 1967; Epstein, 1983; Rosenfield, 1983).

The male protagonist, in order to be in control, needs to eliminate this danger. Women, therefore, are subjected to humiliation and/or violence. Myrtle Wilson is punched and run over by an automobile. Curly's wife is likewise "accidentally" murdered. Juana is beaten by her husband. Mayella Ewell is beaten by her father. Scout is attacked while dressed as a ham. Finally, the metaphorical gang rape/murder of Golding's sow seems to sum up the kinds of violence which are enacted upon women.

Yet, with the possible exception of the sow in *Lord of the Flies*, this violence is rationalized in terms of the phallocentric plots. Fitzgerald portrays Myrtle Wilson as a lowerclass whore whose death is supposed to be accidental. Steinbeck depicts Curly's wife as a sleezy flirt who "asks for trouble" when she suggests that Lennie stroke her hair. Lee's Mayella Ewell is "poor white trash" who has "no business" trying to seduce Tom Robinson. Kino beats Juana when she tries to throw the pearl away. Then Steinbeck rambles about men and mountains. Thus, the violence upon such women is justified by implication. The women deserve it. The women ask for it.

Pejorative language used in the canon novels, the scholarly interpretations, and the selected ancillary study guide materials perpetuates the ideas of women "deserving and asking for" violence. Myrtle Wilson is described as cheap and vulgar, a lowerclass whore. Curly's wife is called a bitch and a tramp, among other things. Mayella Ewell is "poor white trash."

In addition to violence, women are objects of humiliation and ridicule. Apolonia's fat stomach jiggles on the trips to town. Mayella's secrets are exposed in court. Hester's exposure and public humiliation are the fulcrum of Hawthorne's novel.

Aunt Sally is subjected to a series of cruel tricks. Jim is most cruelly exploited when dressed in feminine attire (King Lear costume) or in women's clothes.

In addition to being objects of violence, women characters in the high school canon novels are also objects of ownership. Daisy Buchanan is used by Gatsby as the embodiment of a dream. Daisy is also owned and used by her husband Tom. Tom additionally owns and uses his mistress Myrtle Wilson. Curly's wife is owned by Curly, and the other whores in the novel are owned by their madames Suzy and Clara. Juana is owned by her husband Kino. Hester isolates herself from society to be independent, but her isolation and her child Pearl seem to control Hester, nevertheless. Golding's sow is the quintessential object -- pursued, hunted, violated, murdered.

By contrast, white male subjects are in control. Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, George, Curly, Kino, Tom Sawyer, Jack, and Roger are the brutal purveyors of such exploitation. It is probably too extreme to say that the high school canon novels are a middleclass text of "snuff" pornography. It is probably too extreme to say that the high school canon novels present images of women in bondage. Yet Nick Carroway, Huckleberry Finn, and Ralph, to some extent, seem to be voyeuristic observers for violence enacted upon women. Dimmesdale and Gatsby seem impotent.

The ideology of the novels may be what Banks (1993) calls mainstream academic knowledge. Banks writes that certain ideas "... became institutionalized within mainstream academic knowledge" (p. 9). Among these are included "... that the history of the United States has been one of constantly expanding progress and increasing democracy" (p. 9). Thus, the myths of rugged individualism, the American dream, and the work ethic support such a conception of reality. The high school canon novels as school knowledge reinforce and perpetuate these themes. Whose interests are being served?

## Pedagogical Implications

Applebee (1993) has found that teachers prefer teaching familiar so-called "great works" from the Western tradition (p. 81). Additionally, Applebee finds the following influences on choices of literary selections: (1) policies and guides from the school department; (2) probable or specific reactions from the community at large; (3) the judgement of the teacher which is influenced by familiarity with the work, as well as availability of the text, i.e., anthologies or class sets of novels. The question, then, is who is empowered by teaching this canon of novels.

One possible answer is that teachers may feel it "safer" to teach an established literary work despite the fact that these works have been subjected to censorship assaults. A second possible answer is that of familiarity. Most high school teachers have studied these novels in college, as well as having taught them for any number of years. Hectic schedules, overcrowded classrooms, and numerous assignments, in addition to the

classroom, certainly restrict the reading of large numbers of unfamiliar works, as well as planning how to incorporate these in their classrooms. A third answer, of course, is that publishers continue to publish the canon novels with ancillary study guide materials so that the availability of these texts and ancillaries facilitates planning, teaching, and evaluating. Publishers are private enterprise -- big business. The canon novels and the ancillary study guide materials are published because there is a market. Thus, the canon issue runs in a circle.

The high school canon novels are primarily American literature. Only one novel is British. Yet out of the huge corpus of novels in American literature, none is more recent than 1960. Thus, the dated ideas in some of these works may be, at best, irrelevant for the contemporary classroom. All of the writers are white middle class, and all of the writers except one are male. This canon is inappropriate for today's school population which is drawn from varying socioeconomic classes, as well as many racial/ethic groups. Females, of course, make up a large percentage of the school population.

The addition of women writers to anthologies or to the syllabus does not in itself resolve the issue. Women writers in the past have been writing in a white male dominated culture. Therefore, their writings may not evidence a strong female voice or strong female presence. Although many women of color write more assertively about gender relations, many of these writers are taught at the college, rather than the high school, level. Certainly, more fiction and poetry by Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American, African American, and white women with strong female voices need to be added, as well as women writers from world literature. The point is that questions need to be asked about what women writers are included, what works of these women are included -- more important, why are these works included.

Young adult novels, because they are contemporary and accessible to high school readers, are sometimes considered as a substitute or adjunct for literary canon works, particularly for lower track students. Nevertheless, these works may also contain bias. In considering an adolescent novel as a whole-class work, teachers should consider if the protagonist is male, if female characters obstruct the male protagonist in some way, or if female characters are stereotypes rather than individuals.

Male authors from world literature, as well as male authors from nonwhite American literature, should be considered for additional perspectives. White Euro/Anglo male writers need not be abandoned. The point is that the works should be carefully examined for a particular perspective, in this case, for views of women.

Teachers and publishers should carefully examine recent pedagogy related to the multiple learning styles of individuals. Most of the selected ancillary study guides present authoritative kinds of comments and objective testing to ensure "the right reading of the work." At the other extreme, some of the selected ancillary study guide materials

seem to focus on art, music and drama projects related to the written text. These kinds of projects are certainly appropriate and relevant for some literature. In fact, multimodal activities are hardly new. During the 1930s, there were extensive activities of this sort as part of the progressive education pedagogy. Unfortunately, in the 1930s, as today, some of these activities seem questionable.

Teachers and publishers should consider the kinds of written assignments which are given in connection with the study of a literary work. For example, the purpose of writing a eulogy for Candy's dog after reading *Of Mice and Men* seems unclear. Writing to illiterate characters such as Juana and Kino seems absurd. Trendy pedagogy of this sort encourages superficial reading of the texts, as well as vapid interpretations of issues. And finally, whose interests are being served when the "A" of *The Scarlet Letter* is used to discuss the stigma of AIDS and abortion?

Teachers and publishers should consider a multiple perspective approach to any novel -- canon or otherwise -- so that issues of any bias may be addressed. Certainly one way to address the bias issue in a canon novel is to teach it in conjunction with a similar novel offering another perspective and there is evidence that many teachers use this approach. Teaching a group of novels -- canon and non canon -- in terms of an issue is another way of addressing the issue of bias. At the secondary level, organization of literary material in such ways also creates cross-disciplinary connections with other humanities, as well as the social sciences. Rather than espousing a particular ideology, these kinds of studies include many voices.

Biased school knowledge is particularly insidious in today's institutions, decaying high school facilities which are the settings for abuse, assault, robbery, rape and murder (Staub, 1993; Shor, 1986). The AAUW Executive Summary of *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992) reports that "sexual harassment of girls by boys -- from innuendo to actual assault ... is increasing" (p. 2). More subversive, perhaps, "the contributions and experiences of girls and women are still marginalized or ignored in many of the textbooks used in our nation's schools" (AAUW, p. 3). Furthermore, the projected majority urban population for the year 2000 is composed of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latino/Hispanics, and Native Americans (Jones-Quartey, 1993). A canon of novels dealing primarily with white males in pastoral settings is ill-suited for such a population.

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## Appendix 1

### Editions of the Canon Novels

Fitzgerald, F. S. (1925). *The great Gatsby*. M. J. Bruccoli (Preface and notes). New York: Collier Books Macmillan Publishing Company 1992 edition.

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Twain, M. (1884). *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. A. Kazin (Afterward). New York: Bantam Books, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. May 1993 reissue.

## Appendix 2

### Selected Ancillary Study Guide Materials

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