

## IMAGES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: EIGHT NOVELS

by Ilene Alexander

In the space of one minute, three women are battered and another is raped; every minute an assault on a woman is reported while every eighteen seconds a woman is assaulted by a man she lives with (Kaye/Kantrowitz).<sup>1</sup>

Facts about woman abuse are generated and reported daily by public agencies and private organizations: as consumers of news, we are awakened daily by headlines about abused, murdered, assaulted, molested and harrassed women. Woman abuse, clearly and unfortunately, is a current affairs topic for students at any grade level. Students' experience with the issue ranges from personal to academic to judgmental to non-existent.

As a student of women's studies I know that women and men can better understand abuse if they view the violent event not in isolation, but as part of a pattern of events that lead up to the episode. Literature can personalize the experience, making woman abuse more than a statistical collection of data that masks the pain and fear of abuse or that clouds the variety of decisions and dilemmas abused women face.

As a student of English I know that quality novels offer readers an intimate glimpse of characters' lives and a sense that the reader knows the circumstances of the lives s/he is reading about. In looking for a graceful and relevant way to blend English methods of teaching literature with women's studies theories of violence against women, I realized that a number of novels could be brought together as an introduction to the novel course, a course that would introduce readers to a variety of novel forms (radical, epistolary, slave narrative, utopian, adolescent, stream of consciousness) and would focus on a single relevant topic--woman abuse.

In this paper I will discuss eight novels that could be used in an introductory course--the novels could be used as a group for a quarter-or semester-long class, or used in pairs to supplement discussion in other English, women's studies,

social studies, or sociology classes.

While the course plan I will offer is structured for the college classroom, it can easily be adapted to middle school and high school use (perhaps even the grade school level in conjunction with the TOUCH program by using short stories from MS. magazines' Stories for Free Children and similar sources). Strong Women: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature for the High School Classroom is a good place to begin searching for other titles to be used in a high school setting.

Before considering which novels to include in this topic oriented literature class, the instructor will need to increase his or her own understanding of woman abuse. Several works on battered wives, rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse have flooded library and bookstore shelves; some books are woman blaming--what did she do to provoke the attack, some point accusatory fingers at the overall violent structure of society, and others develop a contextual understanding of the multifaceted causes and manifestations of violence against women. It is important to survey the material available but even more important to select background materials that offer an understanding of abuse--historically and statistically with some reporting of individual, personal interviews--that is not woman blaming.

Two recent publications can aid both teacher and student in the search for background material: Violence Against Wives, by R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash; Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement, by Susan Schechter. Schechter focuses on the movement that struggles for political, judicial, and legislative reform of laws and attitudes regarding battered women. "Toward an Analysis of Violence Against Women in the Family," chapter nine of Schechter's work, is a valuable resource that should be shared with students early in the class.

Chapters from Violence Against Wives, specifically chapters six, seven and eight--"The Violent Event," "The Violent Marriage," and "Staying, Leaving, and Returning," prepare students for an

early discussion of the myths and realities of battering in women's lives. The Dobashes state that "any approach to the understanding of a social problem must include a consideration of history, biography, institutional processes and cultural beliefs and ideas...We have avoided (a) narrow approach by embedding our analysis of individual violent behavior in the wider social and cultural context" (ix-x). This approach blends easily with the individual and contextual images offered in the eight novels.

The novels encourage readers to see male-female relationships in a context that does not (unlike so many best selling romances) romanticize violent behavior as a by-product of intense passion. In each novel the reader becomes part of the process of a character's self-discovery within the abusive situation. At that point, the reading becomes personal scholarship--readers connect events to each novel to various episodes in their own lives. By putting women at the center of the study, by using feminist fiction depicting women in important and realistic roles, by selecting writings that span a period of history in which the subordination of women has undergone only limited change, and by discussing the experiences of women--characters and readers, we discover the actual facts of women's lives and thoughts.

The learning process in such a study of literature helps students to observe the interrelatedness of abuse, social conditioning, community practices, and imposed (male) norms. Furthermore, it encourages students to see literature not as some "thing" divorced from daily concerns and issues.

Questions raised in this examination of literature will include: how have writers depicted women? what can be done or is being done to change stereotypes? what sources do we have and how can they be used to help explain roles and lives of mid-twentieth century or nineteenth century women? what are the basic assumptions--social, political, economic, biases--that form the context for the times during which the work is written? in what ways has the male point of view affected our understanding

of woman abuse? how has this view crept into popular and canonized literature? how does literature socialize men and women? how can literature be used to unlearn outdated stereotypes? how can these novels add to our understanding of abuse? how can women learn about freeing themselves from abuse by reading feminist fiction? and so on.

The eight novels, discussed below, are easily available with the exception of Fettered for Life, an 1874 novel by Lillie Devereux Blake which was reprinted in 1981 by Arno Press. The Ayer Company distributes Arno's holdings but is slow to respond to queries regarding Blake's novel. Several libraries hold copies of the 1874 edition, which is now out of copyright so chapters could be xeroxed by classroom use; libraries holding Fettered for Life include Murray State University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Yale, and University of Arizona-Tucson. As a substitute for the novel, Elizabeth Pleck's 1979 article "Wife Beating in Nineteenth Century America" could be used.

#### THE NOVELS

Blake, Lillie Devereaux. FETTERED FOR LIFE OR LORD AND MASTER: A STORY OF TODAY.

Blake's Fettered for Life, published in 1874 after she became involved in the woman's rights movement, serves as an excellent counterpoint to Brent's Incidents--the settings are clear contrasts, but the roles women were expected to fill and the violence condoned to ensure that women molded to their proper roles are much the same in both works. Through Blake's central character, Laura Stanley--an upstate girl, educated, and in New York City to begin a career--readers meet an activist feminist doctor, a wife murdered by her battering husband, a psychologically abused mother and daughter, a prostitute--used, abused and abandoned, a debutante looking for identity but denied meaningful work, and a newspaper man who reveals her startling secret. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. HERLAND.

Herland is a feminist utopian novel from an author whose own abuse by the psychiatric establishment influenced her politics. Gilman published Herland in 1915. While much of the



novel illustrates the self-sufficient and highly fulfilled lives of a "lost" civilization of women, it is through the eyes of the male narrator that we see the folly of our own sexist society. Readers enraged by the violent attitudes of our society when a companion of the narrator attempts to rape a resident of Herland: "Terry put into practice his pet conviction that a woman loves to be mastered, and by sheer brute force, in all the pride and passion of his intense masculinity, he tried to master this woman." The residents of Herland do not let the incident go unnoticed or unpunished.

Jacobs, Harriet /Linda Brent/. INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL.

Incidents is one of the few printed works written by a nineteenth century woman of color, a woman in slavery, that speaks openly of the culturally sanctioned sexual degradation faced by slave women and often overlooked by southern and northern white women. Written in secret and published in 1861, several years after Jacobs escaped her master's insistent advances, this narrative defies rules of caste, class, and sexual propriety to effect social change.

Olsen, Tillie. YONNONDIO.

Olsen put the family battering in a context that honestly characterizes the interaction between poverty, wage earning, family structure, patriarchal hierarchies, and individual perceptions. In this novel no individual is blamed for or victimized by the abuse, but the hierarchical social structures are closely scrutinized. All of the characters in this dark slice of life are burdened under the oppression of a system that only acknowledges success and readily condones violence.

Piercy, Marge. WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME.

Piercy contrasts the insanity of our social structures with the future world of Mattapoissett, Mass., in the year 2137, a world that Connie Ramos "envisions" as an escape from her bed in a mental institution. Connie's tour guide Luciente--whole name, in Spanish, means bright and shining--makes her aware of the power of violence and of the empowerment in fighting abuse.

Scoppettone, Sandra. HAPPY ENDINGS ARE ALL ALIKE.

This adolescent novel takes on the issue of acquaintance rape and the common attitude that lesbianism is "deviant" behavior in a storyline that also makes clear that rape is an issue of violence, not sexuality. The novel repudiates several on-going beliefs about women: that they ask for it; they need to be taught a lesson; they remain silent because their permissive behavior was really at fault. Scoppettone also takes up many of the biases inherent in the law enforcement systems and pushes those attitudes aside with the determination of her central character.

Walker, Alice. THE COLOR PURPLE.

The vibrancy of The Color Purple comes from the bonding among women that serves to counteract the violence done to them by men. Celie can emerge from the dark hole she was pushed into by her stepdaddy and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ largely because she learns to draw from her own rich source of energy and submerged self-esteem. She merely has to be reintroduced to these characteristics, and that happens through her relationship with Shug Avery. The richness of the color purple surrounds Celie when she moves out from under the control of a man who beats her.

LeSueur, Meridel. THE GIRL.

The Girl is a song that honors the voices of Depression era women who collectively shared shelter and stories. As a feminist and writer, LeSueur saw herself as one "who strangely and wonderfully insisted that their lives were not defeated, trashed, defenseless but that we as women contained the real and only seed, and were the granary of the people. This should be the function of the so-called writer, to mirror back the beauty of the people, to urge and nourish their vital expression and their social vision." While women in LeSueur's collective were gaining confidence in the possibilities of their social visions, the unnamed protagonist in her fictional retelling of those years is caught in and betrayed by the social system.

The novels could be arranged chronologically or by genres but I prefer a pairing of novels that emphasizes a similarity in

either the characters' or authors' lives; therefore, the following arrangement:

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by Linda Brent, 1861

The Color Purple, by Alice Walker, 1982

The first person slave narrative is Linda Brent's story of strong family, escape from slavery, separation from family, and risk taking. Walker's epistolary novel introduces readers to another woman in slavery, this one in a more recent setting; Celie, the central character, is slave to the white patriarchy and black patriarchy. Celie and Linda learn that they have the courage to become "whole women," women who do not take abuse; these images help students unlearn myths about abused women of color.

Yonnondia, by Tillie Olsen, 1974

The Girl, by Meridel LeSueur, 1978

Both of these novels are written by women who were forced to leave their early works untouched for a number of years--Olsen to raise a family before rediscovering her novel, and LeSueur to survive blacklisting before she had sufficient resources and community to nourish her work. In the novels, the conditions of poverty and the conditioning of young girls are topics interwoven with the descriptions of the abusive cycle. As novelists, LeSueur and Olsen are radical writers.

Herland, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1915

Woman on the Edge of Time, by Marge Piercy, 1976

By placing readers in a utopian context that is foreign to traditional surroundings, the focus becomes introspection; that is, the reader finds familiar topics and assumptions take on a different connotation in a setting that does not accept abuse as normal and acceptable.

Happy Endings Are All Alike, by Sandra Scoppettone, 1978

Fettered For Life, by Lillie Devereaux Blake, 1874

During the final weeks of the course, students will be looking for a change of pace in their reading and the instructor will be looking for closure that will encourage future thinking: the pairing of Scoppettone's recent work about an adolescent who

encounters abuse with Blake's historical work about a young woman first encountering ideas and discussion about woman abuse fulfills the goals of student and teacher. Furthermore, these novels show how little and how much laws and patriarchal attitudes have changed.

In assigning readings and written assignments, the instructor can build reasonable class requirements by asking students to do two things: write reaction papers for some or all of the novels, including follow up remarks after class discussion; present historical or current information about abuse to the class, making use of handouts as necessary. Reaction papers are most useful, I have found, when each student responds to a particular idea, theme, or character rather than attempting to summarize or analyze the entire novel. I find it interesting to read the reaction papers when students are given a few moments to add to their reaction papers after class discussion--typed reaction papers, two or three pages, are turned in at the beginning of class and written, brief comments handed in after students spend ten minutes writing post-discussion comments.

Reports to the class work best when the topics correspond to the novel being discussed, naturally; what is especially appealing for students is that they can make reports either on the aspects of the novel--forms, structure, types, or on other studies and research about domestic violence and woman abuse. Through reports to the class, students hear what social scientists have to say about abuse--reading and reporting on Behind Closed Doors, or The Battered Woman or Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape--and will be practicing reading, writing and reporting skills that are called for in a variety of classes outside the English department. Benefits for the instructor include assistance in presenting information, short and swift-to-read writing assignments, discussions that are easy to facilitate and an opportunity to focus on a particular topic through the eyes of many--students', novelists', characters'.

In the classroom, instructors may find that breaking into small groups to discuss specific questions (suggested before



small groups are formed) is an aid to generating and focusing class discussion. Sharing parts of their reaction papers also helps students, especially the quiet ones, bring their ideas into the exchange.

Literature is often used in the women's studies classroom so that students can begin to understand all that surrounds, underscores and interacts with women's lives; literature provides the tools that help students dig for the root that will help them understand an attitude, an ideal, a life. In literature courses it is important that students begin to see novels not just as an escape from reality but as a mirror of social conditioning and as a tool for learning new ways of interpreting and surviving in the world. Literature can help students and teachers see that:

The seeds of wife beating lie in the subordination of females and in their subjection to male authority and control. This relationship between women and men has been institutionalized in the structure of the patriarchal family and is supported by the economic and political institutions and by a belief system, including a religious one, that makes such relationships seem natural, morally just and sacred (Dobash 33-4).

Literature can teach us that the patriarchal myths about abused women are, indeed, lies.

Partial Bibliography for "Images of Violence Against Women: Eight Novels"

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, editor of Sinister Wisdom, is currently at work on a book about women, violence and resistance; she spoke at Mankato State University 19 April 1984.