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Reading women's writing

BA English

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Objectives

Reading Women's Writing is an advanced level subject guide designed for undergraduates studying women's writing in English from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This subject guide has been designed:

- to enable you to read writing by women in relation to social and literary context **and** in relation to its reading for contemporary readers today.
- to consider what is distinctive about women's writing.
- to develop your reading skills with reference to questions of gender, genre and the representation of sexual difference.
- to familiarise you with some of the contemporary debates in feminist theories of women's writing

Using the subject guide

This subject guide is divided in the following way:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Nineteenth-century women's writing

Chapter 3: Nineteenth-century women's writing: women's rights and women's writing

Chapter 4: Twentieth-century women's writing

Chapter 5: Topic study: Motherhood

We suggest that you start by carefully reading the Introduction, taking note of key points on the syllabus and noting down ideas and points to which you may wish to return. You may then find it useful to read quickly through the whole guide before concentrating on the individual chapters. This will give you an overall view of the subject area, the scope of the issues to be covered and the amount of reading involved. You may find that some of the texts and issues are already familiar to you but that others are less familiar or completely new to you. You should take this into consideration when planning your

reading schedule, allocating a specific period of time to each area of the subject according to the time at your disposal. We suggest that you should then read slowly and methodically through each chapter, attempting to answer the questions and making notes, then following up some of the suggested reading, or making comparisons with and connections from your own interests. (You may of course read the chapters in any order, although we would suggest that there are some advantages to starting with the nineteenth-century material.)

This guide is obviously not designed as a comprehensive view of all the issues to do with women's writing, and approaches to such writing, that have claimed critical attention in recent years. You are expected to shape your own approach to women's writing, first of all on the basis of your own interests, whether these lie mainly in prose or poetry, and then according to whether such interests are mainly socio- historical or literary-critical in direction. The content of your reading will thus vary from student to student. However, such content will include primary texts (whether novels or poems) and secondary material (such as literary criticism, social history, biography, and so on).

The guide is intended as a model of how you might decide to organise and develop your programme of study. The authors and topics which we consider here might not coincide with your own choices, but the critical procedures indicated should be of general application. This subject guide does not constitute the subject itself, but a guide to how an appropriate course of study might be constructed by you, and to appropriate ways of studying the material which you will choose.

Syllabus content

Overall aim

You may organise your course of study around particular authors and particular topics but you should try to achieve a balance between texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and those written in the twentieth century. **At the end of your course of reading you should be able demonstrate a knowledge of texts and authors both from the period 1790-1900 and from the period 1900-1990.**

Each text should be considered in relation to its historical context, its thematic concerns and its use of literary form. You may wish to refer to material not mentioned on the reading list (e.g. novels and poetry written by male authors of the same period) and should feel free to do so, providing that these references are relevant to your argument. You may notice that almost all of the nineteenth-century texts were written by British women writers, whereas in the twentieth century there were many English-language writers who came from different cultures and continents. In your choice of reading, you may wish to reflect the contribution made by writers from outside the United Kingdom.

This subject guide provides a list of issues and questions relevant to each period of study and you are advised to consider these questions carefully. They are relevant both to your reading of individual texts/authors and to your general understanding of the context and issues raised by women's writing.

In order to consider the general questions (e.g. women's rights, subjectivity, sexuality or maternity) relevant to this unit of study, you will be expected to familiarise yourself with different theoretical and critical perspectives on these issues. You will find directions on the relevant critical material within each section and in the reading list at the end of this subject guide.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors

The following is a list of late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century authors whose works you may choose to study. Texts suitable for detailed study are indicated in parentheses.

Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*)

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*Frankenstein*)

Jane Austen (*Mansfield Park*)

Mrs Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*)

Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights; Selected Poems*)

Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre; Shirley*)

Mrs Gaskell (*North and South; Ruth*)

George Eliot (*The Mill on The Floss*)

Mrs Craik (*John Halifax, Gentleman*)

Mrs Henry Wood (*East Lynne*)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (*Aurora Leigh*)

Christina Rossetti (*Selected Poems*)

Suggested topics

The following is a list of the kinds of issues you might choose to investigate when

studying late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's writing.¹

1. The problems women encountered, as women, when deciding to write for the public: family background of individual authors, with the roles to which they were expected to conform; their legal and financial status as unmarried/married women. The problems women encountered, as women, when deciding to write for the public: family background of individual authors, with the roles to which they were expected to conform; their legal and financial status as unmarried/married women.
2. Domestic ideology: 'a woman's place is in the home'; the internalisation of patriarchal social structure; the personal/social cost of rejection of patriarchal social structures.
3. Defensive strategies adopted by women writers to make their entry into literature acceptable: the use of the pseudonym; the use of the title 'Mrs'; what women could not write about; how they managed to write about what they did write about. 'Codes' or writing to be read between the lines: women and sexuality.
4. The canon: what effect did it have on women that they inherited a literary tradition by and large gendered masculine? What antecedents were there for women novelists and poets? How far can we speak of a female tradition in literature distinct from the canon, and how far were women writers aware of such a tradition if it existed?
5. Topics: did women share topics, such that certain themes became 'women's topics'; if so, what were they, and were they recognised as such in their period? Did women write predominantly for other women or for a general audience? In either case, how was this signalled? Which women were accepted as important in their time, and how are they seen now?
6. The literary career woman: how women negotiated the private/public split; who earned the most and how they earned it; what made a bestseller and who wrote them; the influence of the circulating libraries; targeting specific audiences; the influence of ideologies on earning power.
7. Fictional techniques: nineteenth-century women writers employed a wide range of techniques, any of which you may find of interest. For example, a study of the narrators/narrating voices used by women writers might include the use of the 'ungendered' narrating voice in the novels of George Eliot; the use of the first-person narrator by Charlotte Brontë; the 'feminised' male narrator used by Emily Brontë and Mrs Craik; unreliable narrators, whether male or female (Emily Brontë again), and so on. This could lead into a discussion of narrative authority, and the problems of adopting a subject-position for women; it might also lead into a discussion of closed or open endings and their significance for women writers.

¹ Note: such issues could be examined in the context of the works of a single author from the list above, or used in connection with representative works by a series of authors.

8. Changes in the social and legal status of women that took place during the nineteenth century: rights to divorce, to alimony, to custody of children at divorce, to property obtained before and during the marriage; changing attitudes to middle-class women working outside the home, and so on. All these changes are reflected in women's writing in this period, though by no means all such women were feminists and the attitudes taken by women writers vary considerably. Considerations of ideology and of patriarchy, whether internalised or not, come in here also.

Twentieth-century authors

The following is a list of twentieth-century authors whose works you may choose to study. Texts suitable for detailed study are suggested in parentheses.

- Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*; *To The Lighthouse*)
- Dorothy Richardson (*Pilgrimage*)
- Winifred Holtby (*South Riding*)
- Jean Rhys (*Voyage in the Dark*; *Good Morning Midnight*; *Wide Sargasso Sea*)
- Sylvia Plath (*Ariel*; 'Three Women' in *Collected Poems* edited by Ted Hughes)
- Margaret Atwood (*Surfacing*; *The Handmaid's Tale*)
- Anita Desai (*Fire on the Mountain*; *In Custody*)
- Doris Lessing (*The Golden Notebook*)
- Fay Weldon (*Life and Loves of a She-Devil*)
- Pat Barker (*Blow Your House Down*; *Union Street*)
- Angela Carter (*Nights at the Circus*; *Heroes and Villains*; *The Passion of New Eve*)
- Toni Morrison (*Sula*; *Beloved*)
- Jackie Kay (*The Adoption Papers*)
- *The Faber Book of Modern Women Poets* (edited by Fleur Adcock) contains a

useful selection of contemporary women's poetry.²

Suggested topics

The following is a list of the kinds of issues you might choose to investigate when studying twentieth-century women's writing.

1. What, if anything, is distinctive about the way women wrote in the twentieth century? Did they write about different things from male writers? Or did they write about similar things in different ways? For example, you might like to think about 'war' (a supposedly masculine preoccupation) and 'childbirth and childrearing' (a supposedly feminine preoccupation). What kind of stylistic differences, if any, do you notice between male and female writing? (E.g. language, imagery, syntax, rhythm, or differential uses of narrative and poetic forms?)
2. What cultural and/or psychological explanations would you use to explain any gender differences in writing?
3. Are there any common characteristics between women's writing in, for example, 1847, 1897, 1927 and 1987?
4. Does women's writing challenge the representation of male and female identity? Does male writing? If so, how does women's writing do this?
5. How is the question of gender related to the questions of class, 'race', ethnicity or sexual orientation? If a woman writer is never just a 'woman' but is also a particular kind of woman – working class/middle class, white/black, heterosexual/lesbian, married/single, for instance – how are these other identifications articulated in the literary text?
6. Do we always read either as a woman or as a man? What kind of literary devices or texts enable the reader to cross over or to read from alternative positions?
7. To what extent have women writers contributed to the modernisation of literary forms in, for example, 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' writing?
8. How does the question of gender figure in the reading and writing of popular fiction (e.g. romance, detective stories, science fiction and thrillers)?³

² Note: you may also study other texts by the suggested authors, or choose to read other relevant authors from the late eighteenth century onwards.

³ Modernism is a general term for experimental trends in the arts in the early twentieth century. A useful definition of modernist literature is provided by Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (1991). 'Modernist Literature is characterised chiefly by a rejection of 19th - century traditions and of their consensus between author and reader: the conventions of realism, for instance... Modernist writers tended to see themselves as an avant-garde disengaged from bourgeois values, and disturbed their readers by adopting complex and difficult forms and styles...James Joyce and Virginia Woolf attempted new ways of tracing the flow of characters' thoughts in their stream-of-consciousness dislocation, along with an awareness of new anthropological and psychological theories. Its favoured techniques of juxtaposition and multiple point of view challenge the reader to re-establish a coherence of meaning from fragmentary forms.' (p.140) Postmodernism is an infamously difficult concept to define. It is used in connection with much, but by no means all, literature since the 1950s and 1960s. Again, Chris Baldick provides a useful explanation: 'Postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorientating techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world; in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity, the postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference. (pp.174–5) See L. Nicholson (ed.)

You will not be expected to explore all of these issues with reference to all the authors listed above. In any case, many of the issues overlap and, in practice, you will find that you are using a combination of them when deciding whether to work on a single author/text/topic or whether to use a number of works by different authors. You are advised, however, to study both poetry and prose; to look at minor as well as major authors; and to select practice essay titles which allow you to prepare for a range of examination questions.

Advice on reading

Ideally, we would offer a bibliography for each of the authors listed in the sections above, but we do not have the space to do so. This means that, for your study of authors other than those discussed here, you will need to compile your own reading lists, with the help of this study guide and bearing the following in mind.

Most libraries have online access to book titles and journal articles. So the entry 'Elizabeth Gaskell', for instance, should produce, not only lists of Gaskell's writing, but also biographies, critical readings, and many will be available to read online.

The nature of English studies has changed radically over the last thirty years, particularly in the study of women writers. Bear this in mind. If all the criticism that you read on, say, Gaskell was written in the 1980s you may have a limited idea of the range of critical responses to this writer. At the same time, do not assume that criticism from an earlier date is necessarily out of date.

In the suggested reading section later in this Introduction you will see that there are collections of essays that deal with feminist theory. There is Belsey and Moore's *The Feminist Reader* and James and Sharpley-Whiting's *The Black Feminist Reader*, for instance, and these will provide fast access to a range of critical views and approaches. The same can be said of critical readers on individual writers. The 'Icon Critical Guide' on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for example, provides a broad and comprehensive range of responses to Morrison's novel. Remember that critical texts, whether concerned with theory or individual topics or writers, usually contain references and bibliographies which will be useful to you in compiling your own reading lists.

Suggested study syllabus

The following is a sample 20-week outline to give you an idea of how you could construct an appropriate syllabus for this subject.

Week 1: Background reading on the social, economic and political position

Feminism/Postmodernism, (1990) and B. Scott (ed.) *The Gender of Modernism*, (1990) for discussions on the relationships between postmodernism, modernism and gender issues.

of women in the nineteenth-century and on the cultural and literary contexts relating to women's writing. Recommended texts:

Appignanesi, Lisa *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*. (London: Virago, 2009) [ISBN 978-1844082346]

Poovey, Mary *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. (London: Virago, 1989) [ISBN 978-185-38103350] see Chapter 1.

Showalter, Elaine *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture*. (London: Virago, 1987) [ISBN 0-860-688693].

Vicinus, Martha (ed.) *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*. (London: Routledge Revivals, 2014) [ISBN 978-041583694].

- Week 2:** Elizabeth Gaskell: Elizabeth Gaskell *North and South*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) [ISBN 978-1844082346].
- Weeks 3–5:** Author study: Elizabeth Barrett Browning *Aurora Leigh*. (See Chapter 2).
- Weeks 6–8:** Women's rights and women's writing: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (See Chapter 3).
- Week 9:** Christina Rossetti: Christina Rossetti 'Goblin Market', in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (Boston: A Squid Ink Classic, 2017) [ISBN 978-1546599098].
- Weeks 10–11:** Author study: Charlotte Bronte: *Shirley*. (See Chapter 3) and essay writing.
- Weeks 12–13:** Twentieth-century women's writing: Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (See Chapter 4).
- Weeks 14–15:** Author study: Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea*. (See Chapter 4).
- Week 16:** Toni Morrison: Morrison, Toni *Beloved*. (London: Vintage, 2007) [ISBN 978-0099511656]
- Weeks 17–19:** Topic study: motherhood. (See Chapter 5).
- Week 20:** Essay writing

Recommended secondary reading for suggested study syllabus

Week 1

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2006) [ISBN 978-0141441474].

Moers, Ellen *Literary Women*. (London: Women's Press, 1986) [ISBN 0-704-338254].

Showalter, Elaine *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. (London: Virago, 1982) [ISBN 0-86068-285-4].

Week 2

Allott, Marion *Elizabeth Gaskell*. (London: Longman Higher Education, 1996) [ISBN 0-582-01124-8].

Flint, Kate *Elizabeth Gaskell*. (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) [ISBN 0-74630-718-7].

Foster, Shirley *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual*. (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1985) [ISBN 0-389-20674-1].

Shuttleworth, Sally 'Introduction' to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *North and South*.

Uglow, Jenny *Elizabeth Gaskell*. (London: Faber, 1999) [ISBN 0-571-20359-0].

Unsworth, Anna *Elizabeth Gaskell: An Independent Woman*. (London: Minerva Press, 1996) [ISBN 1-861-06179-X].

Weeks 3–5

See Chapter 2.

Weeks 6–8

See Chapter 3.

Week 9

Gilbert, S. and S. Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) [ISBN 978-030084580] 564–575.

See also, Annette Fedirico (ed.) *Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic after Thirty Years* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011) [ISBN: 978-

0826219275].

Leighton, Angela *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. (New York; London: Harvester, 1992) [ISBN 0-7108-1314-7]. See Chapter 4 on Rossetti; Chapter 3 is also relevant for your study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Marsh, Jan *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*. (London: Pimlico, 1996) [ISBN 0-712-67437-3].

Rosenblum, Dolores *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*. (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1986) [ISBN 0-809-31269-7].

Weeks 10–11

See Chapter 3.

Weeks 12–13

See Chapter 4.

Weeks 14–15

See Chapter 4.

Week 16

Baillie, Justine *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) [ISBN: 978-1-4742-229-4]

Gates, Henry Louis Jr., and K.A. Appiah (eds) *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. (New York: Amistad, 1993) [ISBN 1-56743-025-2].

Matus, Jill *Toni Morrison*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) [ISBN 0-719-04448-0].

Morrison, Toni *The Origin of Others*. (Harvard MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) [ISBN: 978-0-674-97645-0].

Plasa, Carl (ed.) *Beloved*. (Cambridge: Icon, 1998) In the Icon Critical Guide Series. [ISBN 1-874-16673-0].

Tally, Justine (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) [ISBN 978-0521678322]

Taylor-Guthrie, Danille (ed.) *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) [ISBN 0-87805-692-0].

Weeks 17–19

See Chapter 5.

Week 20

None specifically.

Study questions for suggested study syllabus

Week 1

Victorian attitudes towards femininity were more complex than has previously been assumed. From your reading of the texts above, what is your understanding of the main characteristics of the position of women in nineteenth-century society?

- What were the main attitudes towards marriage and the family in the nineteenth century?
- How important were biological theories of sexual difference?
- What do you understand about the construction of sexuality in the nineteenth century?
- What form did constraints on female sexuality assume, and what do you think were their functions and limitations for men?
- Consider notions of female ‘madness’: what were these and what were their functions?
- What was the position of working-class women in the nineteenth century?
- To what extent can we discuss different forms of patriarchy in the nineteenth century?

Week 2

- In her introduction to *North and South*, Sally Shuttleworth argues that ‘the fundamental class conflict between the workers and their employers is translated into an issue of gender, as Margaret, the defender of the workers, clashes with Thornton’ (page xii). In what ways do issues of class and gender overlap in the novel?
- Examine the riot scene in Chapter 22: how is Margaret’s sexuality presented?
- Consider Gaskell’s characterisation of Margaret: to what extent does Gaskell challenge nineteenth-century ideals of femininity (explored in Week 1) in this characterisation, and to what extent does she conform to them?
- Consider the ending of the novel: do you think that Margaret resolves the ‘most difficult problem for women’ referred to in Chapter 24: ‘...how much was to be

utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working.?’

- What connections can you find between Gaskell’s ‘Condition of England’ novel and *Aurora Leigh* and *Shirley*? (See also Chapters 2 and 3 of this subject guide.)

Weeks 3–5

See Chapter 2.

Weeks 6–8

See Chapter 3.

Week 9

- What does ‘Goblin Market’ tell us about female desire?
- Sandra Gilbert, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, interprets the goblin’s fruits as intellectual and that in eating them Laura asserts both her poetic and her sexual power. Do you find this reading convincing? What other possible allegorical readings of the poem can you identify?
- Laura buys the fruit with a lock of her hair: what does this say about women’s bodies as an object of exchange?
- The language of ‘Goblin Market’ has been described as child-like or fairy-tale language: what is the effect of the tension between Rossetti’s use of language and any proto-feminist content of the poem?
- Lizzie resists the temptation of the fruit: what does Rossetti seem to be saying about the nature of female strength?

Weeks 10-11

See Chapter 3.

Weeks 12-13

See Chapter 4.

Weeks 14-15

See Chapter 4.

Week 16

- This is a historical novel which also employs some of the techniques commonly associated with magic-realism.⁴ What is the effect of this and what do you think Morrison's purpose is in including elements of the supernatural?
- In what ways is the ghost of Beloved used to recover a traumatic and repressed history?
- Consider the complex narrative structure of the novel: does the complexity of the narrative structure reflect the complexity of African-American history? To what extent, and why, can Morrison's novel be described as postmodern?
- What is the importance and role of the community in the novel? Consider the importance of memory in the novel.
- The novel is concerned with the experience of motherhood within the economy of slavery: how does the novel complicate western perceptions and theories of motherhood? (See Chapter 5 of this subject guide.)
- Morrison has described herself as a 'Black woman writer': in what ways do gender and 'race' intersect in the novel?

Weeks 17–19

See Chapter 5.

Week 20

Go over the work you have done for **at least eight authors**, for balance at least **two of these should be late eighteenth- or nineteenth-century women writers** and at least **two more must be twentieth-century women writers**. You should also make sure that you are familiar with relevant aspects of feminist theory. This is roughly the amount of study required for one English literature course in one full academic year in a British university.

Guided by the sample essay questions, in this guide, set yourself some essay questions and answer these (2000 words) on the understanding that most British universities require English literature students to write between two and three essays per year long course.

Suggested reading

The following is a list of sources which should help you in your study of this subject. You will find other sources relevant to the individual topics listed at the head of each of the

⁴ In his entry for 'magic-realism' in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1991), Chris Baldick defines it as 'a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the "reliable" tone of objective realistic report... The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels – levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis – are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the twentieth century.' (p.128)

chapters.

Baldick, C. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) [ISBN 0-192-82893-2].

Belsey, C. and J. Moore (eds) *The Feminist Reader*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) [ISBN 0-333-44603-8].

Brennan, T. *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1989) [ISBN 0-415-01490-5].

Burgin, V. *Formations of Fantasy*. (London: Routledge, 1989) ISBN 0-415-05099-5].

Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*. (London: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-90042-5].

Caine, B. *Victorian Feminists*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) [ISBN 0-198-20170-2].

Cameron, D. (ed.) *The Feminist Critique of Language*. (London: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-04260-7].

Christian, B. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997) [ISBN 0-807-76253-9].

Clarke, N. *Ambitious Heights*. (London: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-00051-3].

Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*. (London: Routledge, 2000) [ISBN 0-415-92484-7].

DuPlessis, R. *Writing Beyond the Ending*. (Indiana: Bloomington, 1985) [ISBN 0-253-20345-7].

Eagleton, M. (ed.) *Feminist Literary Criticism*. (Harlow: Longman, 1991) [ISBN 0-582-05014-6].

Ellmann, M. *Thinking About Women*. (London: Virago, 1979) [ISBN 0-860-68059-2].

Felski, R. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) [ISBN 0-674-06895-5].

Hall, C. *White, Male and Middle-Class*. (London: Polity, 1992) [ISBN 0-745-60937-6].

Humm, M. *Feminist Criticism*. (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) [ISBN 0-710-81048-2].

Jacobus, M. *Women Writing and Writing about Women*. (London: Croom Helm, 1979) [ISBN 0-856-64745-4].

James, J. and T.D. Sharpley-Whiting (eds) *The Black Feminist Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) [ISBN 0-631-21007-5].

Jelinek, E. *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) [ISBN 0-805-79021-7].

Kaplan, C. *Sea Changes*. (London: Verso, 1986) [ISBN 0-860-91151-9].

Kemp, S. and J. Squires (eds) *Feminisms*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) [ISBN 0-19-289270-3].

Kristeva, J. *Desire in Language*. Edited by L. Roudiez. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) [ISBN 0-631-12527-2].

McConnell-Ginet, S., R. Borker and N. Furman (eds) *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. (New York: Praeger, 1980) [ISBN 0-275-90520-9].

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2006) [ISBN 978-0141441474].

Miller, N. *Subject to Change*. (New York: Columbia, 1988) [ISBN 0-231-06660-0].

Mitchell, J. *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) [ISBN 0-140-21616-2].

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Mitchell, J. *Women's Estate*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) [ISBN 0-140-21425-9].

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Nead, L. *Myths of Sexuality*. (London: Blackwell, 1988) [ISBN 0-631-15502-3].

Newton, J. and D. Rosenfelt *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*. (New York: Methuen, 1985) [ISBN 0-416-38700-4].

Nicholson, L. (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*. (New York: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-90058-1].

- Rich, A. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. (London: Virago, 1980) [ISBN 0-860-68156-4].
- Rose, J. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. (London: Verso, 1986) [ISBN 0-860-91148-9].
- Ruthven, K. *Feminist Literary Studies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) [ISBN 0-521-26998-9].
- Scott, B. (ed.) *The Gender of Modernism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) [ISBN 0-253-35122-7].
- Showalter, E. *The Female Malady*. (London: Virago, 1985) [ISBN 0-860-68869-0].
- Spivak, G. *In Other Worlds*. (New York: Routledge, 1988) [ISBN 0-415-90002-6].
- Todd, J. *Feminist Literary History*. (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) [ISBN 0-745-60514-1].
- Todd, J. *The Sign of Angelica*. (Worcester: Billings and Son, 1989) [ISBN 0-860-68576-4].
- Treuherz, J. *Victorian Painting*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) [ISBN 0-500-20263X].
- Wisker, G. *Post-Colonial and African Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) [ISBN 0-333-72746-0].

Chapter 2

Nineteenth-century women's writing

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a model of how to read a specific example of nineteenth-century women's writing. From your study of the text *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, you should learn how to identify the thematic and stylistic issues raised by the text and how to situate it in relation to its historical period. The skills gained in this process should enable you to make an informed reading of other nineteenth-century women's writings.

Primary text

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856). This verse-novel comprises 964 lines of blank verse, and was, in the opinion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning⁵ and her contemporaries, her major poetic achievement.

For the purposes of writing about *Aurora Leigh* it is impracticable to attempt to read everything that Barrett Browning wrote, and what you select will be determined – at least in part – by how much time you can spend on one text. You will presumably already have some familiarity with Victorian writers, on which you may be able to draw for comparative purposes. *Aurora Leigh* has been selected as a core text because its length makes it suitable for the central focus of an essay. However, because of its length the amount of additional primary-text reading you do might have to be curtailed to some extent: this depends on personal judgement. Remember not to overextend yourself, as you will have secondary, critical, reading to do as well.

Additional primary-text reading

Poems

Elizabeth Barrett Browning *Selected Poems*. You should read as widely as you conveniently can in EBB's poetry, in order to place *Aurora Leigh* in the context of

⁵ Henceforth referred to as EBB.

EBB's other work. Of particular interest might be (among others):

'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' (1844)

'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1844)

'The Cry of the Children' (1844)

Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850)

'Casa Guidi Windows' (1851)

'Lord Walter's Wife' (1862)

The following collection of poems is recommended:

Minogue, Sally (introduction and notes) *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth, 2015) [ISBN: 978-184870-619-4]

Letters and Biography

These exist in various collections and editions. Use these selectively: you will probably find that EBB's letters to Robert Browning and to Mary Russell Mitford are the most useful. The following books are recommended:

Forster, Margaret (biography) *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (London: Vintage Classics, 2017) [ISBN: 978-1784872441]

Kintner, E. (ed.) *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845–1846*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969) [ISBN 0-674-52605-8]. Two volumes.

Porter, C. and H. Clarke (eds) *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Volumes 1–6*. (New York: AMS Press, 1900; reprinted 1973) [ISBN 0-404-08840-6].

Raymond, M. and M. Sullivan *Women of Letters: Selected Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Russell Mitford*. (Boston: Twayne, 1987) [ISBN 0-805-79023-3].

Recommended background: primary texts

Charlotte Brontë *Jane Eyre*. (1847) (any edition)

Charlotte Brontë *Shirley*. (1849) (any edition)

Lord Byron *Don Juan*. (1819) (any edition)

George Eliot *The Mill on The Floss*. (1860) (any edition)

Mrs Gaskell *Mary Barton*. (1848) (any edition)

Mrs Gaskell *Ruth*. (1853) (any edition)

Letitia Landon *Poetical Works*. (1850)

William Michael Rossetti (ed.) *The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans*. (1873)

Mme de Staël *Corinne*. (1807) (any edition in the original French or any English translation)

Secondary texts

'Aurora Leigh' in Woolf, V. *Collected Essays Volumes 1–4*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966–67) [ISBN X-900-66775-2].

Donaldson, S. (ed.) *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999) [ISBN 0-783-88461-3].

Donovan, J. 'The Silence is Broken' in Cameron, D. (ed.) *The Feminist Critique of Language*. (London: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-04260-7]. Not specifically on EBB, but raises issues of general importance about women and writing.

'Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet', in Gelphi, B. *Victorian Poetry* (1981) 19: 101–127.

Gilbert, S. and S. Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) [ISBN 0-300-02286-7]. Has a short section on EBB, pages 575–580.

Leighton, A. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) [ISBN 0-710-80572-1].

McSweeney, K. (ed.) *Aurora Leigh*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) [ISBN 0-192-82875-4].

Mermin, D. 'Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Newsletter* (1986) 69: 7–11.

Mermin, D. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) [ISBN 0-226-52039-0].

Moers, Ellen *Literary Women*. (London: Women's Press, 1986) [ISBN 0-704-33825-4].

Montefiore, J. *Feminism and Poetry*. (London: Pandora, 1987) [ISBN 0-863-58162-5]. Raises general questions to do with women's poetry, from the feminist-psychoanalytic perspective.

Steinmetz, V. 'Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh*', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* (1981) 9: 18–41.

Stone, M. 'Genre, Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess and Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry* (1987) 25: 101–127.

Reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

Aurora Leigh

The major problems with this poem are interrelated: because it is a novel-in-verse, it is long (as most Victorian novels were); it is also an attempt at epic, at catching the flavour, range and reality of Victorian society from the slums to the wealthiest households, from provincial dullness to elevated artistic endeavour, and it attempts to do all this through the autobiography of its narrating heroine, the poet of the title. The result is not an easy read. It is not necessary to remember every detail of what is said or done by the protagonists: it is more important to grasp the central relationships, to see what the recurring themes and images are, and to ask yourself what EBB was saying about the position of women in her society. Although it is not absolutely necessary to have read reasonably widely in Victorian fiction before reading *Aurora Leigh*, such a background makes an initial encounter with the poem much easier than it would otherwise be. Certainly any student who decided to write on this poem for an essay would need to have a reasonable knowledge of Victorian fiction; such knowledge is in fact built up via the other texts studied in the pre-twentieth-century section of this subject guide. Since this poem is so long and complex, you will need to decide carefully which aspects of the text you wish to focus on. The following suggestions offer a series of strategies with which to open up the text, but they are only a selection of several possible ways into this difficult work. Broadly speaking, they fall into two groups: strategies for placing the work in its time, and strategies for placing it in the context of modern literary criticism.

Genre

This work is a verse epic; it is autobiography (with an interesting blending of EBB into *Aurora*); it is a novel-in-verse; it contains passages of social satire and passages of discussion about poetics; it is unlike anything else written in its period; it is emphatically unlike previous poems written by women. How can it be formally categorised? The flagrant mixing of genres is a refusal to conform to pre-existing models, which has important implications and connects with much recent feminist analysis of 'female' style.

Activity

Consider this point: much feminist criticism has stressed the ‘otherness’ of women’s writing; theories of the imaginary may be important here.⁶

The Victorian novel and *Aurora Leigh*: the ‘Condition of England’ novel and the novel of moral education/spiritual growth

One strong impulse behind the writing of *Aurora Leigh* seems to be the desire to write about the ‘Condition of England’, in the way that prose writers such as Charles Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë had done. EBB was as aware as any of these writers of the social and political upheavals which the Victorian period was going through: her society was being transformed by political reform, by scientific and medical advances and by increased ease of communication with the coming of the railways: and to many commentators it appeared that rising materialism was undermining the moral fabric of society. *Aurora Leigh* reflects EBB’s awareness of all these forces, and shows also her desire to put such social change in a moral context: it is important to realise that, politically, EBB was a conservative, not a feminist, except in the broad sense of wanting women to be able to use their talents where these did not conflict with family ties. The fate of Marian Erle, drugged, raped and the mother of an illegitimate child, shows EBB’s concern with the sexual exploitation of women, but in *Aurora Leigh* she advocates a moral rather than a political solution to the exploitation of the weak by the strong. On the other hand, Romney Leigh, Aurora’s cousin and her lover – advocates a socialist solution to such ills – only to be disillusioned. The political clash of views between Aurora and Romney is one of the most important elements in the poem, and links this work clearly with the ‘Condition of England’ novels.

Activity

Think about Victorian ‘Condition of England’ novels you have read: what connections can you see between, for example, *Mary Barton* (Mrs Gaskell), or *Shirley* (Charlotte Brontë), and *Aurora Leigh*? Consider how the middle-class milieu of both the authors and the audience of these works may have conditioned the political views expressed in them. What implications did this have for the portrayal of women?

The ‘Condition of England’ novels persistently link the private life of the individual with the political life of the nation, and suggest that, ultimately, the middle class must not, and cannot, live in isolation from the working poor. In these novels the narrative focus

⁶ See, for example, Montefiore (1987) Chapter 5: 135–140, as listed above.

often centres upon a young woman's growth to maturity and marriage, since marriage is the fundamental social relationship contributing to a healthy society.

In such a scheme, a woman's moral understanding of her place in the home and in society may be of crucial importance for bridging the gap of imaginative understanding between the classes, without which Victorians feared revolution might one day come. In several novels, a woman's growth into love involves a growth in sympathetic understanding of the life of the poor and oppressed. This fictional device has strongly ideological functions: it insists on the moral significance of the middle-class woman, stresses the link between stable family life and a healthy society, and suggests that middle-class women have an important role to play in educating their menfolk towards a more humane view of the poor. It also suggests that women's main function is to be the moral core of the family and the home, to which they are anchored the more firmly, since their domestic role is seen to be crucial to the life of the nation. In *Aurora Leigh*, EBB takes up many of the typical concerns and assumptions of the 'Condition of England' novel; some of these she endorses, some she rejects, but she clearly expected her audience to be familiar with the issues raised by such novels, and to bring this familiarity to her poem.

Activity

Compare the role of the heroines in such 'Condition of England' novels as you have read with the role of Aurora in *Aurora Leigh*: what point is EBB making when she gives Romney more apparent sympathy with the poor than Aurora has? Although unusual as a self-motivated heroine who pursues her own goals in her own way, notice that Aurora justifies her pursuit of poetry in the light of social benefit, not personal self-fulfilment. What does this tell us about how EBB saw the morally responsible woman? How far does the whole poem endorse or reject Aurora's initial view that the poetically-inspired imagination may do more for society than social engineering, and what are the implications of such a view for literary women, whether poets or novelists? How far is Aurora's initial self-motivation (with which the modern reader is likely to be very sympathetic) "redefined as selfish immaturity out of which she grows" through contact with Marian and love for Romney?

Another influence on *Aurora Leigh* is the novel of personal development, particularly those novels which dealt with the inner life and moral development of a central, female, protagonist. Here EBB's models are not always English, and, although you may be unfamiliar with the life and works of the Genevan writer Mme de Staël, her novel *Corinne* was a major influence on EBB and other women writers of the nineteenth century. Another important influence was the French woman writer George Sand (Madame Dudevant), whose numerous novels with female protagonists and strong moral messages were immensely popular with English intellectuals.

Activity

Find out what you can about Mme de Staël's life and her novel *Corinne*. It is not necessary for you to read this novel (though you might wish to, as it was very influential indeed on women's writing): a good treatment of its significance will be found in Moers (1984). Also find out what you can about George Sand's life and her writings. Moers is useful here too. What parallels can you see between the actual lives and aspirations of Mme de Staël and George Sand, and the women who figure in their novels, and the lives of EBB and her fictional heroine Aurora? What do such parallels suggest to you about the difficulties women encountered, or the achievements they made, as writers? What kinds of tensions become apparent between the life of the writer and the accepted conventions of middle-class life by which most readers of such writers' works actually lived?

EBB was also influenced by English novels that took female protagonists and followed their social and moral education. Two typical 'Condition of England' novels that use this structure have been mentioned above, but one of the most influential examples for *Aurora Leigh* is one interested not in the outer life of politics but the inner life of the mind and spirit: after *Corinne*, the most important single influence on *Aurora Leigh* was Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*.

Book II of *Aurora Leigh* introduces Romney Leigh as Aurora's would-be lover, who scorns her ability as a poet since he does not believe that women can write with the poetic force of men. Women cannot generalise, cannot take in the broad sweep of life, but are limited instead to the personal perspective in all they do and think:

You weep for what you know. A red-haired child
Sick of a fever, if you touch him once,
Though but so little as with a finger-tip,
Will set you weeping; but a million sick...
You could as soon weep for the rule of three
Or compound fractions. Therefore, this same world
Uncomprehended by you, must remain
Uninfluenced by you. – Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us dotting mothers, and perfect wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!

We get no Christ from you – and verily

We shall not get a poet, in my mind.

(*AL*, II, lines 212–225)

Activity

Summarise Romney's view of women's roles in this speech. What is the significance of the hyperboles ('perfect', 'sublime') used to describe women? Does he see women's importance as limited to how they serve men, rather than 'mankind'?

Instead of struggling in vain to be something from which her sex precludes her, Romney wants Aurora to marry him and work with him for social and political reform; Aurora rejects his reductionist view of women's function, saying that his cause is not her cause. She claims her right to work in her own way:

You forget too much

That every creature, female as the male,

Stands single in responsible act and thought

As also in birth and death. Whoever says

To a loyal woman, 'Love and work with me,'

will get fair answers if the work and love,

Being good themselves, are good for her – the best

She was born for...But me your work

Is not the best for...

(*AL*, II, lines 436–451)

In the course of the poem, Romney grows to understand the primacy of the inner life of the spirit and accepts Aurora's genuine literary gifts, but only abandons his earlier belief that men can be made good by an improvement in their living conditions after a mob has fired Leigh Hall and he himself has been blinded. Aurora in turn learns that she was wrong to reject a man's love for the sake of her own spiritual pride in her vocation as a poet.

Activity

Think about connections between *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*. What similarities or dissimilarities can you see between the moral development of Jane and Aurora? Think about the connection between the use of autobiographical retrospection, the foregrounded (i.e. emphasised) subjectivity of the female consciousness,⁷ and the symbolic significance of marriage when used as a structural device to close a narrative: is it true that EBB's work is less 'feminist' or less subversive than Brontë's? What is the function of the love interest in *Aurora Leigh*: does the resolution of the poem undercut Aurora's declaration of spiritual independence quoted above? You might find yourself thinking here about ambivalence, about the threat posed to patriarchal power structures by female intellectual independence, about the role of the author in upholding or subverting authority, and so on. What significance does it have that Brontë's opposing characters, Rochester and St John Rivers, seem both to have contributed to EBB's hero Romney?

The form of *Aurora Leigh*

In its blending of social themes with a personal love story ending in the social (and structural) closure of marriage, *Aurora Leigh* in many ways conforms to the conventions of the Victorian novel; it is, however, a poem, and its length and serious moral intent make clear that it was intended to be 'epic'.

Activity

Consider this point carefully. EBB could obviously have written a novel, but preferred to write a hybrid verse-novel instead. Why? Think about the stylistic advantages and disadvantages in using blank-verse for what is effectively a novel, and think about the implications of the term 'epic'. Considering Romney's initial 'biologist' views that women cannot write great poetry, is there any more to EBB's attempt to do so than a simple desire to prove such views wrong?

Using verse at all suggests that the formal elements in the poem that bring it most close to novel writing, such as 'domestic realism', are susceptible to poetic treatment. Is this in fact the case? *Aurora Leigh* contains markedly different levels of style – compare, for example, the kind of social satire directed at Lady Howe:

...She just knows perhaps

There *are* who travel without outriders,

⁷ In other words, the emphasis placed in the novel on the theme of the subjectivity of female consciousness.

Which isn't her fault. Ah, to watch her face,
When good Lord Howe expounds his theories
Of social justice and equality!

(*AL*, V, lines 591–595)

with Aurora's passionate moral defence of art:

...Thus is Art

Self-magnified in magnifying a truth
Which, fully recognised, would change the world
And shift its morals. If a man could feel,
Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,
The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man –
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
Make offal of their daughters for its use...

(*AL*, VII, lines 855–866)

Morally, the kind of middle-class socialism displayed by the Howes connects with masculine sexual exploitation of lower-class women such as Marian Erle through a failure of imagination: people do not see what the reality of life is for others. But this connection could be made in prose.

Activity

What, if anything, is gained in *Aurora Leigh* by using verse, and do the shifts of stylistic level

in the poem work consistently to illuminate the central moral themes?

Since EBB was a poet, it is not surprising that she wrote verse rather than prose; but the question as to why she decided to write what is effectively a novel-in-verse suggests other questions: novels comprised a relatively new genre, in which women soon established a reputation.

Activity

Is EBB here using a genre in which women had an accepted status to infiltrate the genre of the epic poem, which was considered a 'high-art' form, appropriate to men? How does EBB's move into epic proportions connect with Aurora's determination to lead a life unconventional and self-determined? Do these two challenges to accepted practice suggest any other connections between subversion, on the one hand, and conformity, on the other? Does the decision to write a domestic epic connect with Aurora's final surrender to Romney and love? Consider all these points and try to assess how far *Aurora Leigh* is breaking new ground, whether stylistically or in its social views, and how far its tendency is to confirm the status quo.

Poetic antecedents

Depending upon personal interest, you might decide here to look at poetic antecedents to EBB's work: Byron's *Don Juan* is one source for EBB's contemporary social satire. The poems of Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans are central to what tradition there was of women's poetry before EBB, and we know she was influenced by them: she both acknowledged her debt to them and in her own poetry moved sharply away from their stylistic models. You will find working on Landon and Hemans difficult since complete editions of their work only exist in the original editions, and you will have to rely on the occasional inclusion of their poems in anthologies of verse to which you may have access, or on visits to copyright libraries.

Activity

This raises another question you should think about in connection with *Aurora Leigh*: that of canon formation. How have our conceptions of the volume and importance of women's writings been altered by the work of feminist critics in recent years? How typical of such changed perceptions is the recent increase in attention paid to *Aurora Leigh*? How typical is it that a literary work famous in its own time is neglected by later generations, and is this fate more likely to overtake a work written by a woman? If so, why?

‘The Woman Question’

Writers of the 1840s and 1850s were often interested in ‘The Woman Question’, as it has come to be known: debate was vigorous in novels and periodicals about the nature and function of women, particularly whether they were solely ‘intended’ by nature for a domestic role, or whether they could or should take part in the public life of the country as well underpinning its private order. Hence EBB was entering an area of established interest when she chose as her central theme for *Aurora Leigh* the position and function of women as creative individuals and as members of society. There are obviously many ways of looking at what this poem has to say about the role of women, of which we have chosen to focus on some that seem the most important. To make two obvious points first: EBB makes female subjectivity her theme, simply by organising her poem around the autobiography of a maturing woman; and she makes great claims for female intellectual ability (irrespective of what we may in fact think of EBB’s poetic ability) by deciding to write a long epic poem and by making her protagonist herself a poet and not a novelist. It is difficult to think of a more obvious literary demand for women’s writing to be accorded significance and status.

Women and sexuality

The perception of women

The problem of how women were perceived, of what was expected of them in their familial and social roles, is central to the poem. EBB’s heroine is half Italian, half English, and is thus an outsider from the beginning. The poem opens with Aurora’s own account of her childhood in Italy, her mother’s death, and her own later upbringing in England in the house of her dead father’s maiden sister. A death-portrait of her mother becomes for Aurora a focus for imaginative projection of the roles women can play, which are in turn projected on to them as Aurora projects her imaginings at the portrait, so that her mother’s face seems:

Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
...which did not therefore change,
But kept the mystic level of all forms,
hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns
Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,

A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate...

(*AL*, I, lines 149–155)

Activity

Read *Aurora Leigh*, Book I, lines 148–168 very carefully. Obviously, such imaginings cannot be ‘realistic’: how far is EBB signalling that women’s reality may lie behind and be hidden by the roles that society, and particularly men, project on to them? What connections does this passage have with ideas of women symbolising the ‘other’? How does it also represent a young girl’s difficulty in accepting herself as a woman, given that the concept ‘woman’ has been thus problematised? The fiend/angel dichotomy in the passage quoted above suggests the dehumanising patriarchal division of women into ‘pure’ women and whores, which the rest of the poem deliberately deconstructs (i.e. breaks down). Think about how the reader is led to see Marian Erle and Lady Waldemar as opposites: the mother of an illegitimate child is pure, Lady Waldemar corrupt. Think about how such contrasts make the point that women cannot be defined solely in terms of their sexual situation.

Aurora and Romney

Women cannot, however, be defined as asexual: this is as much a failure of vision as it is to define them as of purely sexual significance. When Romney proposes, he is seen by Aurora as denying her intellectual independence and as projecting on to her his own view of her nature and future, in the same arbitrary way in which Aurora’s mother’s portrait changed aspect. Part of what Romney does not see is that Aurora is not just (and mistakenly, he thinks) ‘a dauntless Muse’, but a girl who resents his apparent lack of physical passion.

Activity

What is EBB saying, through Aurora’s rejection of Romney, about male perceptions of female sexuality, and about female ambiguity over intellectual autonomy versus the desire to be sexually ‘mastered’?

By the end of the poem, Aurora and Romney are united in what is clearly a profoundly passionate physical union as well as a meeting of minds. Aurora recalls their first embrace:

Could I see his face,

I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,

Or did his arms constrain me? Were my cheeks

Hot, over flooded, with my tears or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That, I know not. There were words
That broke in utterance...melted, in the fire-
Embrace, that was convulsion...then a kiss
As long and silent as the ecstatic night,
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
Whatever could be told by work or kiss.

(*AL*, IX, lines 715–724)

If sexual union between man and woman is the pinnacle of individual happiness, as the conclusion of the poem suggests, EBB's imitation of Brontë's ambiguities over sexual power-politics is presumably highly significant. Symbolically, both Rochester and Romney are stripped of patriarchal power when they are blinded, yet the effect is to release not only female sexual energy but male sexual energy as well – albeit safely contained within a monogamous relationship – and with the man as dependent upon the woman as women were usually expected to be upon the men they married. Not only is Romney physically dependent upon Aurora, as Rochester was on Jane, but he has submitted to Aurora's world view, and rejected his earlier self as she had once rejected his cold, asexual 'St John Rivers' view of life and love.

Activity

Think about the implications of these fictions; about the legal subordination of women in marriage; about the conditions in which female sexuality might be free to flourish; think about the fate of Marian Erle. How far is EBB endorsing a covert message that the ideal remains the ideal, but that this ideal is only achievable with the total transformation of sexual relations as her society knew it? On the other hand, is her endorsement of this ideal a collusion with repressive structures, sugared over by an implausible if romantic vision of mutual dependency?

The problem of the 'fallen woman'

Marian Erle and Lady Waldemar can be seen as mirror-images that serve to deconstruct the typical Victorian dichotomy of 'the angel and the whore'. As a working-class woman, Marian is virtually invisible, given male inability to 'see' women as they really are:

Romney treats her as asexual, as a useful social example; her rapist sees nothing there but her physicality; the only person in the poem who really 'sees' Marian, at least initially, is Aurora. The description of Marian's rape is startlingly graphic.

Activity

Compare EBB's handling of sexual violence in *Aurora Leigh* with her sexual outspokenness in other poems such as 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', or 'Lord Walter's Wife'.

The problem of the 'fallen woman' provided several Victorian writers and painters with moral subject-matter, and here EBB is making a deliberate contribution to this debate. In some ways EBB's perspective is closest to that of Mrs Gaskell in her novel *Ruth*, and both writers aimed to deflect blame from the poor woman with an illegitimate child.

Activity

Note that the insistence that we see things as they are is central to EBB's view of the function of poetry, whether that means seeing Lady Waldemar as the equivalent of a prostitute or Marian as a good woman. Remember also that Lady Waldemar is (unintentionally but culpably) instrumental in Marian's rape: the implication is that women's lack of sympathy for other more vulnerable women is partly to blame for men's sexual exploitation of women, and the underlying suggestion is that poetry should foster such sympathy for others. Consider the relation between Aurora's stated aims as a poet, and what the poem in which she features actually achieves.

Social conformity: the middle-class woman

Aurora's English upbringing is described in some of EBB's most savage satire. Consider the following passage, directed at Aurora's maiden aunt:

She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all
(But that she had not lived enough to know),
Between the vicar and the country squires...
...The poor club exercised her Christian gifts
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,
Because we are of one flesh after all

And need one flannel (with a proper sense
Of difference in the quality) – and still
The book club, guarded from your modern trick
Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease,
Preserved her intellectual. She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird...
I, alas,
A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage,
And she was there to meet me.

(*AL*, I, lines 288–310)

Activity

Read Book I carefully, assessing EBB's satire.

Aurora's devastating account of the petty jealousies, barren duty and emotional negation of the life the 'perfect English lady' was bred for, keys straight into 'The Woman Question' debates of the 1840s and 1850s.

Activity

Note the deliberate limiting of Aurora's education, and the gap between what she was allowed to study and the kind of mind she clearly possessed. Compare this with the educational problems encountered by Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on The Floss*: although both were conservative in politics, neither George Eliot nor EBB were in favour of limiting the educational opportunities open to bright women. How far do both these authors blame what we would now call patriarchy for limiting women's access to education, and how far do they show women both struggling against and colluding with such a limitation? What does Aurora suggest is the reason for her aunt's belief that a superficial education is a positive advantage for a girl? Compare the aunt's lack of imaginative understanding of Aurora's needs with Lady Waldemar's lack of sympathy for Marian. Yet it is men who tend to like half-

educated women and men who rape: how far is EBB's charge that women help oppress women an internalisation of patriarchal values (i.e. women are expected to be imaginative, sympathetic and moral, and are blamed if they are not; men are expected to be vain and lustful and are only partially condemned for being so)?

Aurora rejects Romney, loses her inheritance and decides to earn her own living; having done so, she is independent and acquires a dependant and child, much as a man might marry and have a child. Female independence raises issues of male redundancy.

Activity

Think about the paradox that it is only when Aurora is financially independent, with her own quasi-familial base, that she is spiritually ready to admit her love for Romney, by which time he has been blinded. Giving due weight to EBB's convinced Christianity, which permeates her poem, think about the fact that EBB is not 'feminist'; think about multiple meanings and ambiguity: is *Aurora Leigh* both a conservative and a revolutionary work? Is the character of Aurora both conservative and revolutionary?

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and your reading of *Aurora Leigh*, you should be able to:

- identify some of the central issues about the position of women in Victorian England in relation to education, sexual exploitation, independence and marriage. This in turn should enable you to:
- recognise similar questions in nineteenth-century women's fiction and poetry and to make comparisons and distinctions⁸
- discuss women's historical situation.

Sample essay questions

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

1. 'Women writers of the early-to-mid Victorian period show an interesting ambiguity over female intellect: while they may celebrate its power, it must always serve the interests of others and never its own ends.' Discuss, with

⁸ This will be developed further in the next chapter.

particular reference to *Aurora Leigh*.

2. Discuss the presentation of the artist as social reformer in *Aurora Leigh*.
3. With close reference to *Aurora Leigh*, discuss the tension and ambiguity women poets of the Victorian period show over issues of subjectivity and objectivity.

Late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century general themes

1. Discuss the themes of female integrity and independence in at least three texts written by women in the late eighteenth-century and the nineteenth century.
2. How far does it seem to you that female sexuality is consistently seen as a financial commodity in novels of the late eighteenth-century and the nineteenth century?
3. How far and in what ways do women writers of the late eighteenth-century and the nineteenth century problematise the institution of marriage?

Chapter 3

Nineteenth-century women's writing: women's rights and women's writing

Introduction

In this chapter we will be examining the topic of 'Women's rights and women's writing' during the period 1790–1900. We will be looking at two texts which can be read in conjunction to give an understanding of how women writers expressed their views about women's role in society. Both of these texts can also be used to explore the roots of the social and political view which, in a later period, will come to be called feminism.

Choosing texts

There are a number of texts from this period in which women writers address the issues of equality and liberation for women. Texts for this study could in fact be drawn from poetry, novels, plays, essays, or a mixture of these genres. We have chosen as examples two texts from different historical periods which centrally address the issue of women's place in society. The first is an example of a polemical essay, or tract, and the second is a novel.

Primary texts

Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (first published 1792). You may use any edition, but you will find the following one helpful, as it contains notes and background information (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) [ISBN 0-486-29036-0].

Charlotte Brontë *Shirley*. (first published 1849). Again, you may use any edition, as a number are available. Highly recommended is the following edition in the Penguin Classics series which contains an excellent introduction and bibliography and extensive notes on the text: Hook, Andrew and Judith (eds) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) [ISBN 0-14-043095-4]. An annotated edition has also been published by The Clarendon Press (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979) [ISBN 0-19-812565-8] and a further useful edition published by Everyman: (London: Everyman, 1983) [ISBN 0-460-11288-0]. Note that the Penguin Popular Classics edition does not contain any introductory material or notes. See also the Oxford World Classics edition by Roengarten, H. and M. Smith (eds). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) [ISBN 0-192-83378-2].

Essential reading

You will need to read biographical material about Wollstonecraft and Brontë. The following list is not exhaustive, but will help you to structure your syllabus.

Biographies: Wollstonecraft

Flexner, Eleanor *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography*. (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972) [ISBN 0-698-10447-1]. Scholarly biography.

George, Margaret *One Woman's 'Situation': A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) [ISBN 0-252-00090-0]. Feminist political analysis.

Nixon, Edna *Mary Wollstonecraft, Her Life and Times*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971) [ISBN 0-460-03975-X].

Sunstein, Emily *A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*. (London: Heinemann, 1975) [ISBN 0-434-44909-1]. Emphasises psychological analysis of subject's life and writing.

Todd, Janet *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000) [ISBN 0-297-84299-4].

Tomalin, Clare *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. (London: Penguin, 1992) revised edition [ISBN 0-140-16761-7]. A thorough account of Wollstonecraft's life, much lauded for its writing.

Biographies: Brontë

Fraser, Rebecca *Charlotte Brontë*. (London: Methuen, 1988) [ISBN 0-413-57010-X].

Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. (First published 1857.) A number of editions available, including a Penguin Classic edition with notes (London: Penguin, 1997) [ISBN 0-140-43493-3].

Gérin, Winifred *Charlotte Brontë, The Evolution of Genius*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) [ISBN 0-198-81152-7].

Gordon, Lyndall *Charlotte Brontë, A Passionate Life*. (New York: Norton, 1996) [ISBN 0-393-31448-0]. Biography which credits its subject with proactive involvement in her career.

History of the women's movement in Britain

You will also need to read some source material to familiarise yourself with events related to women's rights in this historical period.

Rowbotham, Sheila *Hidden From History, 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*. (London: Pluto Press, 1977) third edition [ISBN 0-904-38356-3]. Comprehensive, with short references to Wollstonecraft and Brontë.

Strachey, Ray *The Cause, A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*. (First published 1928.) (London: Virago, 1978) [ISBN 0-860-68042-8]. A discursive but thorough overview.

Lastly, you will have to consult some literary critical material regarding individual works. Some useful examples are listed here.

Critical studies of the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft

Ferguson, Moira and Janet Todd *Mary Wollstonecraft*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) [ISBN 0-805-76867X].

Kelly, Gary *Revolutionary Feminism, The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*. (London: Macmillan, 1992) [ISBN 0-333-51102-6].

Sapiro, Virginia *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) [ISBN 0-226-73490-0].

Critical studies of Charlotte Brontë's writing that discuss *Shirley*

Azim, Firdous *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*. (London: Routledge, 1992) [ISBN 0-415-09569-7].

Barker, Juliet *The Brontës*. (London: Phoenix, 1995) [ISBN 1-857-99967-3].

Boumelha, Penny *Charlotte Brontë*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) [ISBN 0-253-30107-6].

Craik, W.A. *The Brontë Novels*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1968) [ISBN 0-416-11280-3].

Dessner, Lawrence Jay *The Homely Web of Truth: A Study of Charlotte Brontë's Novels*. (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975).

Kucich, John *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California

Press, 1987) [ISBN 0-520-05980-8].

Pinion, F.B. *A Brontë Companion, Literary Assessment, Background, and Reference*. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1975) [ISBN 0-333-14426-0].

Taylor, Irene *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) [ISBN 0-231-07155-8].

Further reading

This section lists material which will help you to study this topic in more depth, and allow you to research more specific sub-topics.

Additional historical material

Browne, Alice *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind*. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987) [ISBN 0-7108-0967-0]. Concludes with Wollstonecraft.

Rogers, Katharine M. *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England*. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) [ISBN 0-7108-0427-X]. Examines the political and legal situations; also literature, radicalism and feminist writing.

Wollstonecraft

Diedrick, James 'Jane Eyre and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' in Hoeveler, Diane Long and Beth Lau (eds) *Approaches to Teaching Brontë's Jane Eyre*. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1993) [ISBN 0-8735-2705-4].

Field, Corinne 'Breast-Feeding, Sexual Pleasure, and Women's Rights: Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication', *Critical Matrix: The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender, and Culture* (1995) 9(2): 25–44.

Woolf, Virginia *The Common Reader*. (first published 1932). See chapter entitled 'Mary Wollstonecraft'. More recent editions exist; see *The Common Reader*. Second Series (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) [ISBN 0-7012-0264-5].

Brontë

Argyle, Gisela 'Gender and Generic Mixing in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* (1995) 35(4): 741–756.

Barker, Juliet *The Brontës*. (London: Phoenix, 1997) [ISBN 1-85799-967-3]. An extensive biographical portrait of the entire Brontë family.

Beer, Patricia *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane*

Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974) [ISBN 0-333-15067-8].

Brontë, Charlotte *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Volume 1: 1829–1847. Edited by Margaret Smith. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995) [ISBN 0-19-818597-9].

Dupras, Joseph A. 'Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Interpretive Engendering', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* (1988) 24(3): 301–316.

Ewbank, Inga-Stina *Their Proper Sphere: A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists*. (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1966)

Reading Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

This polemical text was Mary Wollstonecraft's attempt to decry the injustices she perceived and had experienced against women in society. Any of the biographies about her will aid your understanding of her background, and how, after intense self-education, she was able to tackle authorship of a complex political science tract. While it is useful to know Mary Wollstonecraft's background, it is also possible to analyse the text as a piece of social critique, and as a foundation for later works of commentary and of literature which analyse a similar, gender-based, agenda.

As you proceed it will be worth considering carefully what is meant by the term 'rights'. Today we discuss the concept of equal rights quite comfortably, but this ease can overlook the complicated issues underscoring the position of women and men as social groups in relation to each other. In the context of the historical and social period examined in this topic study, one confronts women's lack of material rights and of physical autonomy. Even though these areas suggest the conditions of oppression, you may find it useful as well to consider what it is that constitutes a human right.

Critics have observed that equality, for example, is a stated goal of all democratic societies, yet few of these societies demonstrate complete equality of rights. As you explore this subject, consider the following questions.

What is meant by:

- women's rights?
- rights of citizenship?

- equal rights with men?
- rights based on specific gender issues?

Does the granting of equal rights automatically lead to individual emancipation?

Activity

Mary Wollstonecraft's liberal view of rights held that all of society suffered by the enforced refinement of women into weak and ineffectual beings. By 'rights' then, does Wollstonecraft imply a revision of both female and male roles in society? Within the context of the pursuit of the rights of women, what is the difference between a change *within* society and a change *of* society?

Women's lack of autonomy in Wollstonecraft's time

The position of women in society at the time Mary Wollstonecraft was writing was one of general disempowerment, a condition which was embedded in social structures and resistant to legal change. Significant alterations to women's status in law did not occur until the late 1850s, with the passage of two important pieces of legislation:

- The Married Woman's Property Act (1857), which allowed property rights and the power to make a will to be extended to married women.
- The Marriage and Divorce Bill (1857), which gave grounds for legal divorce other than the previously required Act of Parliament (which had only ever been applied twice).

The latter Bill gave specific grounds for women to initiate divorce, and allowed divorced people to remarry. Thus, at the time Wollstonecraft was writing, women had no legal rights. As only men had access to education, women were largely under- educated or totally uneducated. Women were frequently poor, in that they rarely owned material possessions in law: single women came under the rule of male authority, such as that of a father or a brother, while married women had no control over any family property and their possessions automatically became their husbands'. There was no agency which protected women from the abuses of violent spouses; indeed, the safety and security of women in society depended wholly upon the whims of men.

Ray Strachey (1928) supports the view that the women's movement began with the publication of *A Vindication*, because it provided a thorough attack on all of the areas of female disempowerment in society.

Activity

At this stage in your reading, you should familiarise yourself with the legal standing of women in this period, referring to sources on the history of the women's movement in Great Britain.

Mary Wollstonecraft deplored particularly the lack of humanity in the *de facto* dominance of men over women. The inequalities in law, education and economics took in no consideration of any woman's talents, abilities or virtues, which the highly intelligent Wollstonecraft found to be a humiliating state of affairs.

Activity

See in particular Chapter IV, in which Wollstonecraft explores the social situation of women denied access to education or to any means of developing reason.

At the time of writing *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft thought little of the conventional and socially-approved institution of marriage, wherein a woman became male property, and, in marrying, traded her sexuality and reproductive potential for economic stability. One of her biographers, Nixon (1971), notes that her view of marriage was significantly influenced by her own experience of observing the injustices and states of servitude inflicted on her mother and sister, Eliza; both had what would today be termed abusive relationships and suffered at the hands of their respective husbands. As a child, Mary had tried to intervene to protect her mother from her father's violent attacks. As a young woman, Mary had aided Eliza's dramatic escape from her marriage and her subsequent recovery of her child. Her first-hand experience had taught her that the lack of legal protection for women left them vulnerable.

Other women's writing on equal rights

Wollstonecraft was not the first to address these issues. Other writers had touched on the subjects and highlighted problematic areas. A French woman writer, Olympe de Gouge, had published the *Declaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* ('Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen') in 1791, in which she demanded equal social and political rights for the sexes. De Gouge's particular writing strategy was to take an earlier document about the rights of men and to alter each use of 'man' to 'woman', thus focusing attention on the need for shared equalities in law and society. Although we don't know if Mary Wollstonecraft read Olympe de Gouge's tract, she was in France during a number of years of the French Revolution (arriving in 1792), and was influenced by the same events of social change which made it possible to imagine far-reaching alterations to male-female relationships. Even earlier (and preceding the period being

studied in this chapter of the subject guide), there is the example of the English writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who, in 1739, published an argument calling for a more equal footing in society between women and men, based on access to education for women. The work was called ‘Woman Not Inferior to Man or, A Short and Modest Vindication of the natural Right of the Fair-Sex to Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem with the Men’. Mary Wollstonecraft would later disagree with Montagu’s grounding of her argument in the view that women held a moral superiority over men.

The fact that Wollstonecraft was not the first to address these topics also raises the perplexing issue of how women in Wollstonecraft’s time learned about earlier writing in any subject. With no organised systems or institutions of women’s education, the reading of an autodidact (or self-educator) was bound to be patchy. A well-read mentor was likely to be a man, who may not himself have been familiar with extant women’s writing. Wollstonecraft was lucky to have had both male and female mentors who were able to direct her to material which met her interests in social issues. Biographies of her will in turn direct you to information on who her intellectual mentors were.

Activity

You may wish also to read some of the texts which influenced Wollstonecraft, such as John Locke’s *Reflections on Education* (1693), or Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s romance of a boy’s education, *Emile* (1762).

Reading *A Vindication as a feminist text*

Mary Wollstonecraft may not have been the first woman to write about these subjects, but later scholars of women’s writing have agreed that she was a central figure in the history of feminist theory and writing. Scholars such as Sapiro (1992) have argued for a reading of Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist theorist, emphasising Wollstonecraft’s life and work as part of a long history of gender-based political theory which leads up to contemporary feminism.

Activity

What ‘contemporary themes’ do you note in Wollstonecraft’s polemic?

However, these same scholars have recognised the problem of tagging Wollstonecraft as a ‘feminist’ in that, at the time she wrote, no concept of ‘feminism’ existed. Sapiro has pointed out that the term ‘was coined in the late nineteenth century [but is] best understood as a product of the early twentieth century.’⁹ Nonetheless, Sapiro goes on to

⁹ Sapiro (1992) 258.

outline the elements of Mary Wollstonecraft's work which establish a fundamental link with later women's writing. Wollstonecraft, she notes particularly:

despised the inequality between women and men she saw, defining their relationship as tyrannical and oppressive...Much of her work...was devoted to demonstrating her belief that any inequality between women and men was socially constructed, a result of education broadly construed. Wollstonecraft certainly demanded profound changes in society both at the level of law and of social behaviour.¹⁰

Activity

It is worth noting the language Wollstonecraft uses to depict the extreme defects she diagnoses in society. See her description of total female dependency making women 'cunning, mean, and selfish' (Chapter IX). How does mutual respect between the sexes lead to the better society and the concept of 'citizenship' with which this chapter concludes?

This interpretation places Wollstonecraft at the start of feminism as a movement for social change, which calls for changes in the way society is organised and defines its members. Indeed, although Mary Wollstonecraft does not delineate or project the path of organised collective struggle, Sapiro states that Wollstonecraft 'implied' that this path would have to be taken.¹¹ The critic Gary Kelly (1992) goes further, linking Wollstonecraft with the revolutionary politics being mooted as both theory and practice in the 1790s. Kelly interprets Wollstonecraft's published writings as calls for feminist issues to be included in the late eighteenth-century movement for social change which encompassed the French Revolution, political unrest in Scotland and Ireland, religious Dissenters and the early labour movement. Kelly bases this reading on Wollstonecraft's depiction of the debased situation of women to highlight the weaknesses of the entire social system. In *A Vindication*, 'the condition of women represents the values of an entire society and culture'.¹² In Kelly's reading, Wollstonecraft is an initiator of social change.

Activity

To what extent do you agree that Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is a call to action? What

¹⁰ Sapiro (1992) 259. Sapiro's use of the term 'socially constructed' refers to the argument that gender differences are not innate, but are rather the product of external social influences such as education, upbringing and environment.

¹¹ Sapiro (1992) 259.

¹² Kelly (1992) 95.

is the balance achieved between theory and practice?

Mary Wollstonecraft's critique presents a re-evaluation of a number of literary sources, including James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) and Dr John Gregory's *Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), both of which were extremely popular upon publication; Rousseau's *Emile* and Madame de Staël's writing on Rousseau. She attacks in all of these works the way in which they set and maintain low expectations for female ability and achievement. Rousseau is targeted particularly for his assumption of female weakness as innate rather than conditioned. She also discusses prevalent social opinions. You will note Wollstonecraft's strategy of challenging the reader's own attitudes. How can women, she asks, habitually kept in ignorance of many issues, particularly sexual issues, ever function as enlightened beings? Wollstonecraft here queries the assumed overlap of ignorance and innocence.

Activity

What are some of the additional circumstances which, according to Wollstonecraft, contribute to the 'weaknesses' of women?

Wollstonecraft's analysis teases out the contributory causes which belie the assumption that women are simply the weaker sex. In Book IV, for example, she explains that, although denied the opportunity to develop '[t]he power of generalising ideas', it has been widely assumed that women are simply not capable of this 'power'. Wollstonecraft argues that '[e]verything conspires' to prevent women from cultivating this and many other intellectual abilities. It is worth noting the anger with which *A Vindication* concludes, when Wollstonecraft abandons her measured and reasoned tone:

Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man, for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty. (Chapter 13)

If women are not to be emancipated, then Wollstonecraft counsels that women and children might as well be disciplined as animals; but where there are no rights, she warns, neither are there any responsibilities (Chapter 13).

Reading Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*

Charlotte Brontë's novel investigates the role of women against the broad backdrop of wide social and economic change. In setting the scene she presents what may be described as a civic, political theme – that of the impact of industry on a rural, agricultural community. This thematic focus is notably different from Brontë's other works and from the major trend in Victorian women's writing of presenting a study of

personal or purely domestic issues. In *Shirley* Brontë explores broad social problems, using the setting of a slightly earlier historical period to highlight the impact of specific changes in industry and in agriculture. This scenario then serves as a framework for the central investigation of the question of women's place in society, a central focus which is presented in the overlapping stories of Shirley and Caroline. In the case of each of these central female characters she explores the question of how an individual woman finds a meaningful role in life and in her community.

The central female characters

Caroline wrestles with the problem of what to do with her life. Shirley, though from a position of social and economic advantage, also has to combine conflicting elements and desires in her life and ambitions. Inescapably, the focus on the condition of women reflects back on to the larger picture of the universal need for happiness and adequate social welfare. The novel aims to illustrate how individual well-being affects a wider social balance.

Activity

How many other characters' lives are bound up in the 'problem' of Shirley's and Caroline's future?

Class is undeniably bound up, in the novel and in the society Brontë is analysing, in the problems of imbalances between the genders. But it is also undeniable that Brontë has chosen to filter the central social and economic problems depicted in the novel through the lives of particular women.

Although the novel is named after a single character (who does not appear until the eleventh chapter), Brontë has given us a pair of central female characters, and the novel fixes on the entwined destinies of both in order to create a complete sketch of women's condition in society.

Activity

Note the focus on a range of women's possible roles, from Shirley's governess to the 'old maids' Caroline visits, and with whom she renews and reassesses her friendship, in the chapter 'Old Maids'.

Taylor (1990) has noted that:

Charlotte [Brontë]'s system of double heroines allowed her to explore a double range of woman's needs and potential, divided along the lines of her own long-standing dilemma of domestic as opposed to intellectual success. (Page 181)

It is Shirley who is the genuinely different literary heroine. According to Taylor, through the character of Shirley:

we are asked to imagine what it might be like if a young woman of wealth and spirit were to experience the social freedom regularly accorded to young men of her status.¹³

While Shirley has the dignity and propriety to fit into her society, she is nonetheless a rebel and sexual revolutionary:

Shirley is allowed to cavort on the very borders of female respectability.¹⁴

Activity

Brontë demonstrates the masculinity of Shirley in various ways: list the areas in which Shirley functions as the equal of a man.

The situation of Shirley also echoes a theme in the life of Mar Wollstonecraft: the loneliness of the exceptional female, the isolation of genius, not to mention the problem of how the female genius and social nonconformist finds a true life partner.

Another way of looking at this issue is Winifred Gérin's construction of it as the problem of the integration of the intelligent woman into society.

Activity

Consider what Brontë is saying about the role of women's education in integrating women into the spheres of commerce, politics, society, and so on. Note that illustrations are given of the education of both central female characters.

If you wish to investigate *Shirley* in the context of Brontë's own life, it is interesting to note that, at the time of its publication, when it received a majority of positive reviews (November 1849), Charlotte Brontë was still responding to correspondence by presenting herself as the male writer, 'Currer Bell'. Indeed, when sending gift copies to her fellow successful women writers, Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell, she maintained her gender subterfuge and signed herself as a man.

Brontë's examination of women's roles

¹³ Taylor (1990) 182.

¹⁴ Taylor (1992) 182.

It is interesting that Caroline first assesses her own possible roles in society as a woman in the same chapter in which she reassesses the true value of the marginalised, ridiculed 'Old Maids' (Chapter 10). This serves as a prelude to the introduction of Shirley, the sharp firebrand female with a man's name, who startlingly or even shockingly refers to herself at times as a 'gentleman'. 'Fieldhead' (Chapter 11) is a crisis point for Caroline, in which she struggles to imagine a different and positive role for herself, after recognising Robert's rejection, and in the face of her uncle's ridicule that the female sex are 'fantastical and whimsical!'. He dismissively offers her 'two guineas to buy a new frock' (Chapter 11).

Activity

Compare, then, the difference in the freedoms of Caroline and Shirley. What does their friendship represent? And what does Shirley especially appreciate about Caroline?

It is worth noting the nature of Shirley's identification of herself as a man, and of other characters who also allocate to her a specifically male role. In 'Further Communications of Business' (Chapter 13) Shirley refers to herself as 'Captain Keeldar'. Later, others engage in conversation in which they too pick up on this characterisation:

'Now,' interrupted Shirley, 'you want me as a gentleman – the first gentleman in Briarfield, in short, to supply your place, be master of the Rectory, and guardian of your niece and maids while you are away.'

'Exactly, Captain; I thought the post would suit you.' ('A Summer Night' Chapter 19).

Here Caroline's uncle, by joining in with Shirley's use of masculine titles, conspires with Shirley in her gender change through language. This is one example of the lending of a level of public approbation to Shirley's transgression of the confines of her own gender.

Activity

Consider also how Brontë uses the symbols of this break with gender convention: the brace of pistols loaned by Rev. Helstone (Chapter 19); her choice of the huge mastiff, Tartar, as a pet, and Donne's assertion that all ladies prefer small lap-dogs (in Chapter 15, 'Mr. Donne's Exodus'); her reading of the 'men's' sections of the newspapers.

Having met and bonded as like-minded friends, Shirley and Caroline provide in their dialogue a debate on pertinent gender issues. But while Brontë sometimes has her heroines confess to conventional female aims, she also allots to them some fairly masculine undertakings.

Activity

To illustrate this area further, consider Shirley's surprising answer to Caroline's query as to whether women are 'men's equals' ('Shirley and Caroline' Chapter 12). Then compare it with her actions during the attack on the Mill ('A Summer Night' Chapter 19), or her debate with Joe Scott, when she asserts: 'I read the leading articles, Joe, and the foreign intelligence, and I look over the market prices; in short, I read just what gentlemen read' ('Lower Persons Introduced' Chapter 18).

Brontë's conviction of an ideal relationship of the sexes and of marriage as a model of mutual partnership is perhaps best borne out in Shirley's query to Scott: 'Joe, do you seriously think all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls?' ('Lower Persons Introduced' Chapter 18).

Reading Brontë through Wollstonecraft

Shirley, though exceptional in its depiction of female ability, courage and intellect, does not challenge the convention of romance in which a happy marriage concludes the tale. In its double heroines, it doubly emphasises the conventions of the genre, concluding with a double wedding celebration after all the obstacles have been removed from the lovers' unions. It does, though, present the problems of the able female in a society which ignores or disbelieves such ability.

Activity

You might want to analyse closely the story of Eve as 'The First Bluestocking' (Chapter 27) for its exposition of the agonised situation of the isolated female.

Wollstonecraft herself, one notes, sought to get away from her own isolation, opting for marriage; neither writer appears to be proposing the rejection of relationships with men, but both are challenging the problematic attitudes which can underlie such relationships.

The plot of *Shirley* demonstrates some of Wollstonecraft's ideas. It presents clearly the difficulty for Caroline when her uncle presumptuously discontinues her lessons with Hortense Moore. In addition to the way in which this episode shows the control of men over women in these matters, Caroline had appreciated the value of education for herself, rather than viewing it as purely a preparation for wifedom. Shirley, prior to her engagement, had appeared to adhere to Wollstonecraft's belief that independence and self-resilience matter over all else, and that dependence is to be avoided; she embodied the idea Wollstonecraft elaborates in *A Vindication* that women's 'first duty is to themselves as rational creatures' (*A Vindication*, Chapter IX). Shirley, in fact, appeared to be singularly and estimably placed to enact these Wollstonecraftian principles. It is

her commitment to such principles that spurs her actions to defend the Rectory and the Mill, and her example as such that finally prompts similar courage and daring from Caroline.

Activity

In what ways does Shirley prove or disprove Wollstonecraft's statement that, despite developing 'courage or fortitude' (*A Vindication*, Introduction), women will still require the physical strength of men?

The novel does, then, bear out some of Wollstonecraft's notions about female capabilities. Nonetheless, it is problematic in that it then veers off this course in the way it resolves the two romances. Shirley, despite her independent tendencies, reverts to a very traditional attitude about marriage in which she articulates a wish for a dominant partner, although there is some indication that she seeks a partnership with Louis in the running of the estate. Brontë, nonetheless, writes of Shirley's marriage in military language: 'conquered by love', 'bound by a vow', 'vanquished and restricted', 'her captor alone could cheer her', 'the lost privilege of liberty' ('The Winding-Up', Chapter 37). Shirley is in fact aware of the inevitability of her loss of influence as she is subsumed into marriage. Robert predicts that Louis, once he becomes 'master of Fieldhead', will be made district magistrate, as the respect and position previously accorded Shirley will transfer to him. It is also an example of a codified position in the social hierarchy from which Shirley is barred by her sex. Caroline remains gentle and feminine, and learns to recognise her self-worth as such. She wins her man when, after a serious injury, he reconsiders his life and recognises her value to him. He promises, in fact, to draw on her opinions and judgements in distributing future wealth and 'doing good' in the community ('The Winding-Up', Chapter 37).

It is enticing to imagine a more equitable, Wollstonecraftian conclusion to *Shirley*, considering all the promise it demonstrates in establishing its main characters. The final picture is more one of the economic development of the whole community rather than attention to changed gender roles, although certain gender conventions have certainly been challenged.

Activity

To what degree has the convention of the docile female been challenged? What comment has the novel made on gentle women and gentle men? What role does self-awareness play in each character's achievement of happiness? And does Brontë's novel demonstrate that women's

Learning outcomes

By the conclusion of this chapter and the relevant reading, you should be able to:

- discuss the legislative conditions affecting women's rights in this historical period
- discuss examples of both polemical and literary works by women which respond to women's lack of autonomy and authority in society
- describe the literary impact of this lack of freedom and influence or, in other words, of how the lack of authority relates to problems and specific issues of female authorship.

Sample essay questions on 'women's rights and women's writing'

1. 'Genteel women are literally speaking, slaves to their bodies and glory in their subjection' (Mary Wollstonecraft). Discuss this concept of a woman's social role as slavery, drawing on two or more literary sources from this period.
2. '...I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with eager, and serious solicitude, to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself, had she only moved a pace or two' (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, Chapter IV). Examine two or three areas of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and discuss her points in relation to contemporary feminist concerns.
3. Discuss *Shirley* as a novel about the economic position of women, drawing on Wollstonecraft's writings to support your discussion. (You may wish to include material about the changes which affected women's rights in the period between the 1790s and 1849.)
4. Explore the attitudes of at least two women authors (during the period 1790–1900) towards women's potential to contribute to society.

Suggestions for further study

1. You could add to your study an exploration of Mary Wollstonecraft's novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, reading with an eye to how Wollstonecraft treats her own theories in fiction. (It was first published posthumously in 1798.)
2. You could study another pairing of polemic and novel about women's roles in society

¹⁵ See Wollstonecraft, Chapter 1.

from a later era. Suffrage playwright Cicely Hamilton wrote the polemic, *Marriage as a Trade* (1910), while her close friend Elizabeth Robins authored the novel, *The Convert* (1910). Both examine women's social, political and economic options in the period of the active campaign for women's voting rights, and provide an interesting confluence of women's literary and political writing.

Chapter 4

Twentieth-century women's writing

Introduction

This chapter begins the study of twentieth-century women's writing through a discussion of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*. It asks you to consider the category of 'woman' in relation to other categories such as class, national identity and ethnicity. We then move on to a study of the author Jean Rhys, focusing particularly on her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its relationship with the nineteenth-century novel *Jane Eyre*. In this chapter you will also be asked to consider different twentieth-century theories of reading.

Choosing texts

There are a large number of twentieth-century texts by women concerned with the question of 'woman' and the themes which we will consider in this section. You should make a choice from English language texts – poetry, fiction, drama – from the early through to the late twentieth-century, by writers from different parts of the world. In this subject guide we have chosen to start with an essay by Virginia Woolf written in the 1920s, and then to focus on the novels and short stories of Jean Rhys, who came from the Caribbean.

Primary texts

Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1929, reprinted with an introduction by Hermione Lee, 1991) [ISBN 0-701-20947-X]. You may also use the following edition in the *Oxford World Classics Series: A Room of One's own* [and] *Three Guineas*, edited with an introduction by Morag Shiach. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) [ISBN 0-192-818-392].

Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea*. (any edition)

Essential reading

Critical and contextual reading on Virginia Woolf

Bowlby, Rachel, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) [ISBN 0-7486-0820-6].

Lee, Hermione *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996) [ISBN 0-7011-6507-3].

Marcus, Jane (ed.) *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. (London: Macmillan, 1985) [ISBN 0-333-38552-7].

Marcus, Jane *Virginia Woolf and the Language of Patriarchy*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987) [ISBN 0-253-20410-0].

Marcus, Laura *Virginia Woolf*. (Plymouth: Northcote House in association with The British Council, 1997) [ISBN 0-746-30726-8].

Ferrar, Daniel *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*. Translated by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby. (London: Routledge, 1990) [ISBN 0-415-03195-8].

Raitt, Suzanne *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993) [ISBN 0-198-12277-2].

Squire, Susan Merrill *Virginia Woolf and London, The Sexual Politics of the City*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) [ISBN 0-8078-1637-X].

Critical and contextual reading on Jean Rhys

Angier, Carole *Jean Rhys, Life and Work*. (London: Deutsch, 1990) [ISBN 0-233-98597-2].

Bernstein, Marcelle 'The Inscrutable Miss Jean Rhys', *The Observer* (1 June 1969).
Boumelha, Penny 'And What Do the Women Do? *Jane Eyre*, Jamaica and the Gentleman's House', *Southern Review* (1988) 21: 111–122.

Chodorow, Nancy *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978) [ISBN 0-520-03133-4].

Culler, Jonathan 'Reading as a Woman' in *On Deconstruction*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) [ISBN 071-009502-3 (hardback); [0-415-04555-X] (paperback)].

Eliot, T.S. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1914) in Kermodé, Frank (ed.)

Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) [ISBN 0-571-10565-3].

Emery, Mary Lou *Jean Rhys at 'World's End': Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) [ISBN 0-292-71126-3].

Fetterley, Judith *The Resisting Reader.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) [ISBN 0-253-31078-4 (paperback)].

Gregg, Veronica Marie 'Jean Rhys and Modernism: A Different Voice', *The Jean Rhys Review* (1987) 1(2): 30–46.

Harrison, Nancy R. *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) [ISBN 0-807-81790-2].

Hearne, John 'The Wide Sargasso Sea: A West Indian Reflection', *The Cornhill Magazine* (1974) 1080: 323–33.

Hirsch, M. *The Mother/Daughter Plot.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) [ISBN 0-253-32748-2].

Jacobus, Mary *Reading Women.* (London: Methuen, 1987) [ISBN 0-416-92450-6].
Kloepfer,

Deborah Kelly *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) [ISBN 0-8014-2306-6].

Maurel, Sylvie *Jean Rhys.* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998) [ISBN 0-333-68394-3].

Mitchell, J. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) [ISBN 0-140-21770-3].

O'Connor, Teresa F. *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels.* (New York: New York University Press, 1986) [ISBN 0-814-76164-X].

Plante, David *Difficult Women: A Memoir of Three.* (London: Gollancz, 1983) [ISBN 0-575-03189-1].

Scott, Bonnie K. (ed.) *The Gender of Modernism.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) [ISBN 0-253-20584-0].

Showalter, E. *A Literature of Their Own.* (London: Virago, 1982) [ISBN 0-860-68285-4].

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' in 'Race', *Writing and Difference, Critical Enquiry* (1985) 12(1): 243–61.

Thorpe, Michael “‘The Other Side’: *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*’, *Ariel* (1977) 8: 111–127.

Vreeland, Elizabeth ‘Jean Rhys: The Art of Fiction LXIV’, *The Paris Review* (1979) 21: 218–237.

Webb, Ruth ‘Swimming the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: The Manuscripts of Jean Rhys’ Novel’, *The British Library Journal* (1988) 14(2): 165–177.

The context in which Woolf and Rhys wrote

Bowlby, Rachel *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1992) [ISBN 0-415-08640-X].

Carr, Helen *Jean Rhys*. (Plymouth U.K.: Northcote House, 1996) [ISBN 0-7463-0717-9].

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979) [ISBN 0-300-02286-7].

Hill Rigney, Barbara *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) [ISBN 0-299-07710-1].

Hite, Molly *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies in the Contemporary Feminist Narrative*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) [ISBN 0-801-48017-5].

Hooks, B. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. (London: Pluto, 1982) [ISBN 0-861-04379-0].

Moi, T. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. (London: Methuen, 1985) [ISBN 0-416-35360-6].

Ragatz, Lowell Joseph *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1963) [ISBN 0-374-967075].

Ramchand, Kenneth *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. (London: Heinemann, 1983) second edition [ISBN 0-435-98665-1].

Spelman, E. *Inessential Woman*. (Boston: Beacon Books, 1988) [ISBN 0-704-34228-6].

Further reading

This section lists material which will help you to make this topic study more in-depth,

and allow you to research more specific sub-topics.

Virginia Woolf

You may wish to read all or some of Virginia Woolf's other work. The following is a list of important titles published to date. Those marked with an asterisk are particularly relevant to the issues raised in the discussion of *A Room of One's Own*.

The Voyage Out. (1915)
Night and Day. (1919)
Jacob's Room. (1922)
The Common Reader. (essays) (1925)
**Mrs Dalloway*. (1925)
**To the Lighthouse*. (1927)
Orlando: A Biography. (1928)
**A Room of One's Own*. (1929)
The Waves. (1931)
The Common Reader: Second Series. (essays) (1932)
The Years. (1937)
**Three Guineas*. (1938)
Between the Acts. (1941)
Collected Essays. (1966–67) four volumes
The Diary of Virginia Woolf. (1977–84) five volumes.

Jean Rhys

You may wish to read all or some of Jean Rhys's other novels and some of the short stories. The following is a list of important titles published to date. Those marked with an asterisk are particularly relevant to the issues raised in the discussion of the core text *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The Left Bank. (1927) (short stories)
Postures. (1928) (entitled *Quartet* in the American edition)

**Voyage in the Dark*. (1934)

**Good Morning, Midnight*. (1939)

Wide Sargasso Sea. (1966)

Tigers Are Better Looking. (1968)

Sleep It Off, Lady. (1976)

Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography. (London: Deutsch, 1981) [ISBN 0-23397-213-7].

Jean Rhys: Letters 1931–1966. Edited by Melly, Diana and Francis Wyndham (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) [ISBN 0-233-97567-5].

The Collected Short Stories. (New York, 1987)

Reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

One way of starting your study of twentieth-century writing by women is to look at Virginia Woolf's celebrated essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which begins in the following way:

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs Gaskell and one would have done. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean woman and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably linked together.

Activity

Note Woolf's three ways of considering the question of women and fiction:

- Read Book I carefully, assessing EBB's satire. women and what they are like
- women and the fiction that they write
- women and the fiction that is written about them.

How do these three elements link together?

The three meanings, as Woolf says, tend to be inextricably linked together. Any discussion of what women write or of the fiction written about them, tends to return to the question of what they are like, but this issue (of what women are like) cannot be isolated from the history of representations or images of women produced in literature, art and other kinds of discourse. This is an argument with which you may be familiar from your nineteenth-century reading where J.S. Mill makes a similar point, in a somewhat different way, in his 1869 essay 'On the Subjection of Women':

...it cannot now be known how much the existing mental differences between men and women is natural and how much artificial; whether there are any natural differences at all; or, supposing all artificial causes of differences to be withdrawn, what natural character would be revealed. (*Three Essays*, 507)

Mill's essay arose from mid-nineteenth century debates on sexual equality and difference, but it became an important reference point and inspiration for later generations of women and feminists campaigning for the vote. Woolf's essay was produced at another key moment in women's history in England. It is based on two lectures she gave to women students at Newnham and Girton Colleges at the University of Cambridge in October 1928 which were then expanded and published in the following year under the title *A Room of One's Own*. This short essay has been used as a springboard for many feminist critics and thinkers and the questions it raises are relevant both to later women's writing and to the critical and theoretical debates that have developed around women's writing.¹⁶

Activity

Read *A Room of One's Own* and make a summary of the points raised in each of the six chapters. You might, for instance, consider the following questions:

1. What issues does the story of the imaginary figure of 'Judith Shakespeare' raise about education, financial independence and women's sexuality?
2. Would you agree with the comments on Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre*?
3. How convincing is the androgyny argument advanced in the conclusion?
4. What do you understand by the comment in Chapter 6 that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers' (page 96)?
5. What evidence is there of a special relationship between women writers? Can you think of specific examples?

¹⁶ See, for example, the Introduction to Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*, (1985).

6. What might be the limitations of the essay for a reader in the early twenty-first century?

Woolf's argument that 'Intellectual freedom depends on material things'¹⁷ stresses the fact that writing is not a disembodied activity, that the hand that holds the pen is attached to a body which will be male or female, healthy or sick, well or poorly fed and housed. This point is relevant to all writers, but it may be particularly important in considering women writers.

Activity

Find out as much as you can about the intellectual and material conditions of the writers you have chosen to study. How did they earn their living: from writing or some other activity? Did they have a private income? What were their living conditions like? Did they have children? Domestic help? A room of their own? Access to education or to libraries, and so on?

In some critical approaches, this kind of question would be considered irrelevant, but Woolf argues that, in reading women's writing, it is important and necessary to understand the connections between the life and the writing.

Activity

How far would you agree with the above statement? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to women's writing? Is there a danger of diverting attention from the writing to the woman, of reading the female text as autobiographical – something which the male critic has been accused of doing in the past?

The use of biographical material is an issue which arises particularly sharply when, for example, reading the poetry of Sylvia Plath. You may wish to look at Jacqueline Rose's discussion of this issue in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* which deals explicitly with the relation between the poetry and the life and death of Plath.

What kind of woman?

A Room of One's Own raises a number of very provocative questions, some of which are discussed above. It is useful, however, to read it critically, in its historical context, and to ask questions about both its author and its audience.

¹⁷ *A Room of One's Own*, 106.

Activity

At this point you may wish to look back at your answer to the question posed earlier: what are the limitations of *A Room of One's Own* for a course on reading women's writing, being presented in the early twenty-first century?

When Woolf speaks of being a 'woman', she seems to speak (or may be understood to speak) about women in general, whereas she speaks, of course, as a particular kind of woman in a particular time and place. The essay, you may remember, was originally given as two lectures to women students at Girton and Newnham Colleges at the University of Cambridge by Virginia Woolf who was by this time a successful novelist and reviewer.¹⁸ Her audience, although underprivileged by Cambridge standards, was, in relation to the standards of the majority of women in Britain and elsewhere, immensely privileged. The following passage represents the position of the speaker fairly clearly:

Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (*A Room of One's Own*, 96)

This locates the 'woman' in question as a member of a particular class and nation (Whitehall is the seat of British government offices). As such it accurately reflects the position of both the author and her audience. If she were not a woman, she would be a part of this, on the inside rather than 'outside of it'. The alienation referred to here is generated by her sense of exclusion from a ruling power with which she might otherwise be identified as 'the natural inheritor of that civilisation'. But a woman of a different sort living elsewhere – in Whitechapel in the East End of London, in Harlem in New York, in Dominica, Ottawa or Delhi – might have other, different, reasons for being critical of what 'that civilisation' has brought them. The feminism of early twentieth-century England, which Woolf draws upon in both her fiction and her essays, is concerned with sexual inequality, but shows little awareness of the ways in which sexual differences interlock with other kinds of differences.

Activity

How far do you think the concerns of feminism have changed?

This is not a minor cavil about a major essay on women's writing, but a crucial issue for contemporary critical theories of women's writing. It raises questions about the ways in

¹⁸ You may also find it interesting to read Woolf's diary entry describing this visit in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume 3: 200–201.

which one can speak about the identity of ‘women’ and ‘women’s writing’ in a generalising sense, without reference to the situation of specific women. It is this point that the African-American writer bell hooks raises in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* when she claims:

It is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative. In America, white racist ideology has always allowed white women to assume that the word woman is synonymous with white woman... (*Ain’t I a Woman*, 138)

Activity

You might wish to consider the implications of this argument for the ways in which you read and write about ‘women’ and ‘women’s writing’. For example, how is the representation of the ‘woman’ in the text of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* different from that of Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*? What ‘as women’ do they have in common? Is their identity as women more important than the differences between them?

If you would like to learn more about these issues you should read *Ain’t I a Woman* (Chapter 4) and Elizabeth Spelman’s *Inessential Woman*, both of which have helpful discussions of the relation between gender and ‘race’ and contain useful suggestions for further reading.

The list of twentieth-century authors suggested for study here is necessarily limited, but we have tried to represent something of the immense variety and diversity of women’s writing in English. The writers we have chosen for study come from Canada, North America, India and the Caribbean, as well as the United Kingdom. You may wish to bear this point in mind when selecting authors and texts for study.

Author study: Jean Rhys

The second twentieth-century author selected for study here is Jean Rhys whose novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* will constitute the core text. Jean Rhys, alias Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams (1890–1979), was born of a Welsh-Scottish family in Dominica, in the Caribbean. Rhys came to England in 1907 and spent most of her adult life in England and Europe, returning to the Caribbean only for a short visit in 1936. Details of her life can be found in Carol Angier’s biography *Jean Rhys Life and Work*. (1990). Rhys began writing short stories in the 1920s and went on to produce five novels, the last of which, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, won the Royal Society of Literature Award and the W.H. Smith Award in 1966.

The following is a list of her main published work. Those titles marked in bold are particularly relevant to the issues raised in the discussion of the core text.

The Left Bank. (1927) (short stories)

Quartet. (1928) (originally entitled *Postures*)

After Leaving Mr MacKenzie. (1930)

Voyage in the Dark. (1934)

Good Morning, Midnight. (1939)

Wide Sargasso Sea. (1966)

Tigers Are Better Looking. (1968) (short stories)

Sleep It Off, Lady. (1976) (short stories)

Smile Please. (1979) (an unfinished autobiography)

Jean Rhys: Letters 1931–66. (1985) (edited by Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly)

The Collected Short Stories. (New York, 1987)

Activity

Read *Wide Sargasso Sea* and as many of Rhys's other novels as you can. If possible, you should also read some of the short stories in *Tigers Are Better Looking*,¹⁹ which includes several stories from her first collection *The Left Bank*. (1927).

Rhys's work can and has been read in many different ways: as autobiographical, as feminist, as modernist and, more recently, as postmodernist and/or postcolonial writing. Each way of reading has its own validity and Rhys's fiction, although not difficult to read, is often difficult to interpret. (There is an interesting account of the reception of her work in 'Jean Rhys and Her Critics' in Carr, 1996.) The heroines of both the short and the longer fiction often appear to be passive and powerless victims, but as Rachel Bowlby (1992) points out, while it may be easy for the reader to identify with the heroine and her story, it is not always easy to identify who or what is the source of her oppression. Although she may suffer at the hands of individual men, 'the Rhys woman' seems at different points to be the victim of her gender, 'race', class, and/or psychology. At other points, her suffering seems to embody a more general existential proposition that to be human is to suffer; the powerful and the respectable may defend themselves against suffering but at the cost of a part of their humanity.

The story can be told in different ways and given different meanings for, as the narrator

¹⁹ Henceforth referred to as TABL.

in *Good Morning, Midnight* suggests, story-telling is always the struggle to make sense of life. For a woman narrator/writer the struggle may be more difficult to tell since it has to be narrated in masculine language and forms which may or may not fit. This self-reflexive element, which Rhys shares with other twentieth-century women writers such as Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, can be seen as one of the modernist (and feminist) aspects of Rhys's work.

Activity

Read some of the early short stories, including, if possible, 'Vienne' and 'La Grosse Fifi'. From whose point of view is each story narrated? What technical innovations do you notice? What kind of women are represented in these stories? Make a note of any similarities or differences you find between these women characters (e.g. Frances and Germaine in 'Vienne' and Fifi and X in 'La Grosse Fifi') and those in the novels.

Good and bad women

One of the themes that runs through both the novels and the stories is the relation between women, particularly between 'good' and 'bad' women. It surfaces in 'Vienne' when the woman narrator exclaims:

'For God knows, if there's one hypocrisy I loathe more than another, it's the fiction of the "good" woman and the "bad" one.' (*Tigers Are Better Looking*, 196)

The context here is a brief encounter between a young unmarried middle-class girl ('good') and a young dancer ('bad') who is the mistress of one of the men who comes to dinner. The story raises a number of questions about innocence and experience, about women who use their sexual capital within marriage and outside it, and about a society – Vienna at the end of Empire – organised around such categories. The words 'hypocrisy' and 'fiction' suggest that the distinction is one which serves the sexual and economic interests of powerful men, a theme which Rhys was to develop more fully in her later work. The word 'fiction' also suggests the ways in which 'fiction' in a more general sense – fictional representations of women as 'good' or 'bad' – may uphold what the narrator calls 'the huge machine of law, order and respectability'.

Activity

How does Rhys's treatment of 'good' and 'bad' women compare with nineteenth-century representations of the 'fallen' woman? What continuities and differences do you see with, for example, the story of Marion Erle's seduction in *Aurora Leigh* or Ruth's in Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*? (You may also want to think of Thomas Hardy's treatment of women's sexuality and the double standard in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – subtitled *A Pure Woman*.)

While much nineteenth-century fiction by women (and men) is explicitly concerned with questions of courtship and marriage, it is rare to find the ‘fallen’ or ‘bad’ woman as the central protagonist. Rhys’s fiction, on the other hand, is consistently concerned with women characters who might be described in this way: married women – like Marya in *Quartet* – who become another man’s mistress only to lose both husband and lover; or women who are seduced and abandoned like Julia in *After Leaving Mr MacKenzie*, Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark*, or Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Rhys’s second novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, suggests that there may be literary as well as autobiographical motives for her interest in ‘bad’ women. The protagonist Anna is reading *Nana* (a novel by Emile Zola, set in the Second Empire society, which charts the rise and fall of a courtesan) when a fellow chorus girl, Maudie, asks her whether it is ‘a dirty book’:

Maudie said, ‘I know; it’s about a tart. I think it’s disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides, all books are like that – just somebody stuffing you up.’

Activity

How does this comment relate to Rhys ‘writing a book about a tart’? Is *Voyage in the Dark* also an attempt to tell the truth about a ‘tart’?

What do these novels say about the nature of women’s sexuality in the twentieth-century world? What kinds of worlds do Rhys’s characters inhabit? (You may wish to make a distinction between the European and the Caribbean fiction here.)

To what extent is *Voyage in the Dark*, like Zola’s *Nana*, an attempt to comment on the world?

Writing the body

It is often claimed by critics (see, for example, Kaplan, 1986) that, while male modernist writers such as Lawrence and Joyce begin to write about the body and sexuality during this period, women writers like Woolf, Richardson or Mansfield are mostly silent about the physical and sexual areas of human experience.

Activity

How far is this true of Rhys, do you find? How is Anna Morgan’s ‘fall’ into sexuality described? In what ways does Rhys depict the body, sexual desire and experience?

Voyage in the Dark, like most of Rhys’s fiction, is an intensely literary work; the narrative is segmented and elliptical, the narrative voice a collage of allusions, references to others’ texts, letters, songs and quotations.

Activity

As far as possible, you should look up all allusions and references in the text. What do these contribute?

Helen Carr calls Jean Rhys's writing 'postmodernist'.

Activity

What do you understand by this term? How far does it describe the techniques used in *Voyage in the Dark* and/or *Good Morning, Midnight*?

In *Voyage in the Dark* Anna Morgan's fragmented and unstable sense of self is related to her youth, her exile from her Caribbean home and her financial insecurity. The heroine of the later novel *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha Jensen, although still financially insecure, is no longer a young woman. An ageing woman spending a fortnight's holiday in Paris, she remembers her youth there and struggles to understand her past and present life. Narrated in the first person, and written in a mixture of English and French, the novel moves between memory, fantasy and actuality, cross-cutting between images but returning again and again to the same unresolved questions about femininity, identity and belonging.

Activity

Is Rhys writing about a particular kind of woman at a particular historical moment? What elements in Sasha Jensen's situation might be called representative of women's situation generally?

Good Morning, Midnight presents a woman's personal history which is at the same time a history of Europe between the wars. The technique of this novel has been compared to a film, but also to the process of psychoanalysis where, through the techniques of free association, the analysand remembers and repeats the experiences of the past in order to construct a self strong enough to live in the present. The ending of this novel is enigmatic; it can be read as a gesture of affirmation or of self-destruction, as dream or reality. Whichever way you interpret it, it is an extraordinarily compelling piece of writing which rehearses many of the thematic and stylistic features of her last fiction, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Reading Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*²⁰

This short novel can be approached in a number of ways: it is a historical novel set in the 1840s; it is autobiographical in that it draws on Rhys's childhood in the Caribbean; it is modernist in narrative technique; it may be read as postcolonial fiction; and it is a story about the fragility and disintegration of human identity.²¹ It is also a rewriting of another novel in that it tells the story of Bertha Mason (Antoinette Cosway), the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*. Since Rhys uses Brontë's novel to frame her narrative, it may be useful to start with a fairly detailed comparison of the two.

Activity

If you have not yet read *Jane Eyre* you are advised to read it, especially Chapters 26 and 27, before continuing.

Comparing *WSS* and *Jane Eyre*

In an interview shortly after the publication of *WSS*, Jean Rhys was asked 'Where did the idea come from of re-constructing Bertha's life...?' Her reply is worth considering:

When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life...²²

This is an interesting statement in several ways. It recalls Virginia Woolf's comment, quoted earlier, that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers' in that it seems to acknowledge *Jane Eyre* as the parent text which made Rhys, as a child, 'immediately' wish to produce an alternative story or offspring. (In fact Rhys did **not** produce *WSS* for many years. As far as is known, a version was begun around 1939–41, destroyed, then rewritten and it was not until her third husband's death in 1966 that 'she realised in a dream of giving birth that the novel was finished and she at last agreed to its

²⁰ Henceforth referred to as *WSS*.

²¹ The term 'postcolonial' can be applied to all cultures that have been affected by the experience of imperialism. The exploitative process of colonisation involved the imposition of the coloniser's language and political structures on cultures and this led to a sense of displacement. Hence postcolonial writing is often characterised by an ambivalent attitude towards colonial language and an emphasis on identity as multiple, fractured and 'cross-cultural'. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, (1978) gives an account of the ways in which the coloniser constructed the 'other' through discourse. Interest in postcolonial studies has developed greatly since the publication of Said's influential work.

²² Cited in Harrison (1988) 127.

publication.²³) Her statement may also remind you of the point discussed above, that there are differences **between** women (as well as between women and men) which means that a woman writer may take up a critical position towards her inheritance (the mother-text) and that a woman reader may become a resisting reader by identifying, as Rhys does here, not with the heroine but with the position of the ‘other woman’ in the text.²⁴

Activity

What continuities and differences can you see between the two fictions in terms of story? Make a note of those you consider important.

Rhys takes a segment from the earlier story, and from this spins another. The new fiction has its own compositional features, and is of course a text in itself, but a part of its meaning derives from its relation to the other text. This is one of the modernist features of *WSS*: that it acknowledges the ways in which a piece of writing, a work of art, always exists in relation to other writings and cultural works.²⁵ In the present case, although *WSS* follows the story-line of *Jane Eyre*, it changes the meaning of that story and one might want to ask whether this is one of the characteristics of women’s writing. Telling stories in new ways, from different points of view – particularly from previously subjugated or marginalised viewpoints – is often a way of challenging the dominant viewpoint. That ‘there is always the other side, always’ (*WSS*, 106) is certainly one of the major themes of the novel. Whether this is because Jean Rhys is writing as a woman, or as a creole, or for other reasons, are again questions to consider.²⁶

Activity

What continuities and differences can you see between the two fictions in terms of character?

Although some of the ‘same’ characters are used, they are used in ways which radically alter their significance. In *WSS*, a minor figure, part of the subplot in the story of *Jane Eyre*’s development and marriage, is brought in from the margins to the centre. The Jane

²³ Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.) *The Gender of Modernism*, (1990) 373.

²⁴ For more detailed discussions of how gender may produce different reading practices, you should consult the following: Jonathan Culler ‘Reading as a Woman’ in *On Deconstruction*, (1983); Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, (1981); Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman*, (1987).

²⁵ You might like to look at T.S. Eliot’s discussion of this point in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. Other critics would refer to this kind of relationship between one text and another as ‘intertextuality’.

²⁶ For a discussion of these issues and a comparison of *WSS* with *Jane Eyre*, read ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’ by Gayatri Spivak (1985) in *Race, Writing and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates. For further discussion of *WSS* as a Caribbean novel, see the references to Ramchand and Harrison in the reading list at the head of the chapter.

Eyre who narrates the fictional autobiography of 1847 is displaced to the margins of Antoinette Cosway's story. In the earlier text, Bertha Mason (never called by her married name, Rochester) is a figure who represents madness, alienation and excess and is contained in the attic of her husband's large well-ordered English house. In *WSS*, this figure is introduced as a young girl in her family house, positioned in a very different landscape. Bertha does not speak: 'it snatched and growled' (*Jane Eyre*, 321) whereas Antoinette narrates at least a part of her own story.

Activity

What difference does this make to your reading of the two characters? Compare the descriptions of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (pages 321–322 and 332–337) and the presentation of Antoinette in *WSS*. How do these differences affect the position of the Rochester character?

One of the original aspects of *WSS* is the presentation of the man whom the heroine marries. Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre* is in many ways a figure of romance, the embodiment of a woman's desire and seen largely from the heroine's viewpoint. In *WSS*, 'the man' (who is not given a name) is the narrator of Part Two, the longest section of the novel (pages 55–142). There is a brief segment within this (pages 89–98) signalled by asterisks, which is narrated by Antoinette, but otherwise during Part Two 'the man' presents both himself and Antoinette from his point of view.

Activity

What difference does this make to his role in the novel?

In narrative terms, he has an important function since he rather than she tells the story of their marriage. This also provides the reader with greater access to his motivation and point of view. If he is a more complex character than Rochester, this complexity is in part achieved by making him the subject of the narration (the narrator) rather than simply its object. In *WSS*, the male figure is neither a romance hero nor, despite his treatment of Antoinette, is he merely the villain of the story. He is, as Christophine says, neither the best nor the worst of men (*WSS*, 129). Rhys's presentation technique produces a powerful exploration of a certain type of masculinity – a question we will consider later in relation to the question of identity in the novel.

Activity

Before leaving the question of characterisation, you should consider the role of all the 'new' characters introduced by Rhys, in particular: Christophine, Daniel Cosway, Tia and

Antoinette's mother and brother.

When you have compared the two narratives in terms of story and characterisation, you should consider other continuities and differences between them.

Activity

What differences can you see between the style and structure of the two narratives? You might break this question down into more detailed sections, making a list of the points which seem to you most significant:

- Why is *WSS* named after a place rather than the heroine?
- What is the effect of having the three parts of the novel narrated by different voices?
- Does the use of dreams in *WSS* have a structural as well as a narrative function?
- What kind of ending does the novel have? Is it open or closed?

Rhys's text may be a readerly response to the content of Brontë's novel, but it also offers a 'writerly' alternative to Brontë's novelistic techniques. *Jane Eyre*, as its title page informs you, is a 'Fictional Autobiography', it is a 'life' constructed by the 'I' that narrates it. As you will have noticed, Jean Rhys's novel about Rochester's first wife is not a mirror equivalent, nor a counterblast entitled *Bertha Mason* or *Antoinette Cosway*. A place not a person gives the novel its name and, most significantly, it is narrated by more than one voice.²⁷ Brontë's title directs the reader towards a single, unified centre (Jane Eyre herself), whereas Rhys's choice of title and the multiple narration technique offer a different framework for the question of women's identity.

The question of identity

WSS is a rich and complex piece of writing and one of its most complex and fascinating features is the way in which it stages the question of identity, not as a fixed, unproblematic essence, but as a shifting, often precarious construction. Identity is frequently a key issue in women's writing, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Activity

²⁷ The Sargasso Sea is the name given to the Atlantic between the United States and the South American mainland; 'sargasso' derives from the Portuguese for the seaweed found in this sea.

Can you think of any reasons why this might be so? In what ways has the issue of identity been linked to gender and/or sexuality in your reading? Make a list of the ways in which you think the question of identity figures in Parts One, Two and Three of *WSS*. (At this point you may find it useful to compare your notion of ‘identity’ with that offered in *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*.)²⁸

After giving its derivation from the Latin *idem* meaning ‘same’, the *OED* defines identity as:

1. The quality or condition of being the same; absolute or essential sameness; oneness...
2. Individuality, personality...

If *Jane Eyre* tells the story of a woman’s triumphant self-creation, *WSS* presents ‘the other side’, the story of a woman’s failure to establish and maintain an identity strong enough to withstand the pressures put upon it. The disintegration of Antoinette’s personality can be read in various ways – as the result of heredity, patriarchal oppression, or psychic flaws – Rhys’s presentation of the breakdown and ‘madness’ of her character does not offer any simple explanations, but impels the reader to seek his or her own.

Activity

From your reading of the novel, what would you say causes the ‘madness’ of:

- a. Antoinette
- b. her mother?

In what ways are they comparable?

The narrative technique: naming

WSS begins with a voice recounting its childhood, a voice that names all the members of the family and tells the story of the mother’s remarriage, the firing of the family home, the death of a brother, illness and removal to a convent. Throughout this part of the story, the name of the narrating voice is withheld from the reader until the dialogue in which a nun asks the narrator her name and is told ‘Antoinette’ (page 43).

Activity

²⁸ Henceforth referred to as *OED*.

What is the significance of this delayed naming? Examine the use of pronouns in the opening paragraphs of the novel. (You may wish again to compare them with the opening paragraphs of *Jane Eyre*.) Does the use of pronouns serve to introduce Antoinette's problems with identity? Does it problematise identity in a more general sense? What other effects does it have on the reader?

You will notice that the evasiveness about naming continues in Part Two of the novel, where the narrator is never referred to by name. He in fact remains anonymous throughout the novel. Other characters, including his wife, refer to him solely as 'the man', or 'Sir' or 'the master'. His letters are unsigned and those addressed to him do not refer to him by name. You may feel this anonymity gives him a generalised status – as a representative white Englishman – or that it is a way of raising the problem of masculine identity. In the novel names, pronouns and name changes are a prominent issue and the links between names and identity are raised in a number of ways.

Activity

With this point in mind, consider the naming of African-Caribbeans as 'niggers', 'Negroes' or 'black people' (WSS, 28); the naming of white Caribbeans as 'white niggers' and 'white cockroaches'; and the renaming of Antoinette as 'Bertha' by her husband (WSS, 111, 121). Why does he call his wife by this name? To what extent does this renaming contribute to her breakdown and 'madness'?²⁹

You may think that Antoinette has problems with identity before her marriage. In her own account some of these problems arise from the cultural situation of white Caribbeans:

It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (WSS, 85)

Activity

Why, in Antoinette's terms, is the question of identity problematic for white Caribbeans? What does the passage suggest is the relation between identity and place or belonging? What is the relationship between Antoinette and the black characters in the story?

²⁹ For a discussion of this point, see Harrison (1988) 184–185.

The novel presents the social situation of the heroine, obliquely but concretely: her isolation from the black and white communities and her position as a fatherless heiress in a patriarchal society. It also seems to suggest that there are psychological factors which contribute to her eventual breakdown. According to various critics, one of the most significant of these factors is the mother–daughter relationship.

Activity

Re-read the scenes in which Antoinette is presented with her mother. What kind of relationship does this suggest? In what ways might this contribute to the crisis of identity later experienced by the heroine?

The mother–daughter plot

The relationship between mothers and daughters is a recurrent theme in twentieth-century women’s writing. Many feminist critics, including Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter and Hirsch, have drawn attention to it, and a number of different reasons have been offered which you may wish to consider in relation to *WSS*. According to some theories, it is particularly difficult for the girl child to establish a positive sense of her own femininity and a strong, autonomous identity – separate from that of her mother. This may be because the mother does not value her own femininity, or because femininity is undervalued in her culture (or for both these reasons). Or it may be because, unlike a male child, a girl has no biological differences to help to differentiate her from the mother and she cannot easily construct an identity based on an identification with the father’s position. These are issues discussed in Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) and, in a different way, in Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). In *WSS*, you will have noticed that Antoinette remembers being rejected by her mother, for whatever reasons, on three separate occasions (see *WSS*, 17, 19, 40).

Activity

What do you think is the significance of this? Can you see any parallels with the fact that both the Rochester character and Daniel Cosway are rejected by their fathers? Examine the letters that ‘Rochester’ writes to his father. What does this suggest about his sense of masculine identity? And how does his relationship with his father affect his treatment of Antoinette? How do these problems with masculine and feminine identity relate to the failure of the marriage?

The Rochester figure at one point describes his wife as a ‘stranger’ (*WSS*, 59). This is literally true, of course, since they marry after a brief courtship and are also strangers by

upbringing and culture, coming as they do from the two very different islands of England and Jamaica. Harrison (1988) suggests that this ‘strangeness’ is a metaphor for the strangeness of sexual difference and the threat that it poses to the fragile identities of each.

Activity

What do you think of this suggestion? What evidence can you find in the text to support it?

The man connects the strangeness of Antoinette with the Caribbean landscape by which he is both fascinated and repelled; he struggles to penetrate its secrets, to map it and, when he fails, construes it as the enemy:

I feel very much a stranger here...I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side... (WSS, 107)

His Englishness and his masculinity are linked to the ‘grey’ climate of England and the black and white world of facts and money – about which she is uncertain or indifferent, living in a world which for him has too many colours:

Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. (WSS, 59)

Activity

How is the colour symbolism linked to the question of masculine and feminine differences? Why does the landscape (and the woman) pose a threat to the man’s identity? And why does his rejection of her precipitate her loss of identity?

The resemblance between the mother and the daughter is first raised by Christophine’s ambiguous comment in the first paragraph of the novel that ‘she pretty like pretty self’ (WSS, 15). One can trace the mother–daughter question through to Part III of the novel, where Antoinette has been removed from the colourful landscape, her motherland, and is confined in a ‘cardboard house’ (WSS, 148). At this stage, her situation closely resembles that of her mother: both women are locked up by their husbands, ending their lives in exile and derangement. It is during this confinement that Antoinette has her dream for the third time.

Activity

What is the significance of this dream and what does it impel her to do?

You may or may not decide that the dream foretells her death, but the dream of fire and

jumping suggests that she is living her life according to a 'script'. In one sense, of course, that script is the original text, *Jane Eyre*, but in another symbolic sense, the novel suggests that Antoinette's 'script' is that she, as a woman, is doomed to repeat the experience and the fate of the mother.

Activity

Consider carefully the last pages of *WSS* with reference to this point.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and the relevant reading, you should be able to:

- discuss the tradition of women's writing from the 1790s to 1990 and of the thematic continuities and differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's writing
- relate questions of gender difference to other kinds of social differences in your analysis of particular texts.

Sample essay questions on Jean Rhys

1. 'There is always the other side. Always.' In what ways does Rhys represent 'the other side' in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and/or any of her novels or short stories?
2. 'The difference between Antoinette and her husband is not that of madness and sanity, but that of powerlessness and power.' Discuss the representation of 'power' in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or any other fiction by Jean Rhys.
3. How representative a woman is the 'Jean Rhys heroine'?
4. How does the division of *Wide Sargasso Sea* into three narrative sections contribute to the presentation of sexual difference?

Chapter 5

Topic study: motherhood

Introduction

In this chapter we will be studying the topic of ‘motherhood’ in twentieth-century women’s writing. You will first be asked to consider the biological and social definitions of ‘the mother’ and maternity and then to examine the representation of ‘motherhood’ in two twentieth-century texts: a work of modernist fiction and a dramatic poem first produced for radio performance.

Choosing texts

There is a wide variety of twentieth-century writing by women in which the question of motherhood or maternity is presented either as a central theme or as an important issue.

³⁰ You may select from your reading examples of those which seem to you most interesting. We have chosen as examples two texts from different historical moments in the twentieth century: a novel and a long poem.

Virginia Woolf *The Waves*. (1931). The page references given in this subject guide are from the following edition (London: Hogarth, 1990) [ISBN 0-701-20876-7].

Sylvia Plath ‘Three Women’ (1962) in *Collected Poems*. (1981).

Secondary texts

Chodorow, Nancy *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978) [ISBN 0-520-03133-4].

de Beauvoir, Simone *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. (London:

³⁰ We have already mentioned the question of mother–daughter relationships in relation to Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Vintage, 1997) [ISBN 0-099-74421-X].

Hirsch, Marianne *The Mother/Daughter Plot*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) [ISBN 0-253-32748-2].

Kaplan, E. Ann *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. (London: Routledge, 1992) [ISBN 0-415-01127-2].

Montefiore, Jan (ed.) 'Maternity', a special edition of *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* (November 1998) 21(3). (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) [ISBN 0-748-61357-9]. See especially Helen Carr's contribution 'Motherhood and Apple Pie'.

Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (London: Virago, 1977) [ISBN 0-860-68030-4].

Rose, Jacqueline *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. (London: Virago, 1991) [ISBN 1-853-81481-4].

Stevenson, Anne *Bitter Fame*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) [ISBN 0-140-10373-2].

Walker, Alice *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (London: The Women's Press, 2000) [ISBN 0-704-34695-8].

Defining the topic

In the twentieth century the question of motherhood became a central issue in women's studies and feminist theory as well as in fiction and poetry. The fact that women conceive and give birth to children has been used historically to define women's difference from men – to define the nature of femininity itself.

('Women are mothers or they are nothing...') But, whereas in the nineteenth century and earlier periods the mother–child relation was assumed to be either 'natural' or God-given, in the twentieth century both these assumptions were called into question. Women's writing is one of the places in which traditional and new meanings of motherhood are explored.

What is a mother?

At first sight the answer to this question may seem obvious, but, although motherhood is clearly a biological fact, it is also a social role and that role may vary in different cultural contexts and family structures.

Activity

Consider, for example, the following questions: is a woman who gives birth but then never sees the child again a mother? Is a woman who does not give birth but cares for a child from infancy to adulthood a mother? Is one a mother only when in the mother–child relationship or until death? Can men be ‘mothers’ in any sense?

Like femininity, maternity is not simply a matter of biology, but of institutions and social discourses, and in this sense motherhood is not a universal but a historically constructed category which, like all such categories, is subject to change. Social historians and sociologists of the family have identified three major periods when conceptions of motherhood in the western world changed: first, that of the Industrial Revolution, second, that of the First World War, and third, that of the recent, electronic revolution following the Second World War.³¹

The changing meaning of motherhood is also discussed in de Beauvoir’s chapter on ‘The Mother’ in *The Second Sex* and later by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*. De Beauvoir comments, for example, on the idealisation of the mother and mother-love in many male accounts, but argues that motherhood is a much more complex experience for women than these allow:

...the religion of Maternity proclaims that all mothers are saintly. [But] while maternal devotion may be perfectly genuine, this, in fact, is rarely the case. Maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle day-dreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism. (*The Second Sex*, 528)

She also discusses the woman who renounces ‘self’ for maternal love and the effects of this self-sacrificing love on the children, particularly daughters. Nancy Chodorow, writing from a later point in the twentieth century, suggests that the difference between male and female gender identities can be traced back to ‘mothers’ or to woman-dominated parenting. She suggests that many daughters find difficulty in differentiating themselves from the same-gender mother and, because of this, women have more fluid ego-boundaries than men and tend to seek and value connectedness, fusion and ‘the blurring of boundaries’. These are arguments you may find it interesting to think about when considering the topic of motherhood.

³¹ For references for this argument see Kaplan’s *Motherhood and Representation*, pages 17–18.

Reading Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf's fiction contains a number of women characters who are mothers, perhaps the most well-known of which is the figure of Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Mrs Ramsey, whom Woolf in her diaries acknowledged to be modelled on her own mother, Julia Stephen, is in many ways a typical Victorian wife and mother with a large family of eight children. The novel represents her life and influence on her husband, children and a younger woman painter through the technique of interior monologue. If you have already read this novel, you may wish to compare Woolf's presentation of Mrs Ramsey with her treatment of motherhood in the later novel. Or, you may wish to compare Woolf's treatment of motherhood with that of other contemporary writers (e.g. D.H. Lawrence's portrait of Anna Brangwen's 'passionate' maternity in *The Rainbow*).

The Waves (1931) is one of Woolf's most experimental fictions in which the question of subjectivity and sexuality is presented through the interior monologues of six characters: three men and three women. With the three men, Louis, Bernard and Neville, Woolf presents three types of masculinity each with his own relation to sexuality and authority. Of the women, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan, only one (Susan) becomes a mother, but the novel focuses on the 'passion of maternity' in some detail.

Activity

Examine the opening sections of the novel which introduce the characters as children. How does Woolf present the differences between the three women?

What images are used for Rhoda, Susan and Jinny as children? And how do these relate to what happens to each of them? Compare the images of the women with those of Bernard, Louis and Neville. In what ways do they resemble and/or differ from each other? How are these characteristics linked with gender?

Woolf's three female characters or personae seem in one sense to be variations on familiar stereotypes of women as Virgin, Madonna and Whore. Rhoda who 'feared embraces' is unable to construct a relationship either to the world or to others and this later leads her to suicide. Jinny constructs a role for herself based on sensuality and pleasure – outside the world of domesticity and the family. In contrast to Jinny, Susan's decision is to devote herself to 'the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity' (*The Waves*, 86), a role which in this novel is linked with her image of her mother and with her desire for stability and order. She projects her energies into the structured cycle of the generations who have lived in her parents' house. Jinny's choice to live for the moment robs her of an investment in the future, but Susan's choice of 'rootedness' also robs her of something, the novel seems to suggest.

Activity

Examine the scene in the restaurant when the six friends meet and reflect upon their lives. (See section 4 which begins ‘The sun, risen, no longer couched...’.) What do the monologues in this section tell the reader about the choices made by the six friends? Compare Bernard’s view of Susan, as she enters the restaurant, with her monologue in section 6 of the novel when she is watching over her sleeping children (*The Waves*, 70–78).

You will notice that many of the most powerful and complex representations of motherhood in this novel are not expressed at the level of plot or characterisation but through Woolf’s use of language. She herself called *The Waves* ‘a play-poem’ and in many ways the novel has to be read slowly, aloud, as you might a poem, in order to register the full effects of this language.

Activity

In the following passage, examine the ways in which Woolf uses imagery, rhythm and repetition to represent the satisfactions and sacrifices of being a mother:

When the lark peels high his ring of sound and it falls through the air like an apple paring, I stoop; I feed my baby. I, who used to walk through the beech woods noting the jay’s feather turning blue as it falls, past the shepherd and the tramp, who stared at the woman squatted beside a tilted cart in a ditch, go from room to room with a duster. Sleep, I say, desiring sleep to fall like a blanket of down and cover these weak limbs; demanding that life shall sheathe its claws and gird its lightning and pass by, making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in. Sleep, I say, sleep. Or I go to a window, I look at the rook’s high nest; and the pear tree. ‘His eyes will see when mine are shut,’

I think...

Sleep, I say, sleep, as the kettle boils and its breath comes thicker and thicker issuing in one jet from the spout. So life fills my veins. So life pours through my limbs. So I am driven forward till I could cry, as I move from dawn to dusk opening and shutting, ‘No more. I am gluttoned with natural happiness.’

(*The Waves*, 113–114)

Clearly, this is no simple presentation of ‘mother love’. The passage manages to suggest a range of emotions: regret, tenderness, sentimentality perhaps, protectiveness, anxiety and celebration. In this respect it may remind you of de Beauvoir’s comment, cited earlier, on maternity as a ‘strange mixture’. Susan’s acceptance of her ‘natural’ role seems to have changed her own relation to nature and to time. She is both a part of it and yet outside it. Yet her sense of completion is accompanied by a sense of loss; even when

‘glutted with natural happiness’ she can imagine alternative possibilities:

I see a lit-up street in the evergreens. I hear traffic in the brush of the wind down the lane, and broken voices, and laughter, and Jinny who cries as the door opens, ‘Come, come!’ (*The Waves*, 114)

Susan’s childhood dream of motherhood was that it would give her everything, that it would satisfy all her desires and make her complete. What she learns through the experience of motherhood, as Bernard learns in a different way through becoming a writer, is that there is no role or position which does not involve the loss of other positions or possibilities: that to be Susan is not to be Jinny. *The Waves* dramatises this point in its presentation of maternity as one of the major roles open to women, but it is a point which is made about each of the six characters: that to be human is necessarily to be incomplete. Only those who die young can be imagined as complete or perfect, as Bernard realises when he remembers their friend Percy, killed in India:

We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we failed to be, but at the same time cannot forget. All that we might have been we saw; all that we had missed, and we grudged for a moment the other’s claim, as children when the cake is cut, the one cake, the only cake, watch their slice diminishing. (*The Waves*, 185–186)

You might consider the significance of this passage with reference to motherhood and to the ‘waves’ of the title.

Reading Sylvia Plath’s ‘Three Women’

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) writes about general emotions and experiences such as rage, hatred, madness, death, jealousy and grief but she places these in a specifically female context. Her poem ‘Three Women’, subtitled ‘A Poem For Three Voices’, was written in 1962 as a radio play. Anne Stevenson, in her biography of Plath entitled *Bitter Fame*, calls it ‘probably the first great poem of childbirth in the [English] language.’ You may notice a parallel between the three women speakers of Woolf’s novel and the three voices of this poem; you will also notice that both texts explore and articulate the limited options open to women and the centrality of motherhood within women’s lives.

Activity

Read the poem aloud, if possible with friends taking the roles of the two other voices. How easy is it to distinguish between the three? Write a brief summary describing the different situations of the three voices. What is the effect of numbering as opposed to naming the three

voices?

The setting of the poem is described as 'A Maternity Ward and round about' which offers a context for the three anonymous speakers introduced simply as 'First Voice', 'Second Voice' and 'Third Voice'. The poem dramatises three different relationships to the same experience – the birth process – and the three voices represent what one might call happy fertility, unhappy sterility and unhappy fertility. The anonymity of the voices, the refusal to particularise the characters, may be read in several ways: it may be a device to universalise the experience, to facilitate the reader's identification with the speakers, or it may suggest that these different voices could all belong to one woman.

Activity

What attitudes towards conception and pregnancy are represented (or not represented) in the poem? Make a list of the words and phrases which signify these. Notice the way in which the three characters in the poem change during their stay in the Maternity Ward and consider the ways in which they process their experiences.

The first voice is the voice of a pregnant woman, apprehensive but expectant. In the opening stanzas she describes herself, using images from nature, as part of some large, inevitable process:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and stars
Regarding me with attention.

She describes herself as 'smiling' and 'ready' for what is about to happen to her, yet this serenity disappears during the pains of childbirth ('I am the center of an atrocity.'). The speaker voices both physical and psychic pain, as if she has lost part of herself through the birth and this gives rise to feelings of fear and isolation. Her very powerful feelings towards the newborn child and her new sense of herself are expressed in lines of great lyricism:

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear.
His lids are like the lilac-flower
And soft as a moth, his breath.

I shall not let go.

The poem registers these moments of fulfilment but also the equally powerful alternations of feelings of anxiety and fear, produced by the mother's wish to protect the child:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?

How long can I be

Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,

Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?

How long can I be a wall around my green property?

How long can my hands

Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words

Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?

She is vulnerable because, despite the physical separation of the birth, she still feels her son is a part of her and what he feels, she feels. As the metaphor of the 'wall' suggests, her ego-boundaries have shifted and extended to include a new being, one who is herself and not herself:

It is a terrible thing

To be so open: it is as if my heart

Put on a face and walked into the world.

Differences between women

If the first speaker feels changed by motherhood, the second voice feels, equally powerfully, changed by her experience of miscarriage. (That of the third speaker, who gives birth and decides to leave her newborn child in hospital, provides a different view of loss and separation.)

Activity

Make a detailed analysis of the imagery used by the second and third voices in the poem. Notice in particular the words and phrases used to represent men and masculinity (e.g. flatness, whiteness, etc.). What views of sexual difference do these suggest?

The second voice experiences the first signs of the miscarriage, the ‘small red seep’, in the surroundings of an office; the imagery used connects her sense of waste and failure to what she sees as a world of male domination and infertility:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!

There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,

That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,

Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed...

This speaker seems to feel that what distinguishes her as a woman is her ability to become a mother, to become round and big-bellied, and that to have lost her child reduces her to a masculine ‘flatness’ – an image here associated with destructiveness as opposed to fertility. She sees her failure to give birth as a failure to be a woman (‘the blur of my deformity...’) and the poem traces her struggle to adjust to this.

In contrast, the third voice communicates the fear and resentment of a young girl towards an unwanted pregnancy and birth. (‘I wasn’t ready.’) She describes her child as a snare and entrapment, and talks of the child’s cries as hooks capturing and holding her: ‘I undo her fingers like bandages: I go.’ She regains her previous existence and identity but recognises that she is irreparably changed by her experience. Although – unlike the second speaker – her decision is voluntarily made, she too has to cope with emotions of loss and mourning:

It is so beautiful to have no attachments!

I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?

Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?

What is that bird that cries

With such sorrow in its voice?

I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?

You will notice that the three voices do not speak to each other, their stories are simply juxtaposed, and there are no moral judgements offered in the poem.

Activity

What is the effect of allowing each woman to ‘voice’ her own experience?
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How does Plath suggest the differences and the common elements in the three women's experiences? What view(s) of motherhood is the reader left with at the end of the poem?

Which features of this poem (if any) would you consider distinctive of women's writing (i.e. the subject-matter, treatment, poetic form, imagery or other stylistic features)?

As you can see from the two examples examined above – a very small sample – there is a variety of ways of representing motherhood. In order to broaden your understanding of the topic, you should take the questions considered here to different kinds of writing produced in the twentieth century; for example, to novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or to the poems in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and the relevant reading, you should be able to:

- some of the sociological and psychological debates about motherhood in the twentieth-century world and refer to these debates in your discussion of specific literary texts
- relate the topic of motherhood to other issues in twentieth-century women's writing, for example: to women's role as individuals and in the family; the links between motherhood and sexuality, femininity and identity.

Sample essay questions on the question of motherhood in the twentieth century

1. With reference to two or more examples of twentieth-century women's writing, consider the relation between motherhood and the nature of 'woman'.
2. According to Eileen Aird, Plath insists that 'what has been traditionally regarded as a woman's world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which contains the tragic.' Discuss the relation between 'the tragic' and the 'women's world', with reference to Plath or any other twentieth-century woman writer.
3. 'Write yourself...your body must be heard...' (Cixous). In what ways is the 'body' represented in twentieth-century women's writing about motherhood?
4. 'Changing content means changing form.' In what ways does women's writing about motherhood challenge existing literary conventions of language and/or narrative form?

Feedback

We welcome any feedback you may wish to give on this guide. Such feedback from students helps us in our effort to improve further editions of this guide.

Email feedback to j.j.baillie@gre.ac.uk