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text of the material is changed. I also suspect that learning about the material, that is, understanding what the material does in the lives of women who perform it, is contingent on maintaining it *in situ*. The presence of males who are not family members or close friends would, in genuine performance contexts, mean that the material would not be performed. As with menstruation stories, for example, the door is shut on male eavesdropping. I have, again on occasion, suggested to male students that they attempt to recall situations in which they have heard female bawdy material; where they heard; from whom; and in what situation. I have asked them to compare what they know of women's situations to that of males; for example, a late night dorm storytelling session. The results have always been fruitful both in per-

sonal and academic terms. In general, however, my rules in dealing with women's bawdy traditions have been similar to my rules for dealing with male traditions. Respect for the informant's anonymity, if they wished for anonymity; an attempt to downplay the salacious aspects of obscenity in favor of a recognition that such material is "normal" and "ordinary"; a sensitivity to the moral or religious objections some students may have to open use of such materials; a concern for the racial and sexual political agendas inherent in comparative studies—these are the "rules" that one need play by in the classroom. The alternative view of women and women's performance that bawdy lore presents is often worth the caution that one must take in working with it, but the caution must always be there.

Feminism in the Bible Belt

by Judith P. Jones

One has only to glance at an ERA map
of the United States to see why the amendment has not passed.
The problem lies in what H.L. Mencken pejoratively but accurately labeled
the "Bible Belt," those parts of the Deep South that are dominated,
in fact controlled, by a profoundly fundamentalist
and patriarchal brand of Christianity.

Drive only a few miles from the metropolitan centers of Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Northern Florida, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia and you begin to sense what Flannery O'Connor meant when she said that the South, though hardly Christ-centered, was "most certainly Christ-haunted."¹ The sides of barns and even the hillsides are painted with slogans declaring that "Jesus Saves" and "The Lord is Coming"; and there is the preditable proliferation of bumper-stickers that admonish drivers to "Honk if they Love Jesus." Closely linked to the Christ-hauntedness of the Bible Belt is a chauvinistic loyalty to the region. The "Bible Belt Syndrome" is characterized by a bedrock conservatism which holds to traditional ways of thinking and being because they are God-given and thus unquestionably "right." At the moment, not surprisingly, all the forces that fundamentalist patriarchy can muster are being directed against the vast changes implicit in the women's movement.

Bible Belt women learn early that to question the submissive position which they have long accepted, or appeared to accept, will destroy the family, the community, and the church and prove, once and for all, their perversity in refusing to "love Jesus." They are taught early and by rote Paul's instructions to the Ephesians.

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body.

Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. (Ephesians, 5:22-24)

Supported by such passages, the Southern Protestant church denies women all positions of leadership; some congregations do not even allow women to teach Sunday School.

Of equal importance to Paul's admonition, however, is the Old Testament portrait of the "good woman"; and indeed the religion of the Jesus-loving South is pervaded by the spirit of the Old Testament's adamant God:

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.

She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. (Proverbs 31:10-13)

The woman designed by Southern Protestantism is enjoined to submit to the male in everything and at the same time to be active in maintaining and stabilizing the social structure; she comes to believe it her duty to buttress the system that oppresses her. The paradoxical role that the Southern woman plays in her own oppression

contributes to her image as a smiling hypocrite. In effect, she must *be* strong, stable, and productive but *look* submissive. For example, Alabama State Treasurer Melba Till Allen is an aggressive, successful politician said to be running for governor, who opposes the ERA because God intended men to head their families. With one finger in every political pie in the state she purrs: "I don't believe that a woman could win in Alabama if she were not a lady."²

There is another, even more elusive, paradox: A Southern feminist or any Southerner with "unusual" political leanings can do what he or she pleases as long as it is done quietly. Silent personal revolutions are possible, but overt attacks on the sacred traditional codes are dangerous. Tight-knit communities have tolerated and protected their iconoclasts, but relied on all the forces of history and religion to enforce the *status quo* to render them ineffectual. What was not allowed, and what is still looked upon as a grave threat, were outspoken organized attacks on the oppressive system itself. All the more amazing, then, that Southern women have at times been able to fight the establishment by working for racial equality—the first time in the 1830's with the movement against slavery, the second in the late 1950's with the struggle for civil rights.

Despite such activism, the old conservatism holds on. I am a feminist born and raised in the Bible Belt. I have until quite recently found it difficult to express my feminism visibly and vocally in political action. Coming from a background that combined traditionally Southern and immigrant heritages, I spent the early years of my adulthood trying—despite great personal conflict—to conform to the pressures of the society I have described. And I am still learning painful lessons about what will and will not work politically and in my teaching.

I am an assistant professor of modern and Renaissance Literature at Auburn University in Montgomery, a commuter-community university whose students come largely from middle and lower-middle class families with extremely conservative, rural, white Southern backgrounds. The school is, however, enriched by a smattering of more sophisticated students, predominantly women over twenty-five and the children and wives of officers at the nearby Air Force Officers' Training School. Although we have no women's studies program as such, a handful of feminist professors have managed to get literature, education, and sociology courses pertaining specifically to women into the curriculum. For two years I have taught a literature course emphasizing women: last year "Women in Recent Fiction," this year "Recent Women Poets."

The techniques I used in teaching the classes changed as a result of my increasing awareness of the forces that affect the behavior of Southern women. It was after reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*³ that I completely reversed my approach to presenting feminism to an unsympathetic and threatened student body.

My goal for the course, both years, was to provide an open setting in which students could read and express their opinions. I planned to teach the books as literature and at the same time broaden the students' perceptions of the lives and roles of women in society. The class treating women and recent fiction was a disappointment to me as a teacher and as a feminist. But from it I learned much about my own ignorance of what femaleness means to most women who grow up in the South. Not only did the class resist insights into the women characters and novelists we studied, it also failed to become the kind of community that good literature classes often do. The class was made up of sixteen students, most of them with the background and perspective I have described, although some were already developing broader views. It included one woman in her thirties who described herself as "liberated," and three women in their mid-forties in search of a better understanding of their lives. Nine students were female and seven male. From the start I stated my own position as a feminist and tried to define the term "feminism." I chose to consider feminism from the perspective of books that were more "universal" than regional. This limited the extent to which my students were able to respond from the perspective of their own experiences. First, we read and discussed Elizabeth Gould Davis' *The First Sex* and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, for I wanted to establish a feminist foundation from which to view the following novels: Doris Lessing, *The Summer Before the Dark*; Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*; Blanche Boyd, *Nerves*; Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*; Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*; Philip Roth, *When She Was Good*.

This approach proved disastrous; we spent the rest of the quarter trying to recover. Four of the novels were selected to show what current women novelists are saying about themselves and to cover a variety of female experience—black, middle aged, intellectual New Yorker, Southern. I used Flaubert and Roth to present male perspectives on the same problem the women writers were considering.

In the 1976 class, most of the students resisted being bombarded with opinions (mine, Davis', and Daly's) that seemed more foreign and more dangerous to them than I had expected. The women who were moving in the direction of feminism were encouraged and I made two good friends, but in effect I lost the rest of the class. I saw early that these students resented my trying to force strange opinions on them. Eventually I realized that much of what I said simply baffled them; I was asking them to respond to concepts for which they had no frame of reference.

Not being one to give up easily, I planned to offer "Women in Literature" again the next year. This time I intended to concentrate on recent women poets, particularly the "Women's Poetry Movement" that has become such a significant expression of the developing consciousness of American women. Some months before I started making specific plans for the 1977 course, I stum-

bled upon Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I immediately realized that what Freire had to say applied to my situation as a feminist teaching students whose political and theological orientation is contrary to my own. Freire's book describes his method of teaching the socially, economically, and politically oppressed peasants and workers of Brazil during the years before the military coup of 1964. In the course of his work and travels in the Third World he developed a theory for educating deprived adults. My success in applying Freire's methods suggests a correlation between the profound educational, psychological, and political oppression of Southern women (and consequently, men) and that of the Brazilian peasant workers.

According to Freire, we cannot teach people what they are not ready to learn; liberation comes only from the experience of individuals who are learning to "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p. 15). The oppressed must free themselves; it cannot be done *for* them. Freire makes a sharp distinction between *systematic* education, which is always administered and controlled by those in power, and *educational projects* carried out by means of dialogue among the oppressed. He describes the steps whereby the oppressed come to understand the nature of their condition and become capable of acting against it. The result is a new person, neither oppressor nor oppressed but one in the *process of liberation* (pp. 40-42). Freire's analysis emphasizes the danger of the "convert" who functions as a teacher but fears the independent and discordant acts and thoughts of the people:

Our converts...truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his "status," remains nostalgic towards his origins. (pp. 46-47)

Here he deals with the temptation (the one I succumbed to) to force one's own position on those whose process will inevitably be a different one. He concludes that: "The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a personal relationship of dialogue with the oppressed" (p. 55).

Much influenced by Freire, I organized the 1977 class differently. I had chosen to work with feminist poets, rather than novelists, because I had myself become interested in how much women from varied backgrounds are turning to poetry as a medium for expressing a "new being." It seems to me that it was a lucky choice. Many students do write poems now and then, and therefore know more about its composition than about writing novels. By encouraging the writing of poetry as well as the reading of it, I was able to enhance the "project" aspect of the classroom situation. Thus the insights of the students were allowed to grow out of their experience, rather than out of my politics.

Instead of starting with feminism, we started with the meaning of poetry—how and why it is written. We used David Swanger's *The Poem as process* as a guide. Soon most of the students were writing and discussing their own poetry, although no one was required either to write it or bring it to class. From there we went to the discussion of particular poets, working with the poems in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, Anne Sexton's *Live or Die*, Maxine Kumin's *Up Country*, a collection of poems by Emily Dickinson, and *Selected Poems and Essays* by Adrienne Rich. The last few sessions were devoted to applying feminist literary theory to the poetry we had written and read. The texts for this part of the course were *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. J. Donovan and the Norton Critical Edition of Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose. I kept my own biases in the background as much as I could until near the end of the quarter. As a result, the students were able to deal with their experience of the literature as it reflected their own lives.

The poetry class included fifteen students, five mature women with various degrees of identification with the Women's Movement. Two young men took the course, but often did not attend class. This fact undoubtedly accounts for some of the differences in the two courses, for the women students were always more free in discussing their resentment of their roles and the difficulties of male-female relationships when no men were present. The other students in the class were young women very much influenced by their Southern patriarchal training. Several of them believed, and still believe, that in a family the man should make the decisions and that the Bible is paramount in determining the relationship between men, women, and God. But all the students broadened their perspectives, and there was much less resistance to the perceptions of the writers we studied than there had been in the other class. The experience by older students of motherhood, the problems of early marriages, and of middle age, deeply affected the thinking of the younger women. A particularly provocative session evolved from our discussion of Sylvia Plath's love-hate response to motherhood. And conflicts that arose between the men and the women in the class forced us to define carefully such terms as "masculine" and "feminine."

I do not mean to suggest that my new approach to teaching feminist literature altogether eliminated the kind of fear and hostility that dominated the other course. It did not. Especially at the beginning of the session, some of the students objected to the feminist tone of both the poetry and the literary criticism. They often responded to the essays in the Donovan collection with the familiar complaint: "But *these* women just go too far."

One of the most dramatic events of the quarter occurred as a result of a book report given by one of the male students on *Beyond God the Father*. The student is the only child in a rigidly fundamentalist family. His method of reporting on the

book was to take issue with Daly on Biblical grounds: God intended that man be the head of the family and civilization; God created men for certain purposes and women for others. The student insisted that he did not think men were superior to women, but that it was essential to the survival of Christian civilization that men and women adhere to the positions assigned by God. A quiet young woman with similar religious training (who up until now had prefaced everything she said with: "I'm not really for women's lib, but ..."), admitting that she had been reading Daly and other feminist thinkers, in an emotional speech challenged fundamentalist constraints on the spirituality of women. She concluded, with no apologies for the feminist tone of her statements, that what Daly was really saying was that the patriarchal church separated women from God. "And that," she said, "is what I call a sin."

Obviously, my experience in these two classes has changed the way I will teach "Women's Literature" courses in the future. It has also altered the way I present my feminism in other classes. The

experience has, as well, led me to think further about the future of feminism (or its absence) in the South.

Although the women's movement is undoubtedly changing the lives of women all over the United States, it seems likely that twentieth-century feminism will develop differently in the South than it does in other parts of the country. Southern history suggests that the militant challenge to authority characteristic of the early women's movement will not take place here, and would not work if it did. The changes will come about gradually in the lives of individual women. But those changes will be permanent and the effect profound. That is why everybody is so scared.

1. Flannery O'Connor, from a lecture given in the fall of 1962 at East Texas State University quoted by Bob Dowell in "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *College English*, 27 (1965), p. 236.

2. "The Belle,' Magnolia and Iron," *Time*, 27 September 1976, p. 94.

3. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968). References to this edition will appear in the text.



Alabama Feminists pin daffodils, the symbol of Alabama Suffragettes, on Tony Harrison, the legislator who introduced the E.R.A. into the state legislature.