

Undisciplining The Victorian Classroom

Peer-Reviewed Syllabus

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Women of the World Unite? Nineteenth-Century Women Writers

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The nineteenth century is now notorious as an era of “separate spheres”: behavioral norms that broadly excluded women from public life and space. Yet Britain and its empire was also ruled for much of the century by the most powerful queen the world had witnessed in centuries. This class explores paradoxes of gender in the age of first-wave feminism. Analyzing literature by and about women, we will investigate stereotypical symbols like “the angel in the house” and “the madwoman in the attic,” figures of scandal like the fallen woman, the “Race-Woman,” and the New Woman, and political programs extending from Age of Revolution articulations of The Rights of Woman to early campaigns for female suffrage.

While gender is the primary focus of the course, we will also ask how nineteenth-century constructions of femininity intersected with contemporaneous questions of race, class, and sexuality; to this end, we will survey authors from both dominant and non-dominant traditions of literary writing in English. Hailing from across the Anglophone world, our authors include Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Prince, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Frances Harper, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Toru Dutt, E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), Anna Julia Cooper, Zitkála-Šá, Pauline Hopkins, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and many others.

Schedule of Readings

UNIT 1: HUMANISM, FEMINISM, RACISM

Week 1: Human Rights

- (In class on first day) Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790)
- Mary Wollstonecraft, excerpts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)
- Suggested secondary reading: Jill Richards, excerpts from *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (2020)

Week 2: Women’s Rights

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), ch. I-V
- Mary Wollstonecraft, excerpts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)
- Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “The Rights of Woman” (1792)
- Suggested secondary reading: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, excerpts from “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985) and Elizabeth S. Anker, excerpts from *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (2012)

Week 3: Enlightenment Ideals vs. “the Peculiar Institution”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. VI-IX
- Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831)
- Frances E. W. Harper, “The Slave Mother,” “Bible Defence of Slavery,” and “Eliza Harris” (1854), “Aunt Chloe’s Politics” and “Learning to Read” (1872), “Vashti” (1895), and “An Appeal to My Country Women” (1896)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1848) and “A Curse for a Nation” (1856)
- Suggested secondary reading: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, excerpts from *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (2020)

Note: On the first day of class, I provide a brief prehistory of global women’s writing and introduce the dual expansion of authorship and readership that distinguishes our era of study and that facilitated the proliferation of writing by women. We use Judith Sargent Murray’s poem to identify ideals of Revolutionary-era “Republican Motherhood, setting up our analysis, over the first two weeks, of how women’s rights strategically articulated itself as an extension of human rights at the end of the eighteenth century and of how an enduring ideology of separate spheres calcified around the same time. After exploring splits and shifts within early feminism through the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, we consider how the expansion of Revolution-era ideals like liberty, equality, and fraternity engaged, confronted, or ignored the global institutions of slavery. The ensuing week focuses on attempts by white abolitionists, formerly enslaved authors, and freewomen to extend these ideals along the lines of race as well as gender, while secondary readings contextualize the Enlightenment rhetoric of “rights” and the populations it excluded. In week two, to prepare for our upcoming sessions, I also initiate a discussion about classroom language use as we encounter racist terminology and uses of dialect in our texts; after students read Koritha Mitchell’s Classroom Covenant (<http://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>), I ask them to deliberate on how we should proceed.

UNIT 2: CONDUCT, CLASS, LABOR

Week 4: Victorian Conduct: Models and Rebels

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. X-XI
- Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (1842)
- Emily Dickinson, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (c. 1861), “The Soul selects her own Society” (c. 1862), “She dealt her pretty words like Blades” (c. 1862), “The Soul has Bandaged moments” (c. 1862), “I think I was enchanted” (c. 1862), “They shut me up in Prose” (c. 1862), “I dwell in Possibility” (nd), “She rose to His Requirement” (c. 1863), “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s affection!” (nd)
- Suggested secondary reading: Susan Fraiman, excerpts from *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993) and Marisa Palacios Knox, excerpts from *Victorian Women and Wayward Reading: Crises of Identification* (2020)

Week 5: “Women’s Work”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XII-XIII
- Presentations on Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (1842)
- Sojourner Truth, excerpts from *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850); listen to one of the readings of “Ain’t I A Woman?” at <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/the-readings>
- Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, excerpts from *Women and Work* (1857)
- Eliza Lynn Linton, “The Wild Women as Social Insurgents” (1891)
- Suggested secondary reading: Xiomara Santamarina, preface to *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* (2005) and Poulomi Saha, excerpts from *An Empire of Touch: Women’s Political Labor and the Fabrication of East Bengal* (2019)

Week 6: Labor, Art, and the Political Poetess

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XIV-XV
- L.E.L., “The Factory” (1835)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Cry of the Children” (1843)
- Eliza Cook, “A Song for the Workers” and “A Song to ‘the People of England”” (c. 1845)
- Janet Hamilton, “The Uses and Pleasures of Poetry to the Working Classes” (1850); “The Peer and the Pauper” (1870)
- Suggested secondary reading: Kirstie Blair, “Dialect, Region, Class, Work” (2019) and Tricia Lootens, excerpts from *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (2016)

Week 7: Fallen Women, Elevated Women

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XVI-XVII
- Christina Rossetti, “Goblin Market” (1862), “A Soul” (1854), “In an Artist’s Studio (1856), “L.E.L.” (1866)
- L.E.L., “Lines of Life” (1829), “To the Queen” (1838)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “L.E.L.’s Last Question” (1839)
- Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883), “Venus of the Louvre” (1895)
- Suggested secondary reading: Victor Roman Mendoza, “‘Come Buy’: The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’” (2006)

Note: We move into a new unit on conduct, class, and labor as Jane Eyre encounters models of feminine virtue like Helen Burns and Miss Temple and assumes her position as governess of Thornfield, enabling attention to the era’s newly gendered economies and increased female professionalization. The previous unit’s concluding focus facilitates attention to the rhetoric of slavery that, as Julia Sun-Joo Lee has noted, pervades the novel, and sets up ensuing study of the poetry of British factory labor, with its conspicuous importation of tropes of enslavement. Our study of nineteenth-century Anglo-American gendered socialization norms is advanced in presentations and an associated essay in which students use one of Sarah Stickney Ellis’s popular Victorian conduct guides—marketed specifically to readers around their age—to identify behavioral conventions. To this end, they work collaboratively to crowd-source their understanding of these norms by each adopting one chapter of her guide to analyze and present (supplemented by Susan Fraiman’s account of Ellis in relation to Victorian literary culture). In the following session, we discuss how Emily Dickinson responds to and subverts such ideals through her themes, ways of life, and uses of form. In Weeks 5 and 6, we ask how “women’s work” came to be defined throughout the nineteenth century in sometimes predictable and sometimes surprising ways—exploring, for instance, how enduring associations of women with domestic needlework transformed as textile production industrialized into factory labor, or how female writers responded to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous dismissal of the “damned mob of scribbling women” that took literary culture by storm. Week 7 returns to behavioral norms and their intersections with sex work through the lapsarian narratives and visual imagery of fallen women, and to the figure’s inversion by major political poetesses who celebrated and elevated one another, seeking strategically to convene a community of female readers and writers around major social issues of the day.

UNIT 3: RACE, EMPIRE, “CIVILIZATION”

Week 8: Crying Mothers and Literary Caricatures

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XVIII-XXI
- E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Cry from an Indian Wife” (1885) and “A Strong Race Opinion” (1892)
- Felicia Hemans, “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “The Indian City” (1828)
- Lydia Sigourney, “The Cherokee Mother” (1831)
- Eliza Hamilton Dunlop, “The Aboriginal Mother” (1841)
- Zitkála-Šá, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” (1900)
- Suggested secondary reading: Lindsey E. R. O’Neil, “Creating Canada: Emily Pauline Johnson and the Dramatic Monologue” (2020)

Week 9: Settler Colonialism and the “Civilizing Mission”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XXII-XXVI
- Mary Ann Shadd, excerpts from *A Plea for Emigration* (1852) and *The Provincial Freeman* (1853)
- Olive Schreiner, “The Native Problem in South Africa” (1909)
- Suggested secondary reading: Rinaldo Walcott, “‘Who Is She and What Is She to You?’ Mary Ann Shadd Cary and the (Im)possibility of Black/Canadian Studies” (2000)

Week 10: “The True Race-Woman”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XXVII-XXIX
- Pauline Hopkins, “Talma Gordon” (1900) and “A Dash for Liberty” (1901)
- Pauline Hopkins, “Famous Women of the Negro Race” series (1901-2)
- Suggested secondary reading: Brittney Cooper, excerpts from *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017)

Week 11: Feminism in Colonial India

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XXX-XXXII
- Krupabai Sathianadhan, “Women’s Influence at Home,” “Home Training of Children,” “Female Education,” and “Social Intercourse between Europeans and Natives” (1896)
- Rukhmabai, “Indian Child Marriages” (1890); Cornelia Sorabji, “Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl” (1891)
- Suggested secondary reading: Priya Joshi, excerpts from *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (2002) and Antoinette Burton, excerpts from *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (1994)

Note: This unit on race and empire includes the keyword “civilization” to recognize that Western women’s participation in imperial “civilizing missions” drew upon their presumptive embodiment of the norms of civility and civilization, further amplifying the idealizations of women’s work analyzed in the previous unit. This focus links our exploration of settler colonial and imperial contexts as disparate as Canada and India, while secondary texts by Lindsey E. R. O’Neil and Rinaldo Walcott enable discussion of meta-level questions about how we nationalize (or don’t) figures like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, whose proposals for African American emigration to Canada raise complex questions about the encounters of immigrant and indigenous populations. In another in-class collaborative assignment that draws on skills cultivated in the conduct guide assignment (described above and detailed further below), we break into groups to research and discuss Hopkins’s definition of “the True Race-Woman” and the politics of uplift that characterize her “Famous Women of the Negro Race” series, published in The Colored American Magazine in 1901-2. Attending to questions of form and genre, we compare the very distinct employments of mysteries and enigmas in Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and Hopkins’s “Talma Gordon.” As we shift, in Week 11, into the new cultural context of imperial India, the essays, poetry, and journalism of Krupabai Sathianadhan, Rukhmabai, and Cornelia Sorabji help introduce students to defining political issues and forms of media of this region in the era, including the education of women and controversial practices like child-marriage and sati.

UNIT 4: THE GLOBAL NEW WOMAN

Week 12: New Women, Palace Burners, and Queer Love

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XXXIII-XXXIV
- Sarah Grand, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (1894)
- Ouida, “The New Woman” (1894)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper” (1892)
- Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, “The Palace-Burner” (1894)
- Amy Levy, “New Love, New Life,” “Borderland,” “In the Mile End Road,” “To Vernon Lee,” “A Wall Flower,” and “At a Dinner Party” (1889)
- Suggested secondary reading: Emma Heaney, excerpts from *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (2017)

Week 13: “A Voice from the South, By a Black Woman of the South”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ch. XXXV-XXXVIII
- Anna Julia Cooper, “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race” (1892)
- Suggested secondary reading: Saidiya Hartman, excerpts from *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (2019)

Week 14: Better Times, Past and Future

- Toru Dutt, “Savitri” (1882)
- Olive Schreiner, “Three Dreams in a Desert” (1887)
- Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream” (1905)
- Suggested secondary reading: Sukanya Banerjee, “Transimperial” (2018) and Kyla Schuller, excerpts from *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (2021)

Note: In our final three weeks, we undertake a comparative study of the global New Woman across British, Irish, American, South African, and Indian contexts. The unit opens with the debates that spawned the term “New Woman” and with conventional literary treatments, themes, and tropes of its associated literary genre, including a common emphasis on the tragic misfit between modern women and their societies. In week 12, we explore representations of homosexuality and gender nonconformity through the poetry of Amy Levy and Emma Heaney’s recent account of the queer and trans-feminine New Woman. In the final two weeks, we identify alternative global depictions of New Women and uses of literature to elevate earlier eras, promote social progress, or envision utopia. The course concludes by asking students to consider the lingering ramifications of nineteenth-century cultural practices, forms, and ideals, as well as the contemporary state of global feminist movements. Here Kyla Schuller’s (forthcoming) alternative history of non-white feminism may prove a salient secondary resource. Last fall, in an especially popular session, my students and I examined newly erected monuments to Mary Wollstonecraft (Newington Green, London, 2020) and Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth (Central Park, NYC, 2020) and the controversies that unfolded around their design, opening a dialogue about how the contributions of historically significant figures get perpetuated, challenged, or reevaluated, today, in contested public legacies and memorials.

Sample Assignments

Commonplace Book Entries/Annotations (15%)

This class will participate in the creation of commonplace books: a favored activity of many nineteenth-century women. Commonplace books most commonly served as repositories for passages of text readers found meaningful and wanted to preserve for posterity. We will retain this function, but also expand upon it: your commonplace entries will ground our class discussion, enable us all to track themes and topics that connect and differentiate our course texts, and serve as a common study guide that will facilitate your development of the final essay.

From any of the non-Brontë readings for a given class session, select a passage that strikes you as significant: intriguing, surprising, puzzling, personally meaningful, etc. Make sure that your chosen passage is substantial enough to invite detailed analysis, since you will be adding at least three substantive close-reading annotations (interpretations, analyses, questions, etc.) to it. However, your passage should be focused: the amount of text should not be longer than needed to highlight three annotations, and the annotations should be specific to the word, device, line, or sentence to which they are appended. For a poem, a few lines or short stanza will often suffice; for prose, no more than a paragraph is usually necessary. Just below the annotations, you should add three keywords (that address properties of the passage: thematic, formal, etc.), to facilitate the searches everyone will conduct when preparing the final essay prospectus. These keyword terms must also be added to a common index at the bottom of the page.

To contribute to the commonplace book, copy your passage of text into our shared Google Doc under the relevant week heading and use comments (and, if you wish, highlights, links, etc.) to add your annotations. List the keywords immediately below the passage *and* add them to the Index at the bottom of the page. Be sure to append your name to each entry so that it's clear who made the contribution and to list the page number from the reading (see my example in the Doc).

Assignment Requirements:

- Post seven entries to the class commonplace book by no later than November 3.
- Submit each entry by 8am on the day we're discussing that text in class.
- Each student should create no more than one entry for each author, to maximize the number of writers covered.

Conduct Guide Midterm Presentation (10%) and Essay (15%)

To understand the conduct guide—a genre widely marketed to women throughout the nineteenth century—our class will form a collaborative research team to study one of the era's most popular guides: Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (1842). Each student will participate in the research team by adopting a chapter of this book to analyze and present to the class, first in a presentation and then in a short essay. The presentation should introduce Ellis's advice to young women on the topic discussed in your chapter. In the essay, identify the values (gendered or otherwise) that Ellis promotes in your chosen chapter and advance an argument about whether her advice aims to circumscribe or expand the agency of female readers—or, perhaps, does both (some elements/values may work in competing ways).

Presentation: Think of this as a short informational presentation: your goal is to educate the class on key pieces of advice offered by Ellis in your chosen chapter, to improve our collective understanding of the complete, book-length conduct guide. Please follow the recommended tips for effective presentations that are included in the prompt for class discussion leadership.

Essay: In this essay, you'll be asked to expand upon your presentation findings in an argument-driven essay of 4-5pp. Successful essays will focus predominantly on your chosen chapter, but also reflect knowledge gleaned from colleagues' presentations about other chapters of Ellis's *Daughters of England*; in addition, they will acknowledge nuances and complexities of the text.

Final Essay (20%)

In this 5-7pp. comparative-argumentative essay, you will be asked to analyze *Jane Eyre* and to situate it in relation to the broader tradition of nineteenth-century women's writing that we have studied this semester. To do so, your essay should advance an argument about how the novel compares or contrasts with at least four works written by other authors we've read. To focus this argument, select a specific object of analysis that you will use to compare these texts—such as a topic (for example: education), theme (for example: independence/autonomy), or element of form/style (for example: first-person narration or irony) that you will trace across multiple works.

The Commonplace Book is designed to be of aid in developing your topic; the Index and broader searchable document furnish a wide-ranging cache of ideas that you all have collectively identified as significant across all of our readings. Indeed, the prospectus activity (described further below) prompts you to begin exploring topics by *first* reviewing those included in the Commonplace Index.

Final Essay Prospectus (10%)

Your final essay prospectus should indicate succinctly (in no more than one paragraph) what object of analysis will guide your final essay topic, which other texts you anticipate including in your study, and what connections you see between these works and *Jane Eyre* (in terms of your chosen object of analysis). Preparation of the prospectus should start with a holistic review of the Commonplace Index and the prospectus must include a selection of 4-5 Commonplace entries that you anticipate using in the final essay or that were helpful in developing your topic. These entries—which constitute potential textual evidence for your essay—should be appended below the opening paragraph of the prospectus, and you should include a short explanation (2-3 sentences) of the relationship of each entry to your chosen final essay topic. If this explanation includes analytic points made within the marginal comments on an entry, these points must be properly attributed to the commenter.

Because this is a prospectus activity, it can be *prospective*—in other words, you are not committed to using these quotations in your final essay (and you are likely to locate additional textual evidence during the writing process). However, you will set yourself up well to write the final essay if you take seriously this opportunity to think creatively and expansively about locating sources of evidence, using insights generated by your colleagues in the Commonplace Book to do so.