Teaching women’s writing: a case study in creative praxis

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Teaching Women’s Writing: A Case Study in Creative Praxis

Rebecca Lipperini

Abstract

Creative writing assignments as textual interventions and “deformances” of original texts, and as alternatives to traditional composition assignments, can strengthen students’ sense of unfamiliar and marginalized subject positions encountered in the literature classroom. Entering into a long-standing debate over the value of creative writing pedagogy in the literature classroom, this article takes an in-depth look at the trials and triumphs of a semester in the classroom teaching “The Woman Question in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction” through a creative praxis. It includes a detailed review of the creative assignment prompts alongside the students’ submissions. Writing creatively encouraged students to develop an intersectional and inclusive view of women’s writing. Finally, creative praxis, by encouraging students to pull apart a text and rebuild it themselves, offers alternative ways of producing the same desired outcomes of traditional literary analysis: critical and astute close readings, effective use of evidence, and thoughtful and persuasive arguments.

Keywords: Creative writing; teaching of literature; intersectional feminism; American literature; storytelling

Introduction

Writing projects are an essential part of the literature classroom; in their papers, students develop their curiosity by investigating and interacting with source material outside of the classroom. However, I am unconvinced that compositional writing— the kind of expository and exegetical writing that ostensibly teaches students how to close read, make use of evidence, and craft an
argument—is necessarily the best tool for exploration and discovery. In an effort to research and enact alternative writing pedagogy, I used my fall 2016 course, “The Woman Question in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction,” as an opportunity to scrap the traditional composition and rhetoric essays and instead ask for creative projects. I wanted to see if alternative pedagogies could produce better versions of the same desired outcomes: critical and astute close readings, effective use of evidence, and thoughtful and persuasive arguments.

The goal for the course was to familiarize the students with a period-specific overview of women’s writing and women’s issues in nineteenth-century American literature. Beyond familiarizing students with the culture and context of the period, the course exposed students to an intersectional view of women’s writing and introduced them to alternative ethnic, racial, and class positions. Literary studies by nature makes available alternative subject positions, and it asks students to recognize their own. Even so, literature as an object of study both encourages intimacy and frustrates it. Any text purports to divulge something about the author, but an astute reader knows that it conceals immensely more than it reveals.

My motivation for assigning creative writing projects was to bridge this gap by emphasizing the craft of authorship. To be clear, creative writing is not equivalent to personal response. Creative writing offers a way of reading that encourages students to get inside of a text and pull it apart. Instead of being asked to find meaning within a text, students are asked to think rigorously about the component parts of a text and to figure out why it works the way it does, what choices the author had to make, and what constraints influenced the author when writing. The students should come away with an understanding of how invaluable the components of a story are to the work as a whole, and how much the text absolutely must change if one of these elements is altered.
What I discovered, though, was that creative writing projects exceeded my expectations. Writing creatively can strengthen students’ sense of unfamiliar and marginalized subject positions they encounter in the literature classroom. This in turn develops students into better readers of nineteenth-century literature. The archive of writings from any period, genre, or group of people is therefore both deeply intimate and historically alienating. It requires students to become familiar with subject positions radically different from their own. I also discovered a welcome, but unintended outcome: creative writing can uncover connections for the students between the past and the present.

In this article, I will outline the research that convinced me to assign creative projects to my students. I then detail my experience teaching, using the assignments themselves as case studies, the rubric I used, and the I results collected.

Literature Review

Research shows that the benefits of creative writing as a pedagogical tool cross disciplines. Art Young, for example, argues that the poetic function of language “engages the writer’s values” and “is central to the development, understanding, and application of knowledge” for the student, no matter the subject she studies (78). In the literature classroom, students who are asked to interact with a text creatively can become better readers (Knoeller 43), can learn basic concepts first hand (Schiller 114), and can gain a sense of ownership over the text (Austen 140). Creative writing, it turns out, “is an activity that requires intense critical thinking” (139).

Veronica Austen lays out five benefits of creative writing pedagogy in the literature classroom:
(1) dispelling the awe of literature and creative active learners; (2) developing critical readers; (3) furthering student understanding of literary criticism; (4) inspiring deeper commitment to excellence; and (5) motivating class bonding and dismantling the classroom hierarchy. (139)

I am most interested in her first two proposed benefits—and I would add three of my own: (6) teaching creative writing allows students to inhabit different subject positions; (7) teaching creative writing is job-oriented, because storytelling is a valuable and practical skill; and (8) teaching creative writing emphasizes the role of craft in authorship.

My stance toward teaching literature aligns theoretically with Rob Pope’s “textual intervention” and Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels’s concept of “deformance,” a portmanteau of “deform” and “performance” that believes in the power of purposefully transforming and deforming a text in order to revitalize and “reinstall” it (30). Deformance has become a powerful keyword in the field of digital humanities—Stephen Ramsay calls it “a radical eisegesis”—but I believe that the eisegesis—meaning, in opposition to exegesis, the practice of imposing your own meaning on the text—of deformance can be valuable in inclusive pedagogy as well. As Pope explains:

The best way to understand how a text works . . . is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done. (1)

And if one of our pedagogical goals is to get students to write more often and better—to “enjoy writing and to experience themselves as writers” (Elbow 22)—then what better way to accomplish that than to ask students to immerse themselves in the playful, metaphorical, and imaginative uses of language? Such a praxis will help students “understand works of literature
from the inside out” (Bloom 57) while answering Robert Scholes’s call that “as teachers we should encourage the full range of critical practices in our students” (41).

When Jessica Labbé conducted a similar case study about an American literature course taught at a North Carolina community college, she found that her results yielded an important reminder: the classroom is inherently interconnected with students’ lives. That is to say, there is no divide between “what happens in school” and “what happens in real life.” A deep, meaningful education stretches far beyond the classroom, the degree, or even the immediate profession obtained as a result of that education. (72–73) Another way of saying this is that education extends beyond the classroom.

The Classroom
I teach at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Almost 90 percent of the students are from New Jersey, split evenly between men and women (the university does not report those students who identify as nonbinary). The student population is racially diverse: the university reports the ethnicities of full-time students (both graduate and undergraduate) as 39.8% White, 23.3% Asian and East Asian, 12.2% Latino, 7.8% African American, less than 1% Native Hawaiian, and less than 1% Native American. A little over three-quarters of all students receive financial aid. The university has over 35,000 undergraduates, and reports more than 700 students with a major or minor in English literature. Although many students pursue an interest in English literature, it is by no means the most popular major at the university.

Most of these demographics were mirrored in my classroom. The room of sixteen students was split, eight men and eight women (no student identified as nonbinary). All but one
student was from New Jersey. More than half of the students self-reported as White, meaning that the classroom was considerably less diverse than the university at large.

The most significant difference between the demographics of the university and those of my classroom, however, was that all of the students in my course were English majors, with one student pursuing a double major in English and communications. The class was an advanced English seminar: six seniors, five juniors, and four sophomores. One student was a foreign exchange student. More than any other statistic, the students’ level of interest (all English majors) and year of study (primarily juniors or seniors) were the most significant factors for this classroom experiment.

Asking students to write creative assignments in a literature classroom best serves upper-level students who already have experience and familiarity close-reading texts and formulating arguments about them. Students who are given creative assignments are expected to already have familiarity with the tools and techniques used in the literature classroom, so that a creative assignment will help them to build on their existing skills. Creative assignments work best when teachers and students trust each other, which is easier to achieve in a classroom of dedicated students with a demonstrated interest in the subject matter. Instructors can trust that their students have experience writing analytical essays and familiarity close reading texts. Students can trust that the assignments will be challenging and meaningful.

The “Woman Question in Nineteenth-Century Literature” class met twice a week for fifteen weeks. The texts on the syllabus were arranged chronologically, and then organized by theme. The three major themes were as follows: (1) slavery, labor, and gender; (2) health and sexuality and gender; (3) the New Woman and gender. Within these topics, we discussed a wide
range of nineteenth-century concerns, including motherhood, slavery, poverty, class struggle, race, indigeneity, religion, citizenship, marriage, and body image.

Each third of the course corresponded with a writing assignment. The three writing projects comprised 50 percent of the students’ grades. Of the other 50 percent, 40 percent came from midterm exams, of which there were two, and 10 percent came from homework assignments. The midterm exams focused on questions about the primary source material. The homework asked students to reflect on the secondary source material. Because my writing projects were experimental, I wanted to implement check-ins for the students, so it was important for me to see homework assignments and to have traditional midterms. Other versions of this class might wish to break down the grading differently. The eighty-minute class had a composite format; the first thirty minutes of class were used as lecture time to orient students to key concepts, themes, historical contexts, and biographical information about the author (or authors) on the table for the day. The remainder of the class was run as a seminar.

Every syllabus represents what was left out, in addition to what was included. I chose texts that foreground race, gender, class, authorship, and creativity. My hope was that these texts would be particularly generative for students to reshape through creative writing. Even so, writing by nonminoritized subjects and nonfiction tracts such as sermons, speeches, and newspaper articles would work just as well. The goal should be to get students to understand the artifice of the text by understanding deeply its component parts.

The Assignments

Each paper assignment asked the students to rewrite one particular aspect of a text, and to include an analytical component of roughly one-third the length of the creative one. In the
analytical section of the assignment, students discussed what they learned via their creative retelling. The purpose of the analytical component was to stabilize the assignment by granting students a more traditional and familiar format for discussing a text. I encouraged the students to use the second part of the assignment to reflect on what was accomplished in the first. The students were given several writing prompts and asked to organize their response around a central idea. I encouraged students to narrativize their thought process and to use the first person in their writing.

In order to move from smallest alteration to largest, I oriented the creative writing assignments around three authorial choices: setting, point of view, and genre. Students began by making the smallest possible changes to the text as they were introduced to the parameters and goals of the assignment. Assigning creative writing projects focused on other components of a text, such as metaphor, character, dialogue, themes, and mood would work well, too. The instructors’ goal should be dual: to teach key literary concepts through creative praxis, and to use creative writing to better understand the primary source. An outcome that pleasantly surprised me was that approaching a historically alienating text through a creative writing project strengthened students’ sense of the unfamiliar and marginalized subject positions encountered in the classroom.

For the first assignment, we read three accounts of labor in America: Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills.” The students were asked to rewrite the story (or at least a part of the story) in a new setting. Besides teaching the basic idea of setting, the assignment stressed that students think specifically about the historical and geographical contexts of these texts. The assignment asked that students consider what the specificity of the historical moment
and geographic location lent to the text and to reflect on what changes when one story gets translated into a different time or place.

The second part of the assignment asked students to reflect on how much of a story is shaped by environment. Some questions I asked the students to consider were: What does your story teach us about the importance of the American historical context of the text? What can the comparison with alternative times and places open up for us? What are the limitations of changing the setting? What is lost when the historical specificity is taken away? I also directed them to think about social contexts: How much are the events of the story shaped by social or political structures? How do gender, class, race, or professional position affect the story? How can you tell? What is the relation between the setting and how the characters speak?

My intention for the assignment was for students to think about difference: what’s specific about antebellum America, and what gets lost when these characters and situations are translated to another time and place. Literature from the nineteenth century should be alienating, after all, to a twenty-first-century college student. But, to my surprise, the students’ writing projects often focused on continuity across historical periods. For example, one student placed the characters of Uncle Tom’s Cabin twenty-five years later in Jim Crow South. Tom, a minister in her retelling, watches his church go up in flames at the hands of a white mob. The message was simple: Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe are no longer enslaved, but they face a host of new problems related to the aftermath of slavery. This transhistorical perspective revealed an understanding of the interconnectedness of history, and the limitations of reading any historical event in isolation.

Students were immensely more interested in similarity than in difference—and not always between historical periods and the texts, but between today and the texts. Students, for
example, used the plight of iron-mill workers to write about labor conditions in today’s minimum-wage jobs, and used Harriet Jacobs’s account of sexual predation to think about the noncitizen status of undocumented immigrants and about the abuse of domestic laborers. I was taken aback by the diversity of responses. These projects produced deformances of the original text that were radical eisegesis, in the positive sense that Ramsay uses the term—they deliberately refract, rearrange, and reassemble the text.

For the second assignment I asked students to rewrite a scene from a text from a different point of view. The texts I chose each featured either an unreliable narrator (Constance Fenimore Woolson’s “Felipa,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,”) or an unreliable focalized character (Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*, Charles Chestnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*). Of the sixteen students, twelve chose to adapt “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and four chose to adapt “Felipa.” Curiously, not a single student wanted to tackle *Daisy Miller* or *The House Behind the Cedars*. Perhaps the student felt that the longer stories would be more difficult to dissect and rewrite. Or perhaps the difference between first-person narration and third-person focalized narration influenced the students.

Of the twelve who wrote about “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the projects split—five wrote from the perspective of John (the husband), five from the perspective of Jennie, (the sister and housekeeper), and two wrote from the perspective of the woman trapped inside the wallpaper. All three versions of the story had to make a decision about how to read the reliability of the original narrator. The stories written from the perspective of John followed directly from class discussion about paternalism in medicine during the Progressive Era. But what was most interesting to me was how many students chose to speak from the perspective of the silent witness of the events as Jennie, the sister/ housekeeper.
These students demonstrated an ability to extrapolate from class discussion and recognize the subject position of a woman who the text itself seems to ignore. One student explained his decision to focalize the story from Jennie’s perspective:

I saw John as an example of what was wrong with America at this time. He is unable to listen to his wife and get past his preconceptions, which ultimately hurts her mental health. I think Jennie was a good perspective [from which] to show this, because the story from John’s perspective would have been just an exercise in ignorance. Jennie shows both sides, the deep understanding of someone who spends time with a patient, and the powerless detachment of someone trying to treat mental illness. She sees these things, and has no choice but to go about her duties and keep quiet. Her perceptiveness goes to no use, and I tried to highlight that.

The student blames John’s benevolent paternalism for the events of the story and argues that any attempt to write from John’s perspective would be “an exercise in ignorance.” John has all the power and none of the understanding. Jennie, on the other hand, has all of the understanding and none of the power. Her voicelessness in the original narration inspired the student to try to see the world from her perspective—a deformance that radically rewrites the original text while also addressing issues of privilege and inclusion.

The third assignment asked students to rethink genre. This project was a bit longer, and contained a small research component. I asked students to rewrite part of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* or Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* in a new genre. These two texts are often read as reflections of the hopeless condition of women at the turn of the century; Lily Bart and Edna Pontellier commit suicide because there’s no horizon of possibility for them. But such an
explanation does not adequately account for the proliferation of more positive endings for women during this time, such as Pauline Hopkins’s *Winona*, Juliet Wilbor Tompkins’s *Dr. Ellen*, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. I believe that the two (accidental?) suicides are generic conventions—that Lily and Edna die because that’s what the protagonist of a naturalist novel does. As Charles Walcutt writes, naturalism is simply “a chronicle of despair” (21). One way, then, for students to engage with literary analysis and criticism of these texts is to consider the effects that genre has on characters and their choices.

Students rewrote the stories as detective fiction, as a newspaper article, and as a fairy tale. One student rewrote *The House of Mirth* as a classic *Dungeons & Dragons* hero’s tale, another rewrote it in the genre of magical realism, emphasizing the lineage of Lily’s demise through her parents. One student chose to rewrite *The Awakening* as a horror story, titled “Strange and Awful.” The author of “Strange and Awful” explained that the defamiliarization that has taken hold of Edna and convinces her to commit suicide is already disturbing. This student’s writing project challenged Chopin’s aestheticization of Edna’s suicide, revealing it as something deeply horrifying.

The Rubric

Creative writing assignments have a reputation for being overly subjective, but I followed Labbé’s example and devised a rubric. The rubric helped scaffold the assignments so that feedback given on the first writing project could be implemented in the next project. In this, I used Nancy Sommers’s research on the reciprocal nature of grading and response, orienting my comments in order to “create a partnership through feedback” (250). I would also add that creative assignments are vastly different from the genre of student writing known as the personal
essay. Where the personal essay invites students to reflect on their own experience, a creative essay is a practice in craft, one that asks students to break down the component parts of a story to understand how it works.

I divided the rubric into four approximately equally weighted sections. For the first and second assignments, the total number of achievable points was fifteen. For the final assignment, the total number was twenty. The four categories were as follows: “Meaning and Content,” which measured the student’s engagement with the source material and with the prompt; “Language Use,” which measured liveliness of voice and quality of storytelling, character development, use of concrete languages, and use of literary devices; “Grammar and Mechanics,” which accounted for, of course, grammar and mechanics; and “Organization and Development,” which assessed the structural logic of the writing, especially as related to the analytic portion of the assignment.

Having an established rubric for a creative project gave students clear guidelines for improving their next project. A solid piece of creative writing that had very little to do with the source material or the prompt (or both!) could earn low marks in “Meaning and Content.” A technically correct piece of writing without an attempt at creative storytelling could lose points in “Language Use,” and a solid piece of writing that failed to have an argument in the analytical component would lose points in “Organization and Development”.

The Results
Writing creatively encouraged students to read closely. One student, who titled her creative revision of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “The Bitter Kind of Lonely,” shows this remarkably well in the explanation for her rewrite:
Given that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* strongly attests to the toxic invasion of slavery into the domestic sphere, I was fascinated by the fact that in many ways, she also highlights that adult slaves were heavily infantilized by the slavery system. Much like children, who depend on their parents for food, shelter, and clothing, slaves were completely dependent on their masters to provide for their needs. Those slaves with cruel masters often suffered unimaginable abuse, violence, and degradation, as did many of the slaves Stowe represents in her novel, including Cassy, whose journey most strongly inspired “The Bitter Kind of Lonely.” Because I was so interested in both Stowe’s fascination with the domestic and the institutionalized infantilization of slaves, I knew that if I wanted to tell a modern, original story with strong parallels to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, I would have to tell a story about children, and about children resisting neglect and abuse in particular. For that reason, “The Bitter Kind of Lonely” is largely focalized from Bandit’s point of view.

The author of “The Bitter Kind of Lonely” reimagined the Cassy subplot of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* through the eyes of two children in an abusive household. Her textual intervention demonstrated the ability to read and understand the intricacies of a text. “The Bitter Kind of Lonely” was more than a creative retelling of a story; it was an analysis, an interpretation, and a close reading of the original text.

One student, who called her story “Nightmare,” focused on the attempted scene of sexual assault between Gus Trenor and Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, rewriting it in the style of a gothic horror. The student explained:
Another common theme of the horror genre is the ability to visibly mutilate the female body without real consequence. In numerous scary tales, the woman is often the most expendable out of all the characters. She is given, very often, the cruelest forms of punishment and torture or she must endure extreme bouts of suffering in order to become a valid character.

Rewriting a text creatively should reveal how a text works. One student, for example, upon turning *The House of Mirth* into a piece of investigative journalism, discovered that realism presents such a “firmly-grounded universe” with “logical progression” that translating it to an investigative piece required very little rearranging of events and perspective.

Managing Student Anxiety

The best way to manage student anxiety about creative writing projects is to make the expectations clear. Because of this, I circulated the rubric beforehand and provided future-oriented feedback on papers. Having more than one creative assignment also helped. Knowing that they’ve done a creative assignment before meant that students felt more confident about succeeding in another, more complicated, creative assignment.

I also installed a safety valve—an emergency final composition paper assignment option that allowed students to forgo a creative writing project at the end of the semester if they felt they needed to. But what I found was that by the end of the semester, students trusted themselves and were comfortable enough with my feedback that they felt confident to compose a final creative writing project. Of the sixteen students enrolled in the class, not one chose to write an analytic paper for their final.
Conclusion

Most advocates of creative writing place an emphasis on the personal enrichment creative writing can offer the students. In my course, I found that creative writing projects developed students’ understanding of unfamiliar and marginalized subject positions, fostering their openness to diversity, their commitment to inclusion, and their reckoning with privilege, all valuable and beneficial to their inner lives. Beyond the personal, asking students to pull apart a text and to understand how it works should be an essential part of the English literature classroom. The analytic essay is one method of achieving this goal. The creative writing project is another. Combining these two approaches by requiring students not only to study the text but to recreate it themselves impresses on them the possibilities, the choices, and the constraints that formed these texts into what they are. The praxis of creation, learning by doing, encourages students to think about literature as craft.

Rebecca Lipperini is a doctoral candidate in English literature at Rutgers- New Brunswick. Her research focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth century American women writers, speculative fiction, and the female inhuman.

Works Cited


