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Women in English Education

The written word has a substantial presence in my world as I study English Education with a minor in writing. Globally, works in the field of literature are dominantly produced by men and have been since the beginning of time. Women were often prohibited from formal education, leaving them out of much of the historical record for thousands of years. However, history reveals women like Sor Juana and Anne Bradstreet, who had the agency to speak their minds on the written page. Similarly, author Melissa Febos does the same in her collection of essays, *Girlhood*. Historically, women had less educational access, resulting in negligible women teachers until the rise of public education and women writers who potentially omitted authentic feelings due to social policing. Still, today, schools have yet to adapt diverse perspectives in English classrooms, highlighting the widespread sexism that remains.

Women authors of earlier generations were more socially policed, but in the modern era, authors like Melissa Febos can be uncensored in their published writing to far less societal backlash. In the spring of 2024, I was introduced to a passage from Melissa Febos' work titled "The Wild, Sublime Body". Febos details her unfiltered experiences during the changes in the female body throughout and beyond puberty. She writes, "By the time I was thirteen, I had divorced my body. Not before or since have I felt such animosity toward another being" (Febos). Relating to her self-image issues, I was inspired to read her book, *Girlhood*; it did not disappoint. Her unfettered speech about the everyday life of growing up female is something I believe earlier

women authors would have looked up to. Women like Anne Bradstreet may have had the power to write their thoughts on women's issues, where the social policing and sexism targeting women of her time were more prevalent. But Bradstreet herself never published some of these works during her lifetime. The Poetry Foundation writes, "In order to defend her from attacks from reviewers at home and abroad who might be shocked by the impropriety of a female author, these encomiums of the poet stress that she is a virtuous woman" (Poetry Foundation para 26). They imply Bradstreet may have felt a particular way about women's topics, but due to upholding her image in the social sphere, her opinions may be filtered. I believe *Girlhood* has had more of a profound impact on me than Bradstreet's works; unrestrained, raw experiences of women should be shared and celebrated. In the 21st century, this is more plausible.

Female teachers dominate statistics when compared to men in the same profession. Historically, this was not the case until the late 1800s, according to historian John Rury in *Education and Women's Work*. Industrialization, immigration, and westward expansion contributed to the implementation of public school systems nationwide, creating a call for a women workforce. Before this growth, boys were taught to further their education for careers, while girls only learned domestic household duties (LeQuire 3). The gender separation in education is a historical chasm, where few women could obtain literacy skills, often through their social class, like Sor Juana. Women's activist and educator Catharine Beecher (1800-1878) founded the American Women's Educational Association, seeking to bridge the gap between men's and women's education. According to the National Women's History Museum, "Beecher argued that women were uniquely suited to the moral and intellectual development of children, either as mothers or as educators" (Michals 1). Beecher's advocacy may have contributed to today's statistics regarding gender in teaching roles across the U.S. If women like Beecher did

not have the agency to support women in their educational journeys, I likely would not have been where I am today studying English Education.

In modern K-12 education, middle and high school English classes can introduce new generations to a diverse selection of literature beyond that of British and U.S. Unfortunately, curricula across the country choose to highlight White male authors over and over again.

Shakespeare, Orwell, Fitzgerald, Hawthorne, Twain, Dickens, Hemingway, etcetera. I do not even have to mention their first names because we know them to all be men. Writer for The Guardian, Jeffery Boakye, writes, “We can’t ignore the fact that these books were written at points in history when social narratives were mainly limited to the perspectives of straight white men” (para 3). Why then, are our prospective generations exposed to one perspective of the world? Where are the women? After all, we established that most teachers are women, so why make them preach outdated, fixed ideologies?

While the history of gender and writing is troublesome, society is *very* slowly incorporating women’s voices. Whether through Melissa Febos and her experience as a cisgender woman, or Catherine Beecher’s support for women in fields predominated by men, which remains so in literature in modern K-12 classrooms, there is hope for the voices of women in coming generations who are determined to make a change. Additionally, the growing idea of gender as a spectrum may begin changing things in the written world, where many are asking themselves how much ground gender holds in society. I am optimistic for the future of literature, education, and women in general – despite the troubling recent election. More frequently, I have found teachers and professors who strive to be progressive in their coursework and resources, which I aspire to as I move into the professional world of teaching English.

Works Cited

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