He Said, She Said: A Feminist Approach to Teaching the Twentieth-Century Novel in the Twenty-First Century

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The question of women's relationship to the literary canon is still pertinent today and is particularly significant for those of us who are both guided by feminist pedagogy and constrained by departmental limitations. How do we give an overview of the novel without either diminishing the importance of certain male novelists or eliminating female writers altogether? I suggest that a thematic approach in which pairs of texts make explicit two different gender perspectives is useful. This approach underscores the notion that gender informs writing as well as reading and, equally significant, introduces feminist theory as a tool for literary analysis.
He Said, She Said: A Feminist Approach to Teaching the Twentieth-Century Novel in the Twenty-First Century

by Elizabeth Richardson Viti

In her introduction to the 1988 Yale French Studies volume entitled The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature, Joan Dejean points out that in a 1961 issue of this same review Henri Peyre stated that France possesses an incomparable number of remarkable women in its literary history. Yet, she goes on to say, the enthusiasm of Peyre, Chair of the French Department at the time, did not promote the institutionalization of a female literary presence at Yale. Thus she asks, “What went wrong with the suggested promotion of women writers from ephemeral status as hot literary property to more lasting presence in the course of study?” (2). In contrast, the final article of this same collection, Alice Jardine and Anne M. Menke’s “Exploding the Issue: ‘French’ ‘Women’ ‘Writers’ and ‘The Canon’?”, challenges the canon. Nonetheless, in fourteen interviews with contemporary French women writers, the respondents “betray a reluctant acknowledgement of their oppression as women by the literary establishment and an often covert recognition that they are not, after all, indifferent to the effects of these highly theoretical matters on the destiny of their own work, especially in the United States” (230).

Today, ten years later, the question of women’s relationship to the literary canon still hangs in the air. This poses a particular problem for those of us who teach the twentieth-century French novel and are both guided by feminist pedagogy and constrained by departmental limitations. How do we, particularly those of us who teach undergraduates, give an overview of the genre without either diminishing the importance of certain male novelists or eliminating women novelists altogether? I suggest that a thematic approach, but one in which two different gender perspectives are made explicit, is the most useful. This strategy has many advantages. Although the works chosen and student capabilities will dictate the rhythm, six novels a semester is an appropriate number for my undergraduates; thus the breakdown into pairs of texts occurs quite naturally. On the one hand, this type of pairing privileges a great deal of creativity,
resulting in some unexpected “literary couples” who uncover delightfully surprising similarities. However, on the other hand, this technique does not preclude the inclusion of the so-called “tried and true,” those authors and texts that we are unwilling, under any circumstances, to eliminate. More important, this approach makes abundantly clear to students, men and women alike, the feminist notion that gender informs writing. The discussions themselves—and they can be quite animated—illustrate the second part of this feminist formula, that gender informs reading. Lastly, and equally significant in this explicitly feminist reworking of the syllabus, is the introduction of feminist theory—provided in lecture format—as a tool for literary analysis.

To begin the course I use Colette’s La Vagabonde and Michel Butor’s La Modification. There are several pedagogical reasons for this choice. First of all, starting the semester with a text by a female author establishes from the outset the value of women writers. There is also a practical advantage for an undergraduate audience: the novel is relatively brief, and because its form is traditional, it is very accessible to students. It builds up confidence in their reading skills, and by the time students begin the much more difficult La Modification, they feel enormous good will, something that they will certainly need not only for Butor but for Proust who appears in the second pairing. In addition, the two texts illustrate structurally the distinction between the traditional novel and the “new” novel. And finally, thematically the two works make evident gender differences in the face of personal crisis. Indeed, the similarities in these two works, published almost fifty years apart, are remarkable. Renée NéRé and Léon Delmont must both make an important decision: they must decide whether to continue living life as they presently know it or to begin anew. For Renée this means giving up her career as a music-hall performer and marrying Maxime Dufferein-Chautel, a financially well-fixed gentleman who has patiently pursued her for months. For Léon this means leaving Henriette, his wife of some twenty-odd years, and their four children, and living with Cécile Darcella, a younger woman whom he met on the train during one of his frequent business trips to Rome. The two protagonists each take advantage of train travel to make up their mind about their fate. Renée leaves Paris on tour with Brague and travels throughout the south of France. At the time of her departure she is quite sure that she wishes to return to the safety of Max’s arms: “Je vous promets, moi, de vous rapporter une Renée lasse de ‘touner,’ maigrie de solitude, et libre de tout, sauf de vous” (1195). For his part, as he leaves Paris, Léon is just as sure what he will do: “Enfin la délivrance approche et de merveilleuses années” (24).

However, in each case the principal character does an about-face. Renée, separated from the man who had reawakened her sexual desire, “l’inéxorable,” is able to evaluate her situation clear-sighted. It is through the process of writing letters to Max that this former author, “une femme de
lettres qui a mal tourné” (1073), understands that she simply cannot reenter this world that she had so bravely chosen to leave when she divorced Taillandy. She asks herself, “Que vas-tu faire dans cette galère . . . pas même! Dans ce bateau-lavoir, solidement amarré, où l’on blanchit une lessive patriarchale?” (1223). Instead, she chooses to continue her “vie de vagabonde,” as the title of the book presages, and jumps at the chance to go on tour in South America. In the case of Léon, he has changed his mind by the time he steps off the train in Rome and does a literal about-face by simply getting on the next train back to Paris without ever speaking to Cécile. Rather he chooses (again, as the title of the novel predicts) a “modification” of his initial decision to leave one woman for another and returns to his usual routine where both Henriette and Cécile are available to him: “Je continuerai par conséquent ce faux travail détériorant chez Scabelli à cause des enfants, à cause d’Henriette, à cause de moi, à vivre quinze place du Panthéon; c’était une erreur de croire que je pourrais m’en échapper; et surtout, les prochaines fois, je le sais, je ne pourrai m’empêcher de retourner voir Cécile” (274). Furthermore, writing plays a pivotal role in Delmont’s decision as well. He will write a book, he says, to sort out, to explain to Cécile, all that led to his decision to return to Paris.

Significant in this comparison is how the female protagonist is able to turn her back on marriage, the traditional life choice for women at the beginning of this century, and how the mid-twentieth-century male protagonist seems unwilling to face change of any kind. Simone de Beauvoir’s Le Deuxième Sexe and its existentialist explanation of gender differences provides a fascinating lens through which to view this disparity. Ironically it is Renée Néré who is the subject of her own life because it is she who decides what form it will take. Clearly she is autonomous, never letting friends, such as Hamond, or lovers, such as Max, make decisions for her. Most important, Renée is willing to confront head-on trying situations, whether her abusive marriage or the possibility of a second marriage, to evaluate the implications for her and to choose what it is that she must do. This protagonist is one of good faith who is capable of what existentialists term an authentic act. She is transcendence itself, willing to move forward in life, as the novel’s title implies. Léon Delmont, in contrast, appears to be among those that Beauvoir would describe as condemned to stagnation. He simply cannot be the autonomous subject that is Renée because he is too preoccupied with what other people think, as his reflexions during the trip to Rome demonstrate. His inability to confront difficult situations, to make hard choices, turns this protagonist into quintessential immanence. Worse, his immobility is not a function of patriarchy, as it is for so many women. Thus, his inaction is the worst kind of bad faith, for when he has the social freedom to act in a way that most women would not be permitted, he sidesteps this choice. He does what all those of bad faith do. He proposes a hypothetical situation in which he would have behaved otherwise: “s’il n’y avait pas eu ces gens, s’il n’y
avait pas eu ces objets et ces images auxquels se sont accrochées mes pensées . . . s'il n'y avait pas eu cet ensemble de circonstances . . . peut-être cette fissure béante en ma personne ne se serait-elle pas produite cette nuit" (276). In other words, when put to the test of the ideal existential model the two protagonists clearly reveal an existential heroine and not a hero.

Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* and Butor's work serve as a graceful transition for the second pair of novels that I typically use, *L'Invitée* and *Du côté de chez Swann*, specifically *Combray* and *Un Amour de Swann*. Students can compare Beauvoir's theory to her fiction and can see how Proust's work paved the way for the *nouveau roman*. The texts themselves match up conveniently as excellent examples of quasi-autobiography: Beauvoir gives a thinly veiled description of the trio she formed with Sartre and Olga Kosakievicz, and Proust essentially tells his life story. Thematically these two texts resemble one another through their focus on jealousy. In Proust's case the love triangle involves two men, Swann and Forcheville, fighting for the attention of one woman, Odette. Swann's jealousy, famously synonymous with Proustian love, begins following Odette's unexpected absence from the Verdurin salon and grows as these absences become more numerous. Swann wishes to possess Odette in every possible way and hopes not only to control her present activities but to establish mastery over her past by finding out everything about her he can. However, feeling rebuffed by Odette for another man, Swann later discovers that his mistress very possibly had sexual relations with La Patronne, and other women as well. It is Odette's supposed lesbianism which underscores just how out of control, so to speak, she is. For her part, Beauvoir describes a triangle which revolves around two women, Françoise and Xavière, who are themselves intimately linked, vying for the attentions of one man, Pierre. Françoise initially finds jealousy inimical to love and graciously allows her lover Pierre any number of attachments to other women. She even actively provides additional partners, most notably Xavière. However, Françoise soon finds her generosity flagging and struggles not to fall victim to jealousy when Pierre describes how he first kissed Xavière: "L'image traversa Françoise comme une brûlure . . . Elle fit un effort violent; elle allait être injuste, elle ne voulait pas se laisser submerger par cette rancune grandissante" (258).

Yet, much more important than the common theme of jealousy in these two novels is the manner in which they both illustrate the impact of the Mother on adult sexual relations and, moreover, how the Mother plays a different role for men and women. Proust's narrator, in his exploration of the Swann/Odette relationship, discovers how it parallels his own attachment to the Mother. For both absence equals anxiety: "comme je l'ai appris plus tard, une angoisse semblable fut le tourment de longues années de sa vie . . . cette angoisse qu'il y a à sentir l'être qu'on aime dans un lieu de plaisir où l'on n'est pas . . . c'est l'amour qui la lui a fait connaître" (30).
However, Marcel is no more able to control his mother, who refused to come to his room that evening when he sent her a note imploring her to do so, than Swann is able to control Odette. Indeed, this parallel sets up an interesting conclusion about Proust’s women: they are “out of control” because they belong to an exclusively female world and the Mother is to blame. In this instance, Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, who examine the Mother from a feminist object relations perspective, provide an appropriate theoretical tool for analysis, and Dinnerstein’s insights in The Mermaid and the Minotaur go a long way in explaining Swann’s behavior as well as that of Odette. Dinnerstein posits three fundamental characteristics of sexual relationships. First, she explains, men and women alike are searching for the Mother in their partner. However, this privileges a sexual asymmetry because, for men, “attachment to a woman is emotionally bearable, consistent with the solidarity among men which is part of maleness, only if she, and one’s feelings toward her, remain under safe control” (50). Therefore men must control their partner’s independent sexual impulsivity, feared because it brings to mind the terrifying erotic independence of every baby’s mother. Finally, not wanting to become too much the baby, men distance themselves from their partner, and sexual excitement is less intimately tied to personal sentiment. However, because women are also looking for the Mother, and are frequently frustrated in this search with their male partners, they sometimes choose a relationship with women, wanting direct access to the Mother. In fact, it appears that Odette, and a whole host of other Proustian women, take the three components of Dinnerstein’s sexual asymmetry and stand them on their head. Thus, exclusive male possession turns into an exclusive female world where, no longer under the dominion of male fear, female feelings and sexual impulsivity are set free.

In her case, Simone de Beauvoir integrates the role of the Mother much more explicitly into adult sexual relations. It is impossible to overlook the fact that Xavière first appears in the novel as Françoise’s protégée, who has yet to meet Pierre, and that Françoise wishes to play the maternal role from the very beginning. Françoise hopes to shape Xavière as she wishes: “ce qui l’enchantait surtout c’était d’avoir annexé à sa vie cette petite existence triste; car à présent . . . Xavière lui appartenait” (23). In addition, because Pierre and Françoise are noticeably older than Xavière, the trio serves as an illustration of the classic triangle of the closed family unit. Xavière’s abandonment of the Mother Françoise to seduce the Father Pierre enhances this impression as does the sense that Françoise is the biggest obstacle to the relationship between Xavière and Pierre (“tu es quand même le plus grand obstacle entre elle et moi,” remarks Pierre [141]). It is, in fact, the role of Mother that determines the contours of the eventual sexual relationship between Pierre and Xavière and which best illustrates the source of women’s search for the Mother. Chodorow points out that the daughter never gives up her attachment to the Mother.
Although she must shift her affective attachment from the Mother to the Father to establish her heterosexuality, a daughter, rather than forming an exclusive couple with the Father, retains her attachment to the Mother and forms a triangle (92–93). The trio which remains intact after the Pierre/Xavière couple is established demonstrates how this takes place. Simply put, Proust portrays the Mother as an obstacle to healthy heterosexual relations, and Beauvoir sees the Mother as an integral part of heterosexual relations while, at the same time, privileging the possibility of love between women.

To complete the course two contemporary texts cry out for inclusion because they so unambiguously exemplify the “he said, she said” dynamic: Annie Ernaux’s Passion simple and Alain Gérard’s Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris. Ernaux’s book, published in 1991, recounts the author’s heretofore hidden affair with a foreign businessman living temporarily in France. Dissatisfied with Ernaux’s account, Gérard assumes the lover’s identity and chronicles events from his perspective, making Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris, published four years later, an explicit response to Passion simple. However, as is so often the case, their stories do not jibe, and at the center of their dispute is a disagreement over the definition of desire. The result is a rare phenomenon—a literary “tac à tac” very much in the public eye which definitively illustrates the feminist viewpoint that gender informs writing (Passion simple) as well as reading (Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris) which underpins the course.

For her part, Ernaux maintains that her narrative is not a betrayal of her former lover because it is neither about him nor about her but, instead, about how his very existence transforms Ernaux. She has “un homme sans arrêt dans la tête” (24) and obsessively spends every moment without this man waiting for him: “A partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière, je n’ai plus rien fait d’autre qu’attendre un homme” (13). Because he is rarely available, she describes an absentee lover whose portrait is appropriately shadowy. Referred to as A., he is clearly Ernaux’s inferior, a “rustre,” says Ernaux. Moreover, it is evident that, although A. initiates the encounters between Ernaux and him, once in her apartment where they all take place, he becomes little more than the object of her desire, reduced to pure libido. Ernaux is content to limit her knowledge of A. to desire, wishing to exploit it for all it is worth because it cannot last: “Je calculais combien de fois nous avions fait l’amour. J’avais l’impression que, à chaque fois, quelque chose de plus s’était ajouté à notre relation mais aussi que c’était cette même accumulation de gestes et de plaisir qui allait sûrement nous éloigner l’un de l’autre” (20–21). Not surprisingly, when Alain Gérard responds to Ernaux, he reacts to this reduction. He insists on providing the narrative with a full-blown hero because Ernaux’s account “ignorait la voix, le discours, les regards, les souvenirs de l’homme espéré” (10). Indeed, central to Gérard’s unhappiness with Ernaux’s portrayal is her insistence that A. is little more than sex object:
“Je ne suis pas cet homme sans âme, sans mots, sans rêves de vous, palpable mais inaudible, cet homme-là tout près mais virtuel, un homme d’une grandiose insignifiance, un moujik d’alcôve, la pièce manquante à votre échiquier de femme” (19). Ernaux is the subject of an erotic economy that is the female space of her apartment, and thus she defines the lover’s significance. Waiting plays the lead role in Ernaux’s eroticism because the lover is strictly a prop for her pleasure who need not be present for her enjoyment. Gérard understands this and protests, “Je cherchais une histoire, la nôtre. J’ai trouvé l’onianisme de l’attente” (17). Worse, Gérard claims that Ernaux not only reduces the lover to pure sex, but she then deprives him of his sex organ: “Choisissant d’oublier qu’un homme ne se réduit pas, même s’il le craint parfois, à la protubérance oblongue qui orne les statues, faisant la part la plus crue de notre vérité, vous l’avez affaiblie” (63).

Luce Irigaray’s observations on the erotic imaginary are particularly helpful in this contradictory view of desire. While on the one hand Passion simple presents a narrator very much the victim of “l’éternel féminin” (preoccupation with appearance and pleasing a man), on the other hand, this text gives primacy to woman as sexual subject rather than sex object. The result is that Ernaux speaks openly about female sexuality, a transgression much more audacious than the revelation of a secret relationship. However, because women have so long been silent, it is no surprise that Ernaux’s depiction of female desire does not meet male expectations, as Irigaray predicted would be the case: “Le désir de la femme ne parlerait pas la même langue que l’homme” (25). The key reason is that her text does not focus on the phallus, around which desire has traditionally revolved, but, instead, examines an elsewhere, an “ailleurs” which is more consistent with what Irigaray sees as the plurality of female desire. Nothing makes this disappearing act clearer than the contrast between the book’s opening pages and the rest of the narrative. The “queue . . . entre la main de l’homme” (12) that hypnotizes Ernaux as she watches an X-rated film on television is never seen again. In this dynamic the lover quickly fades into the background and the woman truly is the heroine of her own text.

Indeed, Alain Gérard cannot believe that this love story has no hero. He finds it intolerable that a man as center of interest has been displaced by a woman and deems it his responsibility to reappropriate for A. what is, to his mind, the lover’s rightful role and place in this narrative of desire. He becomes the quintessential male reader and writes a response to what he sees as an egregious mischaracterization. First, he must make the lover an active agent both to reestablish his primacy in the sexual economy and to make the woman only “support, plus ou moins complaisant, à la mise en acte des fantasmes de l’homme” (Irigaray 25). However, A. must also be made whole once again, and not simply by reassuming his genitalia. His demotion to playing second fiddle to female desire limits
his masculinity, dichotomizing him in the same way women have been traditionally bifurcated and rendering him erotically meaningful while intellectually meaningless. When Gérard puts A. back together again he creates a lover who is not only sexually powerful—“fais-le-moi encore, fais-le-moi fort” cries Ernaux (44)—but also spiritually enriching—“Je voudrais, Madame, poêmiser, non pas l’attente, mais la présence du désir” (27). Consequently, Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris quickly emerges as a settling of accounts in a battle of the sexes where each partner lays claim to desire. Gérard no more likes this impoverished picture of the male than women appreciate limited literary images of the female. In this power struggle, Gérard wants the last word.

Finally, one of the virtues of such a contemporary novel course is that there are many pairings possible. Annie Ernaux’s Une Femme and Albert Camus’s L’Étranger, for example, illustrate a similar telegraphic style and brevity while telling a very different tale of alienation after the death of each protagonist’s mother. Camus’s La Peste and Jeanne Hyvrard’s Le Cercan demonstrate how illness may be used as metaphor. A third option, from Francophone literature, uses Assia Djebar’s Les Impatiens and Tahar Ben Jelloun’s L’Enfant de sable to privilege a discussion of gender roles in the Arab world. In short, the possibilities are numerous in this “he said, she said” approach to the twentieth-century novel. More important for feminist scholars, it validates women writers and expressly promotes feminist literary theory as an analytic tool which takes its place unashamedly among the many others in the Academy today.

**Works Cited**


