Women's History of the 1920s: A Look at Anzia Yezierska and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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As May Kay Tetrault noted in Social Education in March of 1987, the inclusion of scholarship about women's history has not proceeded as vigorously at the high school level as at that of the college. Over the years since that special edition on women's history, some progress has been made. States like New York and New Jersey now require some attention to gender in the social studies curriculum. Yet my own experience in faculty development on the issue of gender balancing in the school curriculum suggests that one chief difficulty for teachers in bringing women's studies scholarship into their classrooms stems from a lack of background in the field. The recent edition of Social Education (February, 1994) on women and war is helpful in addressing this need.

Scholars such as Tetrault, Gerda Lerner (1977, 1981), Joan Kelly (1986), and Anne Chapman (1986) have made an enormous contribution in outlining paths to inclusion and providing bibliographies of the resources available for social studies educators at different levels. Less well known is the work of Emily Style, whose short theoretical essay "Curriculum as Window and Mirror" offers an approach to curriculum balancing that is useful as a yardstick by which to measure the inclusion of women in the curriculum.

If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected. (1988, 6)

Rich resources for weaving women's history into the secondary curriculum are now widely available. This article wishes to highlight a few of those which focus on the 1920s. Bread Givers: A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New, written by Anzia Yezierska and published first in 1925, is a work of fiction known to some secondary history and English teachers, but better known in women's studies programs at the college level. While intrinsically interesting as the familiar story of conflicts around assimilation in a family of recent immigrants, the book is notable for highlighting the special challenges of assimilation for young women from patriarchal cultures. Set on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in an Eastern European Jewish immigrant family, Bread Givers provides both an antidote to the one-dimensional portrayal of the decade found in The Great Gatsby, a standard work of the high school literary canon, and an avenue into the consciousness of what Nancy Cott (1987) called the "new feminists" of the 1920s. In its depiction of America as a land of opportunity and of the tensions between individualism and conformity, the story reflects perennial themes in American history.

The central conflict of Bread Givers revolves around Papa Smolinsky’s insistence that his four daughters, Bessie, Fania, Masha, and Sarah, marry men who will agree to support their father’s lifestyle of religious piety and aversion to paid labor. While Papa manages to successfully exploit his first three daughters through marital unions conducive to his own personal happiness, Sarah, the youngest, proves the rebel of the family. Like Yezierska herself, Sarah wishes to become a person in her own right, an individual whose destiny is defined by the quest for self-fulfillment rather than self-abnegation.

Sarah’s struggle reflects her understanding that selfishness and America rests on economic freedom. Papa’s resistance to the process of Americanization is not so much a resistance to women’s pursuit of economic affairs but to women’s self-determination in such matters. In fact, Papa encourages the women in his family to work so that he can study the Torah. Sarah’s desire to make her own decisions about work and marriage conflicts with her father’s insistence that he determine her future in light of his needs, not hers.

Thus, Bread Givers is a tale of old world versus new as seen through the eyes of women and their relationships within the family, not unlike the story told by the film Hester Street, which makes a wonderful companion piece to this book. While Sarah’s desire to have a career as a teacher makes her a “new woman” as the age defines it, her problems have less to do with the conflict between marriage and career than with her father’s claims to her commitment to the family.

The story of the Smolinsky family, set against the intellectual climate of the new woman of the decade, provides an excellent resource for a unit that seeks to dilute the overemphasis on the flapper, so prevalent in textbook portrayals of women’s history in the twenties. The novel is an engaging first step in balancing the standard one-dimensional understanding of women’s lives with a multidimensional view of women. Secondary American history courses often give too little attention to the dual realities of the twenties: momentum on Wall Street and recession in the real estate and agricultural markets; social freedom and repression of civil liberties; flappers and immigrant working women. Concentrating on the froth of the decade sometimes results in a lopsided portrayal that does not contribute to student understanding of how the stock market crash brought about the Great Depression.

Along with the Palmer Raids, quota laws, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and a resurgence in race riots, the 1920s also marked the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, establishment of the League of Women Voters, and a steady rise in the number of women college graduates in the work force. Many of these women spurned marriage for the world of paid employment, reflecting the new social consciousness analyzed by Cott in The Grounding of Modern Feminism (1987).

An author, lecturer, economist, and great-niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Beecher, Charlotte Perkins Gilman did not consider herself a feminist, but a humanist (Lane 1990, 231). Somewhat paradoxically, Gilman came to disparage the vices of the new feminists of the twenties who mimicked men’s behavior (Lane 1990, 297). Nevertheless, her seminal work, Women and Economics (1898, 1966, 1970), presaged the tensions between autonomy and intimacy that Sarah Smolinsky and other young women of the decade experienced. A radical thinker in the lineage of Mary Wollstonecraft, Judith Sargent Murray, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gilman is better known today for her short novel, The Yellow Wallpaper (1892, 1973), the story of her struggle with the female disease of the late nineteenth century, neurasthenia, a nervous disorder.

Gilman advocated freedom for all forms of women’s active expression, elimination of societal and psychological impediments to women’s economic independence, an end to the double

Social Education January 1995 29
standard of sexual morality, and opportunity to pursue the civic
and professional options open to men. Women and Economics
offers a prescription for female autonomy through economic,
legal, and educational advancement. She was confident that
the world of work would provide full scope for women's talent,
strength, will power, and self-discipline. In her view, the emanci-
pated woman was a "mother economically free, a world-servant
instead of a house-servant; a mother knowing the world and liv-
ing in it" (quoted in Lerner 1977, 144).

Gilman believed the family to be regressive and the private
home wasteful and unhealthy. To free women from bondage to
marriage and housework (which she linked to female servitude),
she advocated communal dwellings that foreshadowed the
planned communities of the twentieth century. Her specific re-
commendations for aid to the servile housewifed centered on re-
configured urban apartments that provided rooms for living and
sleeping without private kitchens. Rather, communal areas for
cooking, child care, and schooling would be sustained by resident
specialists responsible for everyone's cooking, cleaning, schooling,
child care, and maintenance. In the suburbs, a variation on this
plan would provide a set of adjacent homes, each distinct with its
own yard, but kitchenless and situated near a central eating house.
These communal patterns figure prominently in her later utopian
novels, Herland (1915, 1979) and With Her in Ourland (1916).

Gilman's perspective on the subject of the home and sharing of
household responsibilities has a distinctly modern ring. In 1989,
The New York Times noted Gilman's "architectural feminism" in
citing some contemporary applications of her principles of human
design in New York, California, Wisconsin, and Canada.1 On a
theoretical level, Gilman, too, was in the vanguard. "By making
gender the center of her analysis, Gilman made the invisible vis-
able, and that focus in itself greatly advanced social thought" (Lane
1990, 301). In assessing Gilman's intellectual legacy, Ann J. Lane
also noted that in 1963 Betty Friedan asked some of the same
questions in The Feminine Mystique that Gilman asked in Women
and Economics (1898, 1966, 1970), The Home: Its Work and
Influence (1903, 1970), and Human Work (1904). While
Charlotte Perkins Gilman's fame was on the decline by the 1920s,
a decade whose post-war conservatism found sustenance in the
established patterns of American culture, Gilman's work deserves
greater visibility today at the secondary level.

In the 1920s, the conflicts between attachment to home and
autonomy for women manifest themselves in ways that con-
trasted the mindless simplicity of the flapper prototype.
Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, a 1918 edition of The Ladies
Home Journal applauded the notion that "the private kitchen
must go the way of the spinning wheel of which it is the con-
temporary" (May 1918, 30). An editorial in the Smith College
Weekly in 1919 expressed a related view:

We cannot believe it is fixed in the nature of things
that a woman must choose between a home and her
work, when a man may have both. There must be a
way out and it is the problem of our generation to
find a way. (as quoted in Cott 1987, 181)

In 1927, Crystal Eastman, the Socialist advocate of "voluntary
motherhood," wrote that "the great woman question of today" and "the
very essence of feminism" is "how to reconcile a woman's natural desire
for love and home and children with her equally natural desire for work
of her own for which she is paid" (as quoted in Cott 1987, 180).

Clearly, this is a modern tale, one that young women of the 1990s
would find revelatory. Raising these issues as part of the American
History survey course offers "a window and a mirror" into the expe-
rience of self and "other" for both young men and young women.

Many important historical questions are embedded in these
resources. What lessons can be learned about the concept of progress
when we realize that the issues addressed by Gilman and Yeziorska
are still with us? How does the central conflict of Bread Givers
between responsibility to one's self, one's family, and one's commu-

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