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Emptying The Bell Jar

An Exploration of Adolescent Responses to a Women's Literature Unit

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Abstract

This study examines adolescent student responses to a women's literature unit taught within a grade 12 Writer's Craft course. Current research (Gilligan, 1989, Pipher, 1994 & Slack, 1999) suggests that there is a great under-representation of female authors in the high school literature curriculum. The use of women's literature may draw attention to important literary figures who are historically overlooked within the curriculum. It gives voice to a marginalized group and presents students with alternative subjects and heroes. It encourages students to develop a critical perspective and re-evaluate assumptions about institutions, ideologies, language and culture. It also allows me, as a teacher, to reflect on my own teaching practices and explore alternate feminist pedagogical principles and teaching styles encouraging multiplicity of voices, deconstruction of power relations, and alternative assessment tools within the classroom. As an educator, it is important for me to teach curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to students and help them become critical, self-reflective thinkers. It is also important for me to assist students in their exploration of self and encourage them to expand their awareness of historical, social and global issues. Sylvia Plath's (1963) *The bell jar* is used as the primary text taught within this unit. In this novel, the bell jar is a central image that signifies entrapment and isolation. "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead body, the world itself is the bad dream"(p.154). As a metaphor, the bell jar resonates with young readers in a variety of ways.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables.....	vi.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM	1
Background to the Problem	3
Purpose of the Study.....	3
Objectives.....	4
Rationale: A Reflexive Narrative.....	4
Why Study Women's Literature?.....	10
Theoretical and Historical Framework of This Study.....	11
Scope and Limitations of the Study.....	13
Outline of the Remainder of the Document.....	15
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	17
The History of Women in Literature	17
Adolescent Literature	26
Post Modern Feminist Theories.....	28
Adolescent Psychology and Development.....	29
Reader Response Theories.....	38
Summary	42
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES	47
The Research Design	47
Unit Development	49
Selection of Site and Participants	51
Instrumentation and Data Collection	51
Data processing and Analysis	53
Ethical Considerations	60
Restatement of the Area of Study	61
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTING THE DATA	62
Post Modern Feminism	62
Adolescent Psychology and Development	68
Reader Response Theory	72
Summary.....	75

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	77
Addressing the Research Questions.....	78
A Summation of the Key Findings	91
Implications for My Own Practice	93
Myself as an Action Researcher	96
Implications for Further Research	98
Improvements to this Study	98
This Research Continued.....	99
References	101
Appendix A: The Bell Jar Summary	106
Appendix B: Questionnaire	107
Appendix C: Journal Responses.....	108
Appendix D: The Bell Jar Questions	109
Appendix E: Permission Letter	110
Appendix F: Research Ethics Board Approval	112

List of Tables

Table		Page
1	Theoretical Frameworks	44
2	Data: Segmenting and Coding.....	55

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of 25 adolescent student responses to a four-week literature unit focusing on women authors. It examines how these students respond to a women's literature unit taught in a grade 12 Writer's Craft course and explores how these reactions contribute to insights about their socialization. This examination is also important because it investigates the social implications of the secondary literary curriculum in Ontario and the gender perceptions of students in one classroom. An additional objective of this study is to analyze the process of promoting an empowering and stimulating learning environment for students and increase their awareness, understanding, and perceptions of gender in women's literature.

In my third Master's level course, *Curriculum Issues*, I was given an assignment that required me to create a unit of curriculum. Upon consideration of this assignment, I decided I would create a women's literature unit because, as an English teacher, I was fond of literature and I really enjoyed reading literature written by and about women. As I explored this issue further I realized that I really did not teach a lot of literature written by women. In fact, there was a great under-representation of women in the curriculum at my school.

My initial response to this discovery was one of astonishment, leading me to further consideration of a variety of questions: How could I not have realized how few female authors were being taught? Who created this curriculum anyway, and why did they not include women? Why has anyone else not noticed this great injustice? This initial reaction was followed by action. I decided I needed to actively respond to this shortage, so I created a women's literature unit and, with the permission by my program

chair, I incorporated it into my own Grade 12 Writer's Craft course. Thus began my exploration of women in literature. Since that time I have learned an extensive amount of information about female authors and the history of silence that surrounds these women. I have become very aware and sensitive to the issue of gender in literature and find myself in a constant state of assessment and evaluation of the literary curriculum. Action research has heightened my awareness of these important issues and has empowered me to make a difference. As both the researcher and the teacher, I created a unit that was taught over a four-week period. There were 25 student participants, 9 males and 16 females.

How adolescent students respond to curriculum is an important consideration for all educators. If the mission of education is to "create a community of learners and ensure that all students develop knowledge, skills and values to reach their full potential" (Niagara Catholic District School Board mission statement), then teachers must ensure that the curriculum is consistent with this goal. The writing of women is an important component of literature courses because a multiplicity of voices presents a broad and diverse vision of the world. This unit will help to confront a "hidden curriculum" that may suggest that women's voices and experiences are less valuable. This assumption might directly affect student's gender identity. Girls may be left feeling undervalued and insignificant. As Sadker and Sadker (1994) point out, "Every time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worthless" (p.93). Boys may develop a vision of reality that perpetuates the devaluing of the voices and opportunities of women. According to Slack (1999) "we are doing our males a great disservice by allowing male

dominated texts and ideas to pervade the classroom. They no longer accurately reflect what is happening in society or teach the skills boys need to be successful” (p.92).

Background to the Problem

There are 10 major works studied in the four mandatory English courses offered at my school. There are no female authors within these texts and there are no texts that contain a female protagonist. There are two optional texts written by female writers (optional meaning individual teachers can choose to use these texts or not). For example, in grade 12 the major texts taught are: *Hamlet* (William Shakespeare), *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, (T. S. Eliot), and *1984* (George Orwell) or *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley). The other optional novel written by a female is in the grade 9 course. Teachers may choose to teach the novel *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin or *The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien. Presently, one out of the three grade 12 teachers are teaching Shelly and two out of the five grade 9 teachers are teaching Le Guin. This selection clearly indicates a shortage in female authored representation within the literature curriculum at this school, prompting me to further investigate this oversight. I wanted to explore student perceptions of gender through the teaching of a women’s literature unit as well. As a female reflecting on my own past, I have identified and acknowledged the importance of equity in literature. As a female teaching literature, I now feel an obligation to address this disparity more actively and at least examine the affects and/ or benefits it could have on the students within my own classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an appreciation of how one class of students makes sense of the literature it reads. It will also explore how these students connect the

literature to their own lives and reflect on my own personal experiences as a teacher of literature. It seeks to describe these student perceptions of women in literature (as writers and as characters) and to disclose the stereotypes that may exist within their perceptions. It describes and deconstructs students' evaluation of this material and their perceptions of the value and importance of this new information. It also allows me to reflect upon my own perceptions of students in the classroom and re-evaluate my own teaching strategies and principles.

Objectives

The main objective for this study is to examine 25 student responses to a four-week women's literature unit. The main questions are:

1. How does a women's literature unit affect a student's personal, social, and historical concepts of gender?
2. How does studying a women's literature unit affect adolescent students' development and social identity?
3. How do students learn and make sense of literature? Is it necessary for them to find relevancy to their own lives?
4. What effect does the creation of this unit have on me as a female teacher of literature?

This study attempts to respond to these questions and provide valuable information about adolescent responses to literature and the connections they make to their own perceptions and understandings of gender identity.

Rationale: A Reflexive Narrative

Art for arts sake doesn't exist for me. What I saw was wrong,

and I had to speak up. I loved poetry and I loved words. But what was beautiful had to serve the purpose of changing my life, or I would have died. If I cannot air this pain and alter it, I will surely die of it. (Audre Lorde, 1983, 100-116.)

I believe that literature gives me a lens into my own heart and mind. It provides me with a way to see the world. As a child, I learned about life through the stories I read. My developing mind infiltrated so deeply into these stories that it was often difficult to separate from them. I became a direct part of the action, breathing in the nervousness of the hero as he leaves the security of his home, and rejoicing in his triumph when he finally defeats the villain. I traveled with him on his journey experiencing his apprehension, his fear, and his final victory. My emotions were triggered as these stories unfolded. I laughed when my monkey friend, George, mistook an old woman for the man in the yellow hat and cheered when the prince awakened the delicate, Snow White, from her long sleep. I tossed and turned all night haunted by the hungry wolf waiting under the bridge and wept in sadness as my spider friend, Charlotte, took her final breath. Stories shaped my vision of the world. They were my teachers, giving me courage and skill to fight the villain, proper judgment to trust the good guy, and profound compassion to empathize with a friend. I learned about life through the stories I read and was better able to understand the world in which I lived.

As a young child, I was consumed by stories. I loved to travel to mythical lands, to fight battles against monsters and to be an active member of a group of companions. I would climb into Lewis' wardrobe and travel into Narnia with my worthy companions,

ready to face whatever came my way. I would nervously pass over the bridge, hoping not to disturb the angry billy goat but ready to run if I happened to do so.

As a young reader, I always felt as a direct participant in these stories usually identifying with the male hero. Being the youngest girl in a family of five, I never thought of myself as different or less capable than my older brothers and certainly no different from the triumphant male hero in the stories I read. I made no conscious gender distinction. However, as I became a creator of stories I unconsciously developed a male ego, giving him the voice of my first person narrative.

I wrote stories about the things I read about; horses, dragons, insects, out of control bowling balls, haunted houses, crazy uncles, dying grandparents, fighting siblings, and homeless dinosaurs. There were no limits to my subjects. I usually included a combination of description and dialogue and often wrote in the first person narrative. The “I” in my stories was always a male character who would experience various combinations of trials and tribulations. I never wrote as my female self (being the “I” character), instead I gave my voice to a male character. I never questioned the oddness of this phenomenon until I became older and was asked by one of my high school teachers to do a critique of my own writing. My response was an uncertain and conflicting one. Identifying with male subjects was simply something that I had always done without thinking about it. But, as I gave it further thought, this identification made sense. In all of the stories I had read as a child and young adult, male characters were dominant. Male characters experienced hardships and were able to triumph over them (Oliver Twist, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Gulliver, Jack , Joseph, David Copperfield, Bilbo Baggins). Male characters were the saviours of all other characters (Peter Pan, Hercules, Prince

Charming, Lassie, Gandolf, Spiderman, Superman and Batman, Perseus, David). They were the tortured, deep thinkers, struggling with the great philosophical questions of life (Hamlet, Pip, Heathcliff, Biff Loman, Holden Caulfield). If I wanted to write stories about hardships, triumphs, adventures, battles, contention, or personal struggle, I had to develop a male voice because only males (according to the books I had read) experienced these things. For me, male characters were the most dominant, most credible, and had the greatest impact on readers.

In Trepanier-Street and Romatowski's (1991) study of sixth graders, they confirmed that children mimic the stereotypes they see in books, media, and school texts. Both boys and girls wrote about male characters in stereotypical ways, presenting boys as active, problem solving characters and girls as princesses, cooks, teachers, and dancers. From 180 participants, this study concluded that 83% of all the boys' characters were male and 59% of all of the girls' characters were male. These results suggest that the majority of children in this study were influenced by stereotypes at a young age and continued to perpetuate these stereotypes within their own lives.

As a child I recall reading some female authors in the privacy of my home, most notably, Judy Blume and V.C. Andrews. However, I remember feeling ashamed to admit this because these writers were not seen as very valuable. It was best to keep such reading within the confines of my bedroom or hidden under the flip up desktop in my classroom. I specifically remember reading *Are You There God It's Me Margaret?* by Blume and feeling shocked and embarrassed by the mention of female sexuality. I did not know what to do with such provocative words! I also remember being obsessed with V.C. Andrew's, *Flowers In The Attic* series. I was absorbed by the private world of the two abused sibling

characters and was unable to stop reading about them. I remember keeping my lift- top slightly open to conceal my book, so I could read during the lesson. For some reason, the incestuous relationship between the brother and sister entranced me! Even though my mother kept telling me to stop reading such *terrible trash*, I was determined to buy the following novel in the series. (Perhaps she was happy to see me reading, even if it was not the classics!) Clearly, these writers were not valued outside of my home and certainly did not provide me with ‘acceptable’ female archetypes.

As a high school student, I struggled to find my identity and commit to a new set of role expectations. At this time, I was unable to recognize my position of privilege as a white, middle class teenager and was enveloped in an ego-centred emotional transition. My transition from the world of a young tomboyish, prepubescent girl to a developing teenager was not an easy one. I felt a great amount of pressure; as though I had to adhere to the role of a female (to be petite, soft spoken, and tentative) even though I craved the life of the unconstrained and independent male. I remember at times, secretly wishing to be a male so I could truly live the strong and deep thinking life of a man and not have to waste time looking nice, waiting to be rescued by one. Clearly, I resisted the stereotypical images of males and females. As a result, I had a difficult time understanding that I did not have to live a life that was consistent with these stereotypical images.

Julie Brown (1995), a creative writing teacher at Youngstown State University, addresses these adolescent tendencies. She writes “more than half [of the] female students in a given quarter used male narrators to tell at least one of their stories” (p.312). According to Brown, students are affected by the stories they read and by the way gender roles are perceived within their environment. She attributes these stereotypes to the lack

of female role models in the writing world, and states that most of her students could name only a few, if any, female literary authors. Emily Dickinson was often the token female writer mentioned. She suggests that in writing, female students adopt a stereotypical male persona as a result of what they learn from history and from what they see as valuable in their society. As a female growing up in the 1980s, it was difficult for me not to become affected by these prominent and desired patriarchal ideals. I became a product of my environment. As my body and mind made the transformation from childhood to adulthood, I was left with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. I felt very disconnected from the world and terribly alone.

After 2 years I finally came to value and appreciate myself and by the end of my 16th year I had resolved many of these identity issues. I believe it was both my mother and my writing that helped me cope with these difficulties. Despite my anger, my mom quietly comforted me and helped me to develop confidence. She encouraged me to write and, although my words were angry, they offered me a great solace and seemed to calm the storm. I found comfort in words; they became my guide, my expression, and my solace. Upon reflection, I often wonder how my thinking or perceptions might have been changed had I been exposed to more female writers who confronted a wider range of feelings and emotions. Unfortunately, I went through most of high school without experiencing many strong female characters or female writers. The only novel I remember studying in school that was written by a female and included a memorable female character was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte. Like Cathy, I remember falling in love with Heathcliff and longed to join him on the haunted moors of England. The other texts I remember were all written by males: *A Man for All Seasons* by Thomas

More, *The Catcher In The Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Death of Salesman* by Arthur Miller and Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. These were the literary texts and perspectives that were seemingly the most respected and the most valued. They became known as the 'classics' in which male protagonists and their concerns dominated the literary curriculum.

I realize now that these authors may have been a very useful source for me as I struggled through my adolescence. Now, as an English teacher, I am faced with the same paradox. Why do I continue to teach material that excludes female voices? Why, in this world full of brilliant female authors and heroines, do I continue to teach a curriculum that is saturated with male characters, male views, and male writers? These questions were the impetus for my exploration of women's literature, the creation of a women's literature unit and, finally, a research study exploring the impact of this unit on student gender perceptions and classroom socialization.

Why Study Women's Literature?

According to Cleary and Whittemore (1999), many students are interested in gender issues and often struggle with concepts of gender and difference in literature. "In spite of increasing attention to gender-related issues in politics, society and literature, students continue to struggle with notions of gender and language" (p.86). They claim that students need to be presented with a variety of perspectives and should be encouraged to embrace diversity and pluralism. By presenting students with a limited vision of the world, educators may give them a false perception of society. Slack (1999) points out "the voices of women, minorities, the poor, and the uneducated are a vital part of the 'true' American experience. The danger is that in leaving them out, the perception

of what they have contributed to our society becomes warped” (p.94). By excluding female voices in history lessons, myths and literature classes, the self-esteem and perceptions of society are affected. She also cautions “we are doing our male students a great disservice by allowing male dominated texts and ideas to pervade our classrooms. They no longer accurately reflect what is happening in society or teach the skills boys will need to be successful”(p.92). I agree that it is essential for both genders to be sufficiently exposed to female perspectives in order to expand their appreciation for literature and dissolve the stigmas and skewed perceptions supported by the traditional curriculum. “As young people struggle to establish their own identities and relationships to family, community, and the world, these perspectives can bring understanding to the complex challenge of emerging adulthood”(Cleary & Whittemore, 1999, p.89.)

Examining female perspectives allows students to explore a marginalized group and presents them with alternative subjects and heroes.

Theoretical and Historical Framework of This Study

In order to address the purpose and objectives of this study, certain historical and theoretical frameworks are considered. These frameworks will be used to present a meaningful and grounded interpretation of the findings in this study. The history of women in literature and the history and development of Adolescent Literature will be presented, as well as the theories of Post Modern Feminism, Adolescent Development Theories, and Reader Response.

The historical discussion will include an overview of women in literature and their inclusion in the social and academic curriculum. The writing will consider the work of DeShazer (2001), Showalter (1979), and Fetterley (1978) in particular with many

references to individual writers throughout history. These writers discuss the historical development of the female text, the archetypal patterns in women's fiction, and the rise of feminism and post modernism in literature. The purpose of this discussion is to create a meaningful contextual framework for this study and identify significant connections between the literary texts and the participants' responses.

The historical and developmental discussion of Adolescent Literature will include an overview of the growth and common themes found within literature written for young adults. The writing will include the work of Trites (2001), Pratt (1981), and Abel, Hirsch and Langland (1983). These writers examine the development of literature describing the transition from childhood to adulthood and offer various theories outlining the role and function of these prescribed texts.

The discussion of Post Modern Feminism situates my own position as a teacher who perceived gender inequity within the high school literary curriculum. Post Modern Feminism also acts as a lens in which to view and interpret the data from a diverse range of ever-changing perspective according to researchers, such as Mandell (1998), Lather (1991), and Grogan (1996). They describe an individual as unstable, constantly changing, and totally influenced by his/her own social environment. They believe that there are multiple truths and that knowledge is forever changing. They also value deconstructions of power and reflexivity.

A second theoretical framework will include a discussion of adolescent psychological development. This will be a second lens or perspective by which the data will be interpreted, allowing for further connections to be made between student social perceptions and their internalization of literature. The developmental theories presented

include those of Freud (1901), Erikson (1963), Marcia (1966), Piaget (1975), Tannen (1990), Chodorow (1978), Harper (2000), Currie (1999), Gilligan (1989), O'Reilly (2001) and Pipher (1994). The discussion will relate adolescent development to gender identity. Early theorists group male and females together in their discussion and treatment of adolescent development. However, more recent theorists concede that there are great differences in the development of males and females and criticize the traditional theorists for trying to fit females into a category that they did not fit into. These theorists developed separate categories for males and females and highlight differences in social interaction, communication, societal pressures and peer involvement.

A third theoretical framework for this study is Reader Response Theories. This section will include discussion of Aristotle (1902), Fish (1980) and Showalter (1985). Traditional theories present literary texts as having predetermined literary value, despite the position of the reader. In contrast, the modern theorists define textual meaning by the experience that it (the text) produces in the reader. They believe knowledge is a socially conditioned construct that is created by the traditional values and norms. Meaning is indeterminate and all knowledge is created by the social context in which one lives. Analysis of the social constructs is also an important consideration because it accounts for the social context in which these students are located. The question of how these social locations influence their response to literary texts will be explored in this study.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

There are certain limitations and assumptions in the research framework and methods of this study. The first is the position of power I have over my students as their teacher. Students might feel obligated to respond to the questionnaires and journals in a

certain way, providing me with answers that they think I want to hear. It is also assumed that students would fully complete the questionnaires and response journals with honesty and integrity. This assumes that students have an interest in the study and an interest in their own learning process. However, since these activities are required assignments for this curriculum unit, they may feel compelled to perform merely for grades.

Another assumption is that students were in attendance for all of the lessons taught in this unit and had a similar knowledge base of women's literature before the study began. The unequal number of male and female participants also limits the data analysis and interpretation because more female responses were considered. The answers provided by these students may not accurately reflect responses of other students who were not in this particular class.

As well, I was unable to probe students for further clarification or development of their responses. If responses were unclear or misunderstood by me (the researcher) I could not return to the student and ask for further clarification because they were no longer enrolled in this class and were unavailable. This restriction affects the interpretation of the data by (at times), presenting a limited perspective of the student responses.

Another limitation is the novel choice and completion. Students were not given a choice about the novel they could read within the unit; all students were instructed to read *The bell jar*. Some students may not have been interested in the chosen novel, thus distorting their response to the unit. The white, middle class female protagonist is another restriction, giving students a limited perspective of the world in which this character lives

and associates. It is also assumed that students read the novel in its entirety; this assumes that all students completed the novel and responded accordingly.

A final limitation in this study is my own personal biases that I carry into this research with me. I have included within my rationale parts of my personal story. Found within this narrative are my experiences as a young girl who was faced with some difficulties in my adolescence. I understand that this was my own experience and may not coincide with the experiences of the student participants. I also come from an educated white, middle class privileged family that exposed me to books and encouraged reading. This limits my own perception of the world and my associations of and within this world.

The ramifications of these limitations and assumptions results in a limited portrayal of the data analysis and an imprecise projection of the future implications. In spite of this, I believe that the intimate glimpse of how 25 students responded to this novel will provide some worthwhile insights and stimulating questions to consider.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

The intent for the first chapter is to provide the reader with a background and rationale for the study. In reflecting on my own past I am able to connect with my experiences and challenge and extend my thinking. This study developed out of this experience and is intended to contribute to the current school literature curriculum. My overall goal is to engage the reader and make a meaningful contribution to the way educators and researchers perceive curriculum and adolescent responses to literature.

Chapter Two provides the historical background and theoretical frameworks for this study. It provides an historical overview of women in literature, outlining the various women who contributed to the literary canon. It is an historical discussion of the

development of adolescent literature, outlining the various theories, themes, and perceptions. It also provides an in-depth discussion of the theoretical frameworks of Post Modern Feminism, Reader Response Theory, and Adolescent Development Theory. This section is followed by a short discussion on adolescent literature. This review of literature acts as a meaningful and informative structure in which to understand the rationale and concedes in framing and qualifying the interpretation of the data.

Chapter Three provides the discussion and reasoning for the use of Action Research. It is a research method that fits perfectly with the purpose and creation of this study. This chapter also outlines the procedures for the implementation of the women's literature unit in my classroom and describes the way in which the data was collected and analyzed.

Chapter Four presents some of the data I collected over the four-week period in which I taught the women's literature unit. Over the course of this action research, I read, analyzed, and compared student responses to the questionnaire and response journals. I present this data partly in its original form and partly as commentary. I draw direct comparison to the pre-unit questionnaire and the post-unit journal responses. I also consider the ideas and people that may have influenced me, as the researcher.

Chapter Five summarizes the study and draws conclusions of the data analysis. It draws connections and a comparison to the literature described in Chapter Two and connects to the methods outlined in Chapter Three. It suggests future directions for research and explores future implications for curriculum development. It strives to draw connections between personal reflection, gender equity, and adolescent awareness. It describes the passion of a researcher and the experience of adolescent students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The intention of this chapter is to provide both a historical and theoretical framework for the study and offer a useful structure for the rationale, the data analysis and data interpretation. The history of women in literature is included to contextualize and qualify the rationale for this study. The history of adolescent literature is included to contextualize the novel, *The bell jar* and reveal some theories associated with adolescent literature. The discussion of Postmodern Feminism is an important consideration because it situates the point of view of the research and the researcher. The discussion of the Adolescent Development Theory and Gender Identity theories are presented to aid in the interpretation of the data and help the researcher to interpret the data. The Reader Response Theories and discussion on adolescent literature are presented in order to provide a framework for the data analysis and interpretation, and make insightful connections between students' responses to the curriculum unit socialization factors.

The History of Women in Literature

Examining the history of women in literature is a useful discussion in this study because it works to contextualize and qualify the rational. It situates the voices of women in history, showing a shift from the private to the public. It highlights the struggles and triumphs of women as they fight to have their voices heard. It also offers some theoretical discussion on the impact of the traditional literary canon on female readers and highlights the need to embrace and celebrate gender differences.

Females have been writing in the privacy of their own homes for centuries. The words of these women were often hidden within the confines of private rooms. This private profession was usually captured within the forms of letters and diaries. Some of

the earliest examples of such writing include the works of Matilda, Queen of England (1080-1118), Julian of Norwich (1343-1416), Margery Kempe (1373-1438) and Margery Brews Paston (1457-1495). Many of these writers represented the voices of the white upper class (royalty); however, other females wrote anonymously and did not have their work recognized until much later.

The early seventeenth century brought a new group of women writers, and a more widely publicized genre of writing. Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) was an important writer who flourished at this time. She wrote explicitly about female issues, such as childbirth and motherhood, and wrote essays on the rights and freedoms of women. She was one of the first female writers, not of royal descent, to have her work published in England. Living in a Puritan community, she would never have been allowed to publish her work herself, therefore in 1650, her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, published her work without her knowledge, classifying it as “the fruit of some few hours, curtailed from the sleep and other refreshments” (DeShazer, 2001, p.668). Bradstreet presents some early feminist views in her *Prologue to The Tenth Muse* (1650) where she defends a woman’s ability to write and condemns the men who undervalue this right.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century female writers continued to flourish: however, most voices remained private, heard only within the confines of private rooms. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), was a social activist writer whose voice resisted these conventions of privacy. In a direct response to Edmund Burkes treatise *Reflections on the Revolution* (1790) she created a work entitled *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) followed by *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In these pieces she challenged the social structures and presented intriguing arguments for the rights of

all human beings. She argued that women should be educated to use their reason, and their ability to reason independently implies equality to men (De Shazer, 2001, p. 1132).

Wollenstonecraft marks one of the first public female advocates in literature.

Many of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century women's novels served as an entertaining way to present the norms and expectations of womanhood. Writers combined fiction and instruction in a way that interested young readers and pleased their parents. "These novels prescribed submission to suffering and sadism as an appropriate way to prepare a young girl for life" (Pratt, 1981, p.14). The goal of these novels was to groom young girls for marriage and convince them to be content with a modest and limited existence. Lucilla Stanley, a character from Hannah More's (1808) novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* reveals these prescribed goals in her dialogue:

Her conversation like her countenance, is compounded of liveliness, sensibility, and delicacy. She does not say things to be quoted, but the effect of her conversation is, that it leaves an impression of pleasure in the mind, and a love of goodness on the heart. She enlivens without dazzling and entertains without overpowering. Contented to please, she has no ambition to shine. (p.186)

Females were expected to be content with domestic lives and never strive to be considered extraordinary. They were expected to be satisfied with a quiet and ordinary life and were told that they must never seek to be centered out or acknowledged for any form of accomplishment. They must suppress all feelings of ambition and not ever aspire to be anything but average and pleasant. These were the goals prescribed for young girls divulged cleverly within the margins of female fiction.

The nineteenth century was the age in which a few females went public and published literature that has become well recognized. Although many were not recognized until much later, these works contained the critical voice of stark realism and offered deep, emotional content. Famous writers such as Jane Austen (1772- 1817), Mary Shelly (1797 – 1851), Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), Emile Bronte (1818-1848), George Elliot (1819-1880), Emily Dickinson (1838 – 1886), Kate Chopin (1851- 1904), Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941), and Katherine Mansfield (1888 – 1923) emerged at this time. Many of these women expressed feelings of fear and concern over their role as females and as writers. Many were in love with words and longed to be recognized as writers, but were restricted by the social constraints that dominated this typically male profession.

Jane Austen reveals her discontent in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) through the sarcastic voice of Catherine “A woman, especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can”(Chapter XIV). Charlotte Bronte is told in a letter from poet laureate, Robert Southey, that literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and ought not to be (Bronte, 1837). Mansfield (1933) writes in her journal “*Work*. Shall I be able to express one day my love of work- my desire to be a better writer- my longing to take greater pains.... Oh, to be a writer, a real writer given up to it and it alone” (p.112) . Emily Bronte (1941) asks, “O why has heaven denied the precious gift to me, the glorious gift to many given to speak their thought in poetry” (p.242). There is a silence surrounding these voices, a noiseless pressure that invades the desires of these famous writers, a voice that screams quietly for justice and equity.

Even Virginia Woolf worries after the publication of her famous work *A Room Of One’s Own* (1945), that she will be criticized for being a feminist or labeled as a lesbian

by male colleagues and reviewers. She notes, “women have typically been misrepresented in or absent from texts authored by men. Throughout literary history male writers have disparaged women’s writing, identified creativity as a male prerogative, and claimed that women who practice literary arts are not ‘real women’”(De Shazer, 2001, p.3). These women recognize the domination or hegemony that exists within their world and learn to be cautious with their words and conventional with their voices.

These feelings of dominance and control percolate into the voices of the Twentieth Century Contemporary writers. Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 - present), Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974), Sylvia Plath (1932- 1963), Audre Lorde (1934-1992), Elaine Showalter (1941 - present), along with countless others, write directly and indirectly about the inequity and silencing that exists within the literary world.

Sylvia Plath reveals in her novels, poems and letters her insecurity as a female writer; she dares to name these discriminatory gender practices. In her journals (1982) she reveals that she is torn by familial obligation and duty, and her own poetic desires, declaring that a woman must choose one and sacrifice the other. Plath outlines this struggle explicitly through the autobiographical novel, *The bell jar* (1963). The central character, Esther Greenwood struggles to fit into the 1950’s society, longing to be a writer but told by her mother to be something more practical (a short-hand typist). When the pressure builds to an unbearable extent Esther is swallowed by depression and views suicide as the only viable solution. Luckily in the novel, Esther is discovered and sent to a mental institution where she is psychoanalyzed back to sanity. Unfortunately, Sylvia Plath is not so lucky and becomes consumed and suffocated by societal expectations. She

cannot find a place within her world and after poor reviews by the British press she commits suicide on February 11, 1963 at the age of 31.

Elaine Showalter (1979), an English literature professor and feminist scholar explores the history of female voices in literature directly in her piece entitled *Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*. She categorizes women writers into three phases; each phase constitutes a specific time in history and is defined by particular characteristics. The Feminine Phase (1840- 1880) is when women flooded the novel market but were left metaphorically paralyzed. They were not able to adequately reveal their own experiences as women and were restricted within the confines of Victorian society. The Feminist Phase (1880 –1920), is characterized by the feminist movement and many women lashed out against the traditional standards and values. Many women wrote social commentaries translating their own sufferings to those of the poor, laboring class, slaves and prostitutes, venting their sense of injustice. Writers at this time were concerned more with the message than the creation of art. The Female Phase (1920 – present) is divided into two stages, the early stage (1920-1959) and the later stage (from 1960 – present). In the early stage writers turned inward to search for their own identity. They were concerned with self-discovery and freedom of self-expression. The later stage accesses the experience of women more directly, using previously ‘taboo’ language and situations. Sexuality is more accepted as sources of female creative power and writing expresses the conflicts and struggles of women explicitly.

Elaine Showalter’s (1979) development of *gynocritics* explores women’s experience of literature more directly. She proposes that females stop trying to fit into the male world of literature and start recognizing and appreciating their own separate and

equally valuable female literary world. She offers a freedom from the “linear absolutes of male literary history” and focuses on the “newly visible world of female culture.” These differences should be acknowledged and celebrated within the literary world and adopted into the literature classroom. Showalter (1977) also acknowledges the absence of female writers included in the school curriculum. In her essay entitled “Women and the Literary Curriculum” she reveals that out of the 330 pieces studied in the College curriculum, there were 313 male writers and 17 female writers. “Women students are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored” (p. 537). This immense gap led Showalter to further explore and investigate women in literature.

Judith Fetterley (1978) introduces the concept of *immasculation*, a theory that reveals and describes the socialization of women in reading and thinking about literature. Since most novels are written through the male lens, women, as readers, are situated as men. Males site their system of morals and values and women are taught to think, read, and write from the male perspective. The male experience is what is seen as valuable, and is the universal and natural practice. This, therefore, degrades and/or ignores the female experience. The female reader “suffers not simply the powerlessness which derives from the not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self” (Fetterly, 1978, p.10). *Immasculation* exposes the harmful effect the traditional system has on women in literature and on their inclusion in society as a whole.

Historically, women were not typically seen as valuable contributors to the literary canon. They were often silenced and degraded within this world, forced to hide

behind closed doors under male names. Today, female voices are much more widely valued, publicized, and celebrated. Women commonly win literary awards and are dominating the bookstore shelves. Names, such as Margaret Atwood, Jane Urquhart, Ann- Marie MacDonald, Toni Morrison, Mauve Binchy, and Amy Tan, are customarily heard within the North American literary world. These writers have created various pieces of writing divulging the actions and voices of women in a much more public and recognized domain. However, even among these voices there are some questionings and concerns over female roles and obligations.

Margaret Atwood (1982) describes her experiences vividly in her essay entitled *On Being a Women Writer: Paradoxes and Dilemmas*. She outlines the difficulties women have had with being writers, feeling pressure to adhere to their role as wife and primary caretaker. "Anyone who took time off for an individual selfish activity like writing was either neurotic or wicked or both, derelict in her duties to a man, child, aged relatives or whoever else was supposed to justify her existence on earth" (p.3). She describes the obligations of women and the roles that continue to dominate their lives, outlining the constant struggle between domestic obligations and career goals.

Alice Munro (1968) reveals in a commentary about her short story "Boys and Girls" that a young girl cannot be an individual or choose who she wants to be; she must become the definition that is waiting for her. "She understands that participation in the world of action is not possible. She must go back inside the house, inside herself, wait, dream of being beautiful rather than courageous" (p.125). The nameless girl in the story experiences these changes within herself and feels anger and resentment towards the role

that awaits her. Her freedom as an androgynous young child has disappeared and she now must adhere to the standardized female role. She reflects on this experience:

The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word *child*; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment.(p.118)

This young character's realization of her gender role makes her feel belittled and unhappy. She recognizes, however, that she does not have a choice, she is a female and must think and act within the confines of this designation.

Many of these women writers feel compelled to write about their various female experiences and, in doing so, have become active and use their voices publicly. Clearly, women writers have struggled through a long history of silencing and domination but within this history have consistently fought for equity in voice and experience. Today, female writers continue to thrive in the literary market. And, although many contemporary females admit to feeling some insecurity as writers, they at least have the opportunity to express these insecurities explicitly. Female voices have grown louder and more insistent; they strive for recognition and inclusion. As a result, gender issues have become a popular area of study and with the continual development of new theories, gender differences seem to be more widely acknowledged and celebrated.

This exploration of women in literature has greatly increased my own knowledge and awareness of voice and difference. It has provided me with an added incentive to pursue this project and offers me a valuable foundation. I feel compelled as a white, female teacher and researcher to be an advocate for a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Therefore, when I realize how few female authors I expose my students to,

in a world exploding with wonderful female talent, I cannot help but feel obligated to address and explore this issue more directly.

Adolescent Literature

The first adolescent novels were written during the Romantic period. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) is cited as the first adolescent novel explicitly outlining the transition from childhood to adulthood (Trites, 2001). These 'coming of age' texts focus on the development of the children into mature and confident adults. Many of these texts combine social realism and romance or fantasy as a way to explain the turning point in the hero's life that is often of great personal, psychological, and social significance. These narratives involve the transportation of the hero from childhood to maturity making "the undertones of the mythic and fantastic appropriate themes linking the free-ranging imaginative world of childhood to the more soberly social concerns of the adult" (Pratt, 1981, p.13).

During adolescence a child must learn the appropriate roles he/she must play in society, therefore, many of the 'coming of age' or 'bildungsroman' novels outline and describe these social prescriptions. Many of the plots were traditionally structured around childhood initiation and featured these desired patterns of development within the actions of the main characters (Pratt, 1981). Roberta Seelinger Trites (2001) suggests power is the fundamental element in this particular genre of literature. "The adolescent cannot grow without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness" (p.2). She suggests that adolescents must learn their place within their own society's power structures. They do this by learning how to negotiate with the many institutions that shape them, by learning how to balance their own power with the power of their parents and other authority figures, and by learning how to accumulate and control their own personal power. "Adolescents are empowered by institutions, by their parents and by

their knowledge of their bodies, but by offering up rules and holding repercussions over their heads that limit their newfound freedom, these things also restrict them” (Trites, 2001,p.2).

Feminist critics, including Annis Pratt, Barbara White, Elizabeth Abel, Elizabeth Langland and Marianne Hirsch, point out the differences in these patterns of development among white male and female protagonists. Many of these differences are consistent with the differences outlined in the Adolescent Development Theories. For example, many male protagonists define maturity by their ability to separate from their parents and accomplish tasks on their own. Female protagonists seem to define maturity by their inner growth and connection to familial relations. Many of these females do not even leave or separate from their families during this process (Abel, et al.1983). Many of these definitions are consistent with the developmental theories of Chodorow (1978) and Fetterley (1978) and Gilligan (1982, 1990, 1992 and 1995).

The role and function of Reader Response to adolescent literature continues to change, conceding to the social prescriptions and expectations of the particular age. Adolescents historically relied on literature to dictate to them their prescribed roles within society and teach them how to act and respond to others. Today the plot and character development may provide readers with a context in which they can reassess their own experiences without actually having to personally participate in them. It may provide them with a means by which they can reflect on and consider their own lives, and may help these young people to make more thoughtful and more informed life decisions.

Post Modern Feminist Theories

The development of this project began with my feeling of gender imbalance in the language curriculum. As a teacher, I noticed a lack of female authors represented within the high school English curriculum. By definition, Postmodernism involves a “critical response to beliefs, values, and ideals that came to dominate the modernist period of culture” (Mandell, 1998, p.18). My current position as a female questioning the representation of women in literature situates me within the domain of Post Modern feminism. This term is more clearly defined by Patti Lather (1991) through her discussion of concepts. She defines Postmodern Feminism as a shared set of alternative conceptions about the individual, authority, history, and community. A Post Modern feminist views the individual as multiple, unstable, contradictory, and as a direct product of his/her social environment. Lather believes authority and knowledge should be derived from multiple, anti-hierarchical, and participatory forms. She sees history as nonlinear, limited and not necessarily progressive, and she views community as an achievement based on valuing diversity without opposition (p.160). These definitions are consistent with my position as a researcher and a teacher. In my teaching, I try to dismantle the power hierarchy and invite my students into a safe community of learners where all voices and personal experiences are valued and respected.

When reading and evaluating the data for this research, I will adhere to these principles of Post Modernism: open up conversations, allow for multiple voices and positions, deconstruct power relations and recognize the importance and influence of social environments. I must consider that everything is situated; there are no objective or value-free standpoints. Therefore, when assessing the data I must avoid the tendency to

group or 'frame' meaning. I cannot cluster all responses into all categories because they may not fit into these selected categories. I should also resist the urge to generalize after considering only a few responses. Each individual response is unique and is only representative of this student's reaction at this particular time in his/her life. These same students could respond very differently in a different social environment or time frame; their responses are in constant flux. I must also consciously focus on "how language constructs that which is being investigated" (Lather, 1991, p.94). In other words, student responses may be limited because they lack the ability to express themselves clearly or properly, or the questions in the study may have been misinterpreted or misunderstood, giving them a false pretext on which to base their answers.

Self- reflexivity is another important aspect of Post Modern Feminism. As a researcher, I will "embark on a deconstruction of textual authority" in order to challenge certainty and remain open to the different possibilities for data interpretation (Grogan, 1996). I must acknowledge my own social and personal limitations and acknowledge that these will be inherent in my evaluation and presentation of this data. I will recognize that my own perspective is forever- changing and that the interpretive offering within this study is indicative of my own specific perspective at the time of analysis and is subject to future change. My overall goal in this study is to present this research in a thoughtful and meaningful way and provide students with a valuable and significant venue in which their voices are heard.

Adolescent Psychology and Development

Many educators, psychologists, and theorists have examined the issues of adolescence, collectively suggesting that adolescents struggle with problems of

disconnection, societal pressures, low self-esteem, and misrepresentations in the media. There are a variety of theories and debates from traditional to modern surrounding the issues of adolescent development and gender identity. The student participants in this study are all white, middle class adolescents and, therefore, the theories presented in this section are inclusive of only these white, middle class developmental theories. Minority groups may have very different developmental experiences. Considerations of the white middle class theories are presented in this study in order to make useful connections between adolescent development and responses to women's voices in literature.

The early theories addressing adolescent development and identity position children within the context of stages. Many were male theorists like Freud (1901), Erikson (1963), and Piaget (1975) who contend that a person must travel from one stage to the next, building upon their new knowledge and experiences. These theories do not differentiate between males and females and are based on male norms. They consider adolescents as one group and do not distinguish between genders. Freud (1901) defines his developmental stages in terms of organs. He believed that the single motive for human behaviour was to satisfy biological needs and relieve tension. These stages discharge the natural tensions of humans starting from birth progressing through adulthood. These stages include the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Each person moves through these stages in sequence and failure to experience gratification during each stage results in a fixed state of being. Freud (1901) defines adolescence by internal struggles where a child moves from the latency stage to the genital stage. An adolescent experiences conflict between the ego impulses and his/her superego

restrictions. It is this confusion that causes the conflict within this stage of development (DeAnda, 1995).

Erikson's (1963) theories focus on the social and cultural components that impact human development. He defines adolescence as the 'Identity versus Role Confusion' stage occurring between the ages of 14 to 20 years. He describes adolescence as a necessary and productive period where one forms his/her own identity. It is a time of stress and turmoil (crisis) as one searches for and develops his/her own personal self.

Marcia (1966) elaborates on Erikson's theories and develops an identity status model based on the concepts of crisis and commitment. He defines identity as an ego structure and suggests that adolescents resolve this conflict through the experiences of making choices. Marcia distributes adolescents over four identity statuses: *Identity Diffusion*, *Foreclosure*, *Moratorium*, and *Identity Achievement*. The first two statuses are associated with negative characteristics and the third and fourth statuses are associated with positive characteristics. *Identity diffusion* is the stage when adolescents have not yet made a commitment regarding a specific developmental task, with or without a crisis occurring. *Foreclosure* occurs when an adolescent has made a commitment or choice and experiences a crisis in making this decision. Both of these stages are characterized by feelings of low self-esteem, insecurity, and anxiety. *Moratorium* occurs when an adolescent has made no commitment and is in a stage of crisis. *Identity achievement* often precedes this stage, occurring when the adolescent has made a solid commitment and surmounts the crisis. Both of these statuses are associated with high levels of self-esteem and autonomy and result in a high level of moral reasoning.

Piaget (1975) defines development by the way humans think and process information. He categorizes humans into four periods of development: sensorimotor, concrete preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. In adolescence a child moves from concrete thinking to more abstract or formal thinking. This occurs through the acquisition of formal reasoning skills. The attainment of egocentric thought leads to self-consciousness, imaginary audience thinking, and invulnerability. Sharing experiences with others aids in the development of egocentric thinking (De Anda, 1995).

These traditional models of development are important to the understanding and perceptions of adolescent development. However, these theories customarily grouped males and females together, equating male development synonymously with 'normal' human development. Many researchers struggled to categorize or 'fit' females into these models. Douvan and Adelson (1966) were one of the first teams to take direct exception with Erikson's male model and suggest that there were vast differences between male and female development. One of the main differences they observed was that females place more emphasis on the interpersonal (self connected to others) while males emphasized the intrapersonal (self as separate and unique).

Nancy Chodorow (1978) suggests that gender differences are grounded in social structures and are a direct result of the mother-child relationships. "Sex as we know it- gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood – is itself a social product" (p.8). Chodorow's *object-relations theory* proposes that gender identity is inscribed and internalized through the relationship between a child and mother. A male child although sharing closeness with his mother, is viewed as different and separate from her. He is encouraged to become autonomous, having his identity revolve around

achievements in activities rather than in intimate relationships. His focus is on separation and independence and he is threatened by attachment. A mother feels a different closeness with her female child, sharing a more intimate relationship based on similarity and resemblance. She is not encouraged to separate from her mother and is expected to have an intimate relationship with her. The female child's focus is on attachment and she is threatened by separation. This theory sheds light on misogyny – male's resistance to or disassociation from female characteristics.

Deborah Tannen (1990) elaborates on these differences and develops the *genderlect theory*. She proposes that male and female differences reside mainly in their modes of communication. Males live in a world of hierarchy and, therefore, focus on independence and action. Females live in a world of connection and, therefore, focus on intimacy and feelings. These differences result in different modes of communication. Males tend to communicate in a competitive manner, speaking publicly and authoritatively. Talk is associated with leadership and interruptions are seen as a struggle for control. Females converse more privately and discussions are viewed as negotiations for closeness. Talk is protected and interruptions are welcomed and seen as a demonstration of participation and support.

Helen Harper (2000) defines adolescence as a time of change and loss. Children experience a shift from loving and relying on their parents and siblings to loving and relying on someone outside of the family unit. Western culture encourages children to grow up and separate from their parents and this separation presents adolescents with a great sense of disconnection. Harper argues that some girls not only feel this separation

from their family they also feel a separation from their culture. She argues that language is central to this problem.

Language is key in gender identity and becomes particularly problematic and unsettling for female adolescents. The acquisition of language is what turns subjects into human and social beings, but entry into the symbolic order is organized differently for females than for males.(p. 4)

She maintains that, since language was created by a patriarchy, females are not included and have, therefore, developed a relationship that is negatively organized with language. Harper's study of six teenage girls examines their relationship with language and identifies the structures that exist within these girls' concept of language and concepts of societal expectations (p.2). Language has a powerful influence on the development and understanding of ideology.

Dawn Currie (1999) explores the impact of the media on gendered identities. In her book, *Girl Talk*, she examines the activities of two teenagers and explores the impact of beauty magazines on their gendered identities. She directly links the media to the disruption of female identity during adolescence. She outlines the social texts (magazines, television shows) that dictate the feminine 'scripts' for girls to follow, a message that is normally, deeply internalized. These scripts promote physical beauty over intellectual development and present females with a limited gender script.

However mundane the activity of applying make-up appears to be, it engages women in the everyday reconstitution of their gendered identity. This engagement naturalizes cultural prescriptions of femininity, and therefore obscures patriarchal relations of domination

and subordination on the basis of gender. (p. 4)

Currie attributes these gender scripts as the main source of confusion or resistance for adolescents.

Carol Gilligan (1989) describes adolescence as a problem with disconnection. She suggests that girls feel an obligation to meet the needs of others rather than the needs of themselves. They are faced with the decision to abandon parts of themselves in order to please others or abandon others to serve their own self. The world is presented to them in such a way that, in order for them to solve problems, they must choose one way or the other. This is a terribly difficult dilemma leaving girls with feelings of frustration, anxiety, and heaviness. Males do not share this same burden of obligation. Having being encouraged to be independent and self-reliant they tend to be more focused on self and feel less obligated to meet the needs of others.

Patricia O'Reilly (2001) suggests some girls' loss of self is directly connected to societal pressure. When girls enter into adolescence they are presented with a new set of expectations to which they are expected to adhere. "Society's loudest and clearest message is that at puberty girls must give up their quest for self and begin the lessons of becoming a sex object"(p. 24). If girls refuse to adhere to these societal norms they are often labeled, mocked and/ or ostracized. O'Reilly describes three agents of socialization, including family, schools, and churches. These agents contribute to the confusion and destruction of adolescents. All three of these agents support and encourage societal stereotypes (sometimes subconsciously) for gender behaviour.

In her book, *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher (1994) suggests that during adolescence girls feel an enormous amount of social pressure and struggle to find a place

that is congruent with the culture and social expectations. “Adolescent girls experience a conflict between their autonomous selves and their need to be feminine, between their status as human beings and their vocation as females”(p. 22). Peer pressure encourages girls to deny their true selves and assume false selves that are consistent with the world that surrounds them. They start to assume characteristics that they believe are desirable, “their voices have gone underground- their speech is more tentative and less articulate” (p. 20). They are caught between the childhood world of innocence and the adult world of expectations. “Girls stop being and start seeming”(De Beauvoir quoted in Pipher p. 21). They become consumed with the expectations of their culture and struggle to stay within the perceived boundaries of the culture. As a result, Pipher concludes that many girls forget that they have selves worth protecting and often give up hope, losing their resiliency and optimism, and become incredibly self critical, insecure, and fragmented.

As adolescents become more involved in their social world, both males and females are presented with a new and unfamiliar set of expectations that they may or may not agree with. They are also forced to consider others (parents, boy/girl friends, the media) before making a decision. There are often great inconsistencies that exist between what they know, what they want, and what they should do. They may “find themselves caught between a knowledge they trust through experience and a knowledge that is culturally sanctioned” (Gilligan, 2003, p.98). Adolescents must learn to live within the confines of society and those who choose not to often face severe consequences.

These theories represent white, middle-class views and suggest that both males and females experience conflict during adolescence. They struggle to assert themselves as individuals separate and apart from their family and their peers. They are greatly

influenced by the media and are very culturally socialized by their environment. Clearly, there are many similarities and differences between the development of males and females. The differences revolve around social structures, resulting in different modes of communication, social expectations and media stereotypes. Certainly there are limitations to the theories presented in this section. They encompass only the experiences of white adolescents and are not inclusive of the experiences of any minority groups.

Consideration of these theories helps to situate the data, offering useful criteria for the interpretation of student responses in the following chapters. These theories have increased my knowledge of adolescent development and will assist me in assessing and interpreting student responses. In understanding the thoughts and feelings of my students I am better able to understand and assess their responses to the women's literature unit.

The main character in *The bell jar* reflects some of these same struggles of adolescent's development. This novel is a story about a confused, 19 year old girl who feels pressure to adhere to the social scripts of her mother and of her white, middle class 1950s society. Esther's personal feelings are in direct conflict with the societal pressures that surround her. She feels like she is "suffocating". Esther seems to be a character who is caught in a world of seeming instead of being; she is told to act and be one way and yet she cannot help but feel contrary to this. She resists the expectations that surround her and feels that she must be true to herself. She is in a constant state of conflict, trying on different personalities, trying to find out who she really is supposed to be. Her feelings are consistent with those revealed in the adolescent development theories. Many theories suggest that this state of crisis and conflict is a result of this particular age and is a typical pattern in adolescent development. Perhaps some of the student participants may be able

to relate to Esther in that they share some of the same feelings of insecurity, conflict, and pressure at this adolescent stage of development.

Reader Response Theories

Reader Response theories refer to the various ways in which readers respond to literary texts. These theorists question the extent to which this response is objective or subjective. They reflect on whether the world is culturally constructed or has an essential separate existence. They consider to what extent interpretation of texts is conditioned by the social and cultural experiences of the reader and whether or not texts carry independent, objective literary codes that cause readers to have similar literary responses (Lye, 1996). Considerations and discussion of these theories are included in order to examine the responses of the student participants in this study. This discussion enables the researcher to gain an understanding of these responses in order to develop effective literacy curriculum that will engage students in a meaningful way.

The Traditional Reader Response Theories

Traditional literary texts were considered to have determinable, unwavering literary value, despite the position of the reader. These theorists (from Aristotle, Horace, through the Romantic writers and Russian formalists) emphasized that the stylistic features of the text determine the literary merit and greatly influence reader response and interpretation. They contend that meaning is objective and independent of the position of the reader. Aristotle (384-322B.C.E.) asserts that poetry and literature “is more philosophical and more significant than history” because its goal is to represent that which is universal.

In his *Poetics* (1902) Aristotle defines his theory of *literary mimesis*, presenting human beings as fundamental creatures of imitation. We mimic what we see and/ or read and, therefore, all learning takes place through influence and imitation. The function of *literary mimesis* is to present a complete and unified action, a beginning, middle and end and connect this action with essential and probable causes (Grodén & Kreiswirth, 1987). This allows readers to predict and make sense of the actions within the text.

Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* asserts that humans are drawn to reading about tragedy because it creates pleasurable feelings of pity and fear. However, when these emotions are experienced in real life they are painful. When they occur in tragic mimesis they are incorporated into a structure that produces intellectual pleasure. (Grodén & Kreiswirth, 1987). Readers take pleasure in this intellectual experience because they can distance themselves and learn from their literary counterparts. They avoid having to directly experience these painful incidents. "Literature induces us to reflect on the nature of such emotions, to explore their implications, and perhaps to rethink them in productive ways, within a symbolic context that is once removed from the actual world" (Miall, 1996, p.10). Reading, therefore, plays an important part in the development and understanding of the self. It allows us to experience emotions without directly being affected by them and enables us to reflect on and learn from these experiences. It "provides a context in which the reader's own experiences can be reassessed through constructive reformulation of the meaning and scope of the emotions" (Miall, 1996, p.10). These theories provide a possible framework from which to understand the student responses within this study. Perhaps students may be able to position themselves within the world of Esther Greenwood and empathize and learn from her experiences.

The Recent Theories

Over the decades Reader Response Theories have continued to change and evolve. Today, there are a great number of views and positions surrounding this subject. John Lye (1996) simplifies these positions by categorizing them into six theoretical viewpoints. The following definitions are a summary of each of these six positions, all centering on a shifting, subjective position.

1. The Psychoanalytic view - meaning is highly personal and is created by the individual's psyche (at a conscious and unconscious level). The text acts as a pathway between these two levels and may contribute to greater self-knowledge and realization.
2. The Hermeneutic view – meaning is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader. Meaning is always changing and is characterized by identity and strangeness. The reader decodes meaning in accordance to his/her own history or world-view and the text itself has its own history. Therefore, meaning is sometimes shared or collective and sometimes private and personal.
3. The Phenomenological View – meaning is determined by the relationship between the reader and the text. The text functions as a set of instructions for its own processing but needs to be completed or grounded by the reader.
4. The Structuralist View – meaning is determined by the competency of the reader in his/her knowledge and understanding of the social structures that make up the text. The text is constructed according to these objective, social shared literary conventions.
5. The Political / Ideological View – meaning is determined by the social and

political realities of the reader and of the text. Meaning may reinforce aspects of the reader's ideology if he/she is able to connect with these realities. However, the reader may miss meanings if these ideologies are not in accordance with her (culturally produced) system of beliefs.

6. The Post-Structuralist View – meaning is indeterminate; the reader constructs a text as she/he participates in the reading of it. The focus is on process rather than meaning.

Some of these theories seem to share the same premise, specifically the connection to social structure. The Phenomenological, Structuralist, and Political Ideological views all seem to be dependent on outside influences. Meaning is derived from the experience that the reader has with his/her social environment. The Post-Structuralist view dismisses all external structures and focuses on the process of reading rather than the meaning. For the purpose of this study, I have expanded upon the Post-Structuralist view as the lens for my data interpretation (although students' responses may represent all viewpoints). This standpoint was selected because I believe it is the most relevant and consistent form of reflection and evaluation for my students. It also connects well with Post- Modern Feminist position upon which this research is situated.

Post structural theorists, Stanley Fish (1980) and Elaine Showalter (1981) define textual meaning according to the experience that is produced in the reader. They are concerned with what the text *does* as opposed to what it *means*. Meaning is indeterminate and is solely derived from the reader. Fish's (1980) development of *reception aesthetics* rejects the notion of author intentionality and proposes that meaning is determined by the

interpretive community. All knowledge and meaning is influenced by the social context in which a person lives.

As a premise of Post Modernism, knowledge is viewed as a socially conditioned construct that is created and authorized by the traditional values and norms. If these norms, however, are situated in a male tradition then female readers are in danger of becoming, *immasculated* (trained to identify with male needs and desires) by the text. Therefore, Fetterley (1978) suggests that all readers learn to recognize and question these male perspectives and discover how to distinguish and value their own needs and desires.

The Post-Structural viewpoint provides me with a relevant perspective from which to view my own data. It highlights many important factors that I must consider when reading, analyzing, and interpreting the student responses to my women's literature unit. These responses are inevitably going to be situated within the social and cultural constructs of the students. I can, therefore, anticipate a large variety of reactions and responses. Another important factor to consider is that many of the responses may be conditioned or tainted by the mainstream (male) perspective. These may affect the interpretation of data by not accurately reflecting the thoughts and ideas of these female students.

Summary

The discussion of Post Modern Feminism, Adolescent Development and Reader Response Theories is presented in order to provide useful information on the history and theoretical positions for this study. Table 1 provides a chart summary of these various positions. These theories often overlap with each other and share common links. These connections are made evident in Table 1. The history of women in literature is an

important discussion because it provides a useful context for the study and qualifies the rationale. Clearly women have experienced a long history of silence and oppression. They have had to fight hard to have their voices acknowledged and appreciated, and have finally become recognized as valuable contributors to the literary world. This information is also useful as an important handout for students as they begin this unit. The discussion of adolescent development is useful because it also contextualizes the history of this kind of literature and may provide practical theories for the assessment of student responses.

In order to examine student responses, I needed to select a theoretical framework in which to situate and interpret this collection of data. Post Modern Feminism provides me with a valuable perspective from which I can interpret the data. It is important for me to be open to a variety of responses and resist the urge to categorize all of these responses or make generalizations about my findings in this study. As a feminist researcher I will open up conversations, allow for multiple voices and positions, deconstruct power relations and consider alternate assessment tools within the classroom.

Table 1

Framework for Data Analysis

Theories	Post Modern Feminism	Adolescent Development	Reader Response
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerned with women's lives. - Gender is central - Challenges power structures - Many claims to validity. - Self reflexive - Collaborative - Attuned to process - Multiplicity of voices - Oriented to social change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Egocentric - Time of crisis - Confusion - Distortion - Struggle for identity - Peer pressure - Influenced by media stereotypical gender images - Anxiety - Depression - Gendered language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meaning as highly personal - Interaction between reader and text. - grounded by reader - Constructions of reality. - Meaning derived by interpretative community. - Induces reflection - Reassessment of personal lives. - Meaning influenced by social context

The second theoretical perspective discussed in this chapter is Adolescent Development Theory. These theories provide me with another useful lens through which to interpret the data. The students in this study are between the ages of 17 and 19. Many of them are at a critical point in their lives, trying to make good decisions for themselves while experiencing shifts in personal identity, peer pressure and control, and parental/ societal influences. Consideration of the developmental stage of these participants is important because it may help clarify and explain their responses to the women's literature unit. These adolescent students will be asked to reflect on and discuss their own perceptions of gender in literature, describe the role and function of males and females in literature, learn more about the history of females and their position in literature, and assess the function and value of females in literature. The age and developmental stage of these participants is a crucial consideration in the interpretation of their responses and in the determination of appropriate novels to study.

The third theoretical framework discussed in this chapter is reader response theories in adolescent literature. It allows me to further assess and position the student responses to the literature they read in this unit. It will assist me in understanding how students make sense of what they read. Do they make meaning from their own experiences? Do they make meaning by their association with the text? Is meaning dependent on the socially shared experiences of the author and the reader? Is meaning totally indeterminate? Does literature dictate prescribed roles within society? Do plot and character help students assess their own experiences? These considerations are important to the understanding and exploration of student responses to this women's literature unit.

These theories will provide the framework for the interpretation and assessment of the student responses in Chapter Four. A general understanding of these theories is essential to the overall appreciation of the study. The next chapter provides an outline of the research design and describes the procedures and methods used for the unit implementation, data collection, and data interpretation.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The intention of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research design and methodology. Action research is the research method that was chosen for this study because it is consistent with this study's inspiration and purpose; it requires the researcher to respond to a perceived problem within his/her own context (Johnson, 1993). This chapter will also outline the methods and procedures of the data collection and interpretation. It reveals how the women's literature unit was created and presented, how the information was gathered from students, and the ways in which I interpreted the data. It also includes a discussion of the ethical considerations surrounding this study.

The Research Design

I created a women's literature unit because I perceived a shortage of women authors in the literature curriculum. It was a direct reaction to a perceived inconsistency within the current literature curriculum. After the creation of this unit, I wanted to explore how students would respond to it and get them talking or thinking about gender. I wanted to investigate if students were affected by learning about the historical struggle of women and reading literature that contained female voices. Would this knowledge allow them to become more aware of their own gender perceptions and personal identities? This course of action directly corresponds with the description of action research because it involves a researcher taking action against an apparent problem within her own environment.

Action research also invokes a desire to broaden personal understanding and implement change within a current educational system. "It is an attempt to understand our educational practices in a more complete way in order that we may act in ways that may bring about both improvement and understanding" (Carson, Connors, Smits, & Ripley,

1989, p.2). The creation and implementation of this unit was an attempt for me to improve my understanding of student perceptions of gender through literature. It provided me with the opportunity to actively respond to an inconsistency within my current context and the ability to implement change within my professional environment. These goals are consistent with the values and objectives of action research.

Action and *research* become the key components in this research method. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982), characterize this kind of research as a purposeful, solution-oriented investigation that works to promote change in the personal teaching methods of a teacher or a group of teachers. It involves a teacher “trying out ideas in practise as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982 from Johnson, 1993). In striving to understand student perceptions of women in literature I have allowed myself to learn from my students and allowed them to influence my own ideas about gender and curriculum. As an action researcher, I have given myself the opportunity to become an active participant in my own learning by responding to an issue that I believe is important.

Action research is closely linked with self-reflection. It involves the consideration and revision of personal and professional practices, permitting the researcher to think about her own values, practices and ideals.

Action research is simply a form of self- reflection enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in

which the practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.162).

This research method has enabled me to think about my social position as a woman, my role as a teacher, and my responsibility as a researcher. When I first considered the topic of women in literature, I was surprised at how upset I was to discover how few female authors and texts I was teaching. I had not previously even thought about the hidden messages I was teaching. I simply was given the course materials by the head of the English department and I taught them to students. Gender was not an issue I questioned or considered. I did not attempt to confront the status quo.

Johnson (2000) provides a useful systematic structure for this method of research. She outlines the following six steps in this structural process: problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data driven action taken, and problem redefinition. This structure provided me with a useful framework for my own research. I have considered these steps in the collection, analysis, and consideration of my data.

Action research is undoubtedly the most appropriate research method for this study. The intentions, procedures, and active participation and reflection by the researcher are all consistent with this classification of research. No other qualitative research method focuses directly on addressing problems within one's own context. This reflective practice has become crucial to my own learning and allowed me to consider my own teaching methods and ideals. It has given me the opportunity to directly blend theory with action and become an independent and critical thinker.

Unit Development

The women's literature unit was initially created and presented to students in September 2002. This unit has been revised in order to fit within the specific time frame

(4 weeks) and meet the requirements for the Writer's Craft course. As the teacher, I was very open to suggestions about the unit and asked for a lot of input from my professor of *Curriculum Studies* and, of course, from my students. They both provided me with useful feedback. My professor suggested I present a manageable number of authors so I did not overwhelm students with too much information over a short period of time. My students requested that I keep the history and poetry to a minimum and spend more time on the short stories and the novel. After much re-working, I narrowed the unit down to four key areas of study: the history of the women's movement and role in literature, female poets, short stories, and one novel.

I was, of course, somewhat limited because I could only teach material that I had direct access to (within the department). For example, I was not able to choose a novel that I did not have directly available (ordering a new set of novels was out of the question because it would have cost too much money!) As a result, I incorporated the novel *The bell jar* because there were 30 copies available for me to use for my course. I have included a summary of this novel in Appendix A. Inevitably, this limited the content and material taught, however, this limitation did not appear to have a negative impact on the overall unit. Most students, through oral discussion and journal responses, expressed an interest in the selection of literature. *The bell jar* proved to be appealing to many students. They expressed a fondness for the confessional and simplistic writing style of Sylvia Plath and seemed to be able to empathize with the main character. There were no other aspects of this study that were previously conducted or modified. If I had a choice, I might have considered novels that included more cultural diversity.

Selection of Site and Participants

This research study took place at a rural Catholic high school in Southern Ontario. There were approximately 1200 students in attendance at this school (75% Caucasian and 20% First Nation, 5% other). The teaching of the unit and collection of data took place within the English section of the school (Language Room #18). There were 25 student participants in this study, 9 males and 16 females. All students were white, middle-class students. This research was presented as a regular part of the curriculum. Students who did not want to participate would complete the activities but their responses would not be included in the study. Only three students were not included because they were not in regular attendance and were not able to accurately respond to the journal questions.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

There were four phases of data collection in the study. The first segment was a pre-study questionnaire (Appendix B), intended to provide the researcher with information about student's pre-unit perceptions of gender and literature. The second, third, and fourth phases were journal responses (Appendix C) written by students throughout the women's literature unit. I wanted to use journals rather than texts or exams to assess students because I wanted them to have the choice to fully express themselves in writing. I was not looking for the 'right' answer, but rather the richness of their personal interpretations. These segments were intended to track student's thinking and responses as they experienced the unit.

The Questionnaire

I began my research with a questionnaire (Appendix B). This was created in order to obtain an understanding of students' previous knowledge of women's literature and

their perceptions surrounding this issue. It was designed to determine students' prior knowledge of female authors and characters, and explore their perceptions of gender and literature. This questionnaire was distributed to the students within the classroom and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Students were instructed not to write their names on their paper and to place their completed questionnaire on a desk, in a box at the back of the classroom.

The Journal Responses

After the completion of the questionnaire, I began teaching the women's literature unit. This unit was designed to be 4 weeks in length (26 hours) and had the intention of providing students with a short selection of female authors. I wanted to provide students with a short overview of the history surrounding women and the women's movement (from my Chapter Two: "The History of Women in Literature") and expose them to a small selection of female authors. The unit included a variety of literature written by females: six poems, two short stories, and one novel. The short stories and novel contained female protagonists. My hope was to give students some exposure to women's literature as a way to help them consider their own thoughts about women and consider their own perceptions about gender.

Instruction began with a short lecture on Sylvia Plath and the distribution of the novel, *The bell jar*. Students were instructed to read and answer questions (Appendix D) on the novel. This reading was to be done independently and the students were expected to complete the novel over the next 3 weeks. The unit progressed with several lessons on the history of the women's movement and the reading of a variety of poems written by various female poets. These poems were read and discussed in groups, followed by a

class discussion. At this time, students were asked to complete the first journal response (see Appendix C). The journal topic was written on the chalkboard and students wrote their responses on separate sheets of paper. These responses were placed into a box at the back of the room when completed by the student. The unit continued with the reading and discussion of two short stories: *Boys and Girls* by Alice Munro (1968) and *Mirror Image* by Lena Coakley (1990). At this time, students completed the second journal response (see Appendix B) and placed their responses into the same box. By this third week students were to have finished reading *The bell jar* and they participated in oral discussions, note taking, and written assignments pertaining to this novel. At the conclusion of this unit students completed the third journal response (see Appendix C). These responses were collected and analyzed.

Data Processing and Analysis

After the collection of the four phases of data, the questionnaire and journal responses were read over many times. The pre-unit questionnaire was considered in order to qualify the rationale for the study and provided me with a baseline from which to compare and contrast the data from the start of the unit to the end. Questions #1, 2, 3 of the questionnaire required students to numerically list known female authors, known female characters, and the number of female authors studied in high school. These numbers were simply added together and divided by 25 (number of participants) to find an average percent. This quantitative value offers a necessary statistic to the overall study by confirming the necessity of the study.

The rest of the questionnaire (numbers 4 through 10) and the three response journals were analyzed through inductive grouping and coding. *Inductive coding* is

characterized by the generation of codes by the researcher *after* examining the data (Johnson & Christenson, 2000). This procedure involved the reading and re-reading of responses until frequent patterns emerged. These patterns enabled me to group the data into sections. This qualitative method is referred to by Johnson and Christenson (2000) as ‘segmenting’ and involves the dividing of data “into meaningful analytical units”(p.426). I separated and re-wrote the quotes that best represented the majority of viewpoints and wrote them on a separate sheet of paper. I then proceeded to make a list of code words, in order to make direct connections between the data and the research questions. “Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56). This process of coding and segmenting allowed me to locate and label important sections of data, in order to make useful interpretations and re-connect with the research questions. These codes and segments were compiled into a chart (Table 2) as a way to systematically organize and interpret the data.

Table 2

Data: Segmenting and Coding

Quotations	Segmenting	Coding
"Males and females interpret the world differently and we need to be exposed to both interpretations."	Difference	Difference
"Reading only males give us a skewed viewpoint of the world."	Skewed Viewpoint	Inequity
"We need to balance the perspective and offset traditional male stereotypes."	Balance	Balance
"Getting a well rounded education helps give us a better or more accurate view of the world."	Accurate View	Balance
"Women have been through different struggles and we need to recognize and hear these stories."	Difference/Voice	Difference
"Female perspectives help female students feel important and understand themselves better."	Self Esteem	Inclusion
"When I think of a female author, I think of only love stories and stuff like that. When I think of males it's the complete opposite. I know this is a sad state, but it is the truth."	Stereotypes (F = love)	Stereotypes
"I find female authors to be more sensitive and emotional in the way they write. They dwell on thoughts and feelings more than actual events."	Stereotypes (F= emotional)	Stereotypes
"Women's literature is more emotional, male literature is more aggressive."	Stereotypes (F=emotion, M=aggressive)	Stereotypes
"Male authors write in a masculine style, sort of stereotypical. The female authors write with love, care and friendship (the more feminine approach)."	Stereotypes (F= love, care)	Stereotypes
"Females seem to focus more on details and the emotions of the characters and their lives, whereas males seem to focus more on the plot and how to prove or establish the point they desire to write about."	Stereotypes (F= emotions, M=action)	Stereotypes
"Men are generally the hero or at least the person who turns to violence whereas a woman would find a peaceful way to solve the problem."	Stereotypes (M= hero, F= passive)	Stereotypes
"Male characters are often seen as rough, intelligent and sexual while women are seen as intuitive but ditsy and materialistic - mother-types."	Stereotypes (M= intelligent, F= ditsy)	Stereotypes
"The female is usually distressed or helpless in some way and needs the man's help."	Stereotypes (F= distressed, helpless)	Stereotypes

(Table continues)

Quotation	Segmenting	Coding
“Women are also seen as manipulative and deceiving and are usually described as being beautiful and sensitive.”	Stereotypes (F= manipulative, beauty)	Stereotypes
“We take things we read and translate them to our own lives. It may help you deal with a situation or understand one better.”	Translate to lives	Personal meaning
“Sometimes books open your eyes and show you new perspectives and give you better understandings to different situations that people go through.”	New Understanding	New perspective
“They allow me to see the world through someone else’s eyes, or to see a whole different world.”	New Understanding	New perspective
“They can challenge my ethical and moral beliefs and my views on society and individual roles.”	Challenge beliefs	New Awareness
“Different gender issues are discussed by different authors ie: it would be unorthodox for a male author to discuss feminine issues (such as abortion).”	Male/Female Issues	Gender Issues
“Women writers have this stereotypical persona as being depressed whiners while men are seen as the adventure hero writers.”	Stereotypes (F= whiners, M= hero)	Stereotypes
“Gender roles are very distinct in literature. Books tend to separate the males from the females through strength, heroism and the amount of aggression.”	Gender in Literature	Gender Issues
“I believe we have equal rights but usually in school we focus on the males, only certain women have their voices heard.”	Equity – voices	Gender Equity
“I think we are getting there but we are still seen as the weaker sex and sometimes looked down upon because of our gender.”	Equity	Gender Equity
“There are obviously still men with old fashion ideals who make tasks harder for women.”	Gender Roles	Gender Equity
“Women have an equal voice in society today but that voice isn’t taken as seriously as males.”	Voice	Gender Equity
“I think they should make a more conscious effort to include more female authors.”	Inclusion	Gender Equity
“They can be taught instead of just brushed upon.”	Inclusion	Gender Equity
“An awareness of this topic must be brought forth much earlier in schools.”	Gender Awareness	Gender Equity

(Table Continues)

Quotation	Segmenting	Coding
"In the year 2003, females and males, although living with similar responsibilities and circumstances do not face a life of equality. Our modern day is ruled by heterosexual, white males."	Equity	Gender Equity
"Women are still portrayed as the weaker sex, who should be at home with the kids and cooking dinner for the man of the house."	Females as weaker	Gender Equity
"In today's society women are declared as equals to men in every way. Underneath though, I think that woman do not have equal rights or opportunities."	Inequity	Gender Equity
"It really frustrates me that I will never be physically as strong as a male because I feel that I can do anything. It's not that I want to be better than males I just don't want to be considered the 'weaker gender.'"	Females as weaker sex	Gender equity
"I feel vulnerable, I could be overpowered at anytime, perhaps not mentally but physically, and to me this is the reason why women might never be equal to men."	Female as vulnerable	Gender difference
"Just knowing that I can have a child gives me such a huge sense of power."	Birthing/ Mothering	Gender difference
"I don't think there's a difference between women's literature and men's literature. We're all people who experience similar things."	Gender as same	Gender difference
"I feel that having children is the end of my life. Being a mother means the end of my sexual freedom because I will have the responsibility of vulnerable children."	Mothering as burden	Gender difference
"There are inherent restrictions placed on us that are unavoidable. Women cannot have an equal voice because of one thing – Pregnancy. Biology doesn't allow women to have an equal role in such environments as the workplace."	Birthing/ Equity	Gender difference
"I really like being a female even though sometimes I do not feel equal to boys at all."	Female Equality	Gender difference
"I think that being a female has its disadvantages, obviously. So, I'm definitely happy to be a guy."	Male gender bias	Gender perspective
"Personally, I feel that being a woman is comfortable in today's society- although sometimes I feel that there is more stress on women and that it is harder being a woman"	Female Equity	Gender difference
"I think females are still seen as foils to men. This is why a lot of people are intimidated by lesbians, they throw away conventions and are 'empowered'."	Female Equity	Gender difference

(Table Continues)

Quotation	Segmenting	Coding
"Falling into the category of a white hetero male, I focus very little on the things outside my world. I do not read books written by women and know little about women's literature."	Male perspective	Gender difference
"Women in literature do not get one bit of the recognition they deserve. Schools barely teach women authors and/ or work done by women."	Female recognition	Gender in Lit
"Any writing reflects the values of society in some way or another. Society influences everyone and I think that it bleeds through in just about any aspect of artistic creation."	Values in Literature	Social Influence
"I have always felt that literature is a reflection of life."	Lit as Life	Values in Literature
"Literature does not necessarily reflect our values, but rather our hopes and dreams."	Ideals	Lit as Ideal
"It presents us with a necessary ideal of life."	Ideals	Lit. as Ideal
"I have more appreciation for the freedom that I now have."	New appreciation	New Awareness
"I am a fan of poetry and women's poetry especially because I can identify with it so much."	Identification	New Awareness
"This unit has made me depressed in a way because I realized that to be a woman, there are limits as to what you can be. You cannot have it all."	Limitations	New Awareness
"I can really identify with the protagonist. It is motivating for me as a partially depressed person to be able to see someone be successful in overcoming their depression."	Identification	Personal Connection
"I really enjoyed The Bell Jar. I felt like I could relate to Esther and what she was going through. I learned that you can have everything but without happiness and positive influences you will not be able to truly live."	Identification	Personal Connection
"This knowledge is extremely useful to me because it helps me to appreciate all that I have. I am reading a lot more books now, especially by female authors."	Appreciation	New Awareness
"I take more offence to sexist comments and I stand up for what I believe in more than ever. I believe in myself and have confidence in these beliefs."	New Confidence	New Awareness
"This unit makes me have a different outlook on the society I live in. All of my life I have assumed that everyone is equal and believed that I was free. I now realize that life is not what it seems."	New perspective	New Awareness

(Table Continues)

Quotation	Segmenting	Coding
"I would write about the stereotypes of women, how they are perceived as looking a certain way (ex. Skinny, blonde, Barbie image)"	Stereotypes in Lit	Perceptions in lit.
"I think I would write about girl's obsessions. I know all teenage girls have obsessions they don't want to talk about, but secretly want to know if other women feel the same."	Female Obsessions	Values in Literature
"It would most likely be about the teenage experience revolving around sex, drugs and the tough decisions girls face (abortion / peer pressure)"	Teenage Experience	Life in Literature
"I would write about the negative connotations associated with female body parts, the language that we use and how women are being sexually exploited more and more."	Gender Language in Lit	Life in Literature
"I would write about a girl in university, struggling with what she wants to be. She has to find what she really wants out of life and thinks about such issues like if she wants to have a child, if she can balance a career and children, if her husband should stay home with the kids, if she should even get married."	Teenage struggles	Life in Literature
"It would be about a successful woman who is a lawyer and becomes the Prime Minister of Canada or the president of the United States."	Female Success in Lit	Life in Literature

Ethical Considerations

My research began with the creation of my proposal. The greatest concern with my project (as the ethics board pointed out) was the position of power I had over my participants. As a teacher, I am in a position of power and authority. This was a concern because students might be uncomfortable giving me truthful answers and could be subjected to repercussions for unfavourable responses. In recognition of this problem, I clearly explained to my students that they were under no obligation to answer any of the questions and they would remain completely anonymous throughout the project (their names would not be put on any of the written responses.) I created a script containing the explanation that students would be given before the research began. Students were given permission forms (Appendix E), which required a signature from the student and his/her parent/ guardian. All permission forms were signed and collected before the project began. Most students appeared to be excited to participate in this project and did not appear to have concerns about this power position or any long-term penalties or ramifications.

As a creative writing teacher, I strive to create an open and trusting relationship with my students. They are continuously asked to share their writing with the class and appear to have learned to be open, confident, and constructive. I felt that it was a great advantage to use my own students as my research participants because I already knew them and had been previously entrusted with their personal writing (in journals and assignments). This, I believe, put me at an advantage over a researcher who had no previous experiences or knowledge of them. Throughout the research I encouraged students to be honest and tried to ensure them that they would not be penalized for any

responses they included in the research. Overall, they seemed to be excited to participate in something that extended beyond the doors of their classroom. I believe it was meaningful to them and gave them a chance to have their voices heard.

Restatement of the Area of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how one class of students respond to a women's literature unit. The main objective is to gain an appreciation of how these students make sense of the literature they read and to explore their perceptions of gender through responding to literature written by women. As an action researcher, I am directly involved in this research. The experience has made me consider my own perceptions of gender and has invited me to re-evaluate the ways in which gender and equity affect me as a female, literature teacher. The data collected in this study is intended to profile the voices of my students. It reveals some of their thoughts and perceptions about the literature unit and their understanding of gender. The systematic organization of this data is intended to represent these student perceptions and ideas.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTING THE DATA

My purpose for this chapter is to present the data in an organized manner and include many of the original student responses. These comments are presented within quotations and italics and are included as a way to capture the authentic voices of student participants. There is little interpretation of this data in this chapter; the data are simply presented within the three frameworks because I wanted readers to see the data before it was subjected to my own interpretation. The analysis and discussion of this data will be presented in the following chapter. I have italicized the student responses and coded them, identifying the gender of the student and place from which each response came. The codes are explained using the following letters: M= male, F = female, Q = questionnaire, and R = response journal.

The voices of the student participants are an essential part of this study. The student responses provide a meaningful perspective from which to consider and understand the high school literature curriculum. These responses give me, the researcher, an appreciation of the thoughts and feelings of my students' reactions to literature written by women. Their responses are presented and interpreted through three theoretical perspectives: Post Modern Feminism, Adolescent Development and Reader Response. These three lenses provide meaningful ways for me to organize and present the data in this chapter.

Post Modern Feminism

Post Modern Feminist theory is characterized by alternative conceptions of the individual, power relations, historical interpretations, and societal views. These are explicitly defined and discussed in Chapter Two and are further outlined on a

comparative chart in Table 2. Generally, Post Modern Feminism consists of individuals responding to beliefs, values, and ideals that dominate the present period of culture. These responses involve a re-construction of authority and knowledge, and a new understanding of personal influence and meaning. The student responses included in this category consistently involved discussion and concern with these issues. The dominating themes that represent Post Modern Feminism are Gender Stereotypes, Gender Equality, and Self- Reflection and Social Change.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender issues became an important subject for students as they learned about the history of women in literature. Students expressed concern especially when they realized how few female authors they had studied within the curriculum. Most students admitted to not knowing much literature by or about women. *“Women in literature do not get one bit of the recognition they deserve. Schools barely teach women authors and/ or work done by women.” (F,R)* *“I do not read books written by women and know little about women’s literature.” (M,Q)*

In recognition of this lack of exposure to female authors and issues, students expressed a desire for balance and equal representation within the classroom. *“Males and females interpret the world differently and we need to be exposed to both interpretations.” (M,Q)* By presenting only one gender students worried that their perceptions were being distorted. *“Reading only males give us a skewed viewpoint of the world.” (F,Q)* *“We need to balance the perspective and offset traditional male stereotypes.” (F,Q)* Students also expressed concern about receiving an accurate view of the world and expressed an interest in learning more about the struggles of women.

“Women have been through different struggles and we need to recognize and hear these stories.” (F,R) Many of the female students felt they could better identify with stories written by females and felt that this enabled female students to have more confidence in themselves. *“Female perspectives help female students feel important and understand themselves better.”* (F,R) Overall, both male and female students felt that this was an important issue.

Students identified distinct stereotypical differences between male and female authors. They indicated a difference in subject, theme, and writing style. *“When I think of a female author, I think of only love stories and stuff like that. When I think of males it’s the complete opposite. I know this is a sad state, but it is the truth.”* (F,Q) Emotions were also identified and stereotyped *“I find female authors to be more sensitive and emotional in the way they write. They dwell on thoughts and feelings more than actual events.”* (F,R) General statements were made categorizing males and females into separate groups, *“women’s literature is more emotional, male literature is more aggressive.”* (F,R) *“Male authors write in a masculine style, sort of stereotypical. The female authors write with love, care and friendship (the more feminine approach).”* (F,Q)

Students also described the differences between male and female characters. They indicated that many male and female characters are also presented in very stereotypical ways. *“Gender roles are very distinct in literature. Books tend to separate the males from the females through strength, heroism and the amount of aggression.”* (M,Q) Males are very tough, strong, and sometimes violent: *“they are often seen as rough, intelligent and sexual.”* (F,Q) Females are often seen as sensitive and motherly: *“they are seen as intuitive but ditsy and materialistic - mother-types.”* (F,Q) The male characters are

usually the heroes and dominate the other characters while the female characters often get into trouble and require help. *“The female is usually distressed or helpless in some way and needs the man’s help.”*(F,R) Women *“are also seen as manipulative and deceiving and are usually described as being beautiful and sensitive.”*(M,R) These stereotypical images are consistent throughout the student responses.

Gender Equality

Gender equity is an important consideration within Post Modern Feminism. When I introduced this issue as their teacher, many students expressed a concern with this issue and identified a great disparity among the treatment of males and females in their own lives and within literature. Overall, many of the students felt that men and women do not have an equal voice in the world. *“In the year 2003, females and males, although living with similar responsibilities and circumstances do not face a life of equality. Our modern day is ruled by heterosexual, white males.”*(F,R) These responses described a traditional lifestyle for men and women: *“Women are still portrayed as the weaker sex, who should be at home with the kids and cooking dinner for the man of the house.”*(F,R) Some students differentiated between appearance and reality, describing the world as existing with a false sense of equality. *“In today’s society women are declared as equals to men in every way. Underneath though, I think that woman do not have equal rights or opportunities.”*(F,Q) *“We would like to think that women have as many rights as men but they really don’t.”*(M,Q) Some students blamed schools for promoting this inequality, *“I believe we have equal rights but usually in school we focus on the males, only certain women have their voices heard.”*(F,R) *“Women have an equal voice in society today but*

that voice isn't taken as seriously as males, if they did we would be studying them in school."(M,R)

Many responses outlined the physical and biological differences between men and women, reciting these differences as the reason for such discrimination. Students indicated that, because men and women do not have the same physical strength, men will always have power over women. *"It really frustrates me that I will never be physically as strong as a male because I feel that I can do anything. It's not that I want to be better than males I just don't want to be considered the weaker gender."*(F,R) *"I feel vulnerable, I could be overpowered at anytime, perhaps not mentally but physically, and to me this is the reason why women might never be equal to men."*(F,R)

The ability to have children also surfaced as an interesting factor in gender differences. A few students felt this gave women power: *"Just knowing that I can have a child gives me such a huge sense of power."*(F,R) *"I like being a woman because we are unique in our ability to have birth."*(F,R) Other students viewed pregnancy as a burden. *"When I think about kids and a career I'm not sure I can have them both. I want to but it seems like a huge burden to have to choose between them."*(F,R) *"I feel that having children is the end of my life. Being a mother means the end of my sexual freedom because I will have the responsibility of vulnerable children."*(F,R) Some students revealed this biological function as the sole reason for intrinsic inequality. There are *"inherent restrictions placed on us that are unavoidable. Women cannot have an equal voice because of one thing – Pregnancy. Biology doesn't allow women to have an equal role in such environments as the workplace."*(M,R)

In recognition of these gender discrepancies, students reflected directly on their own gender. Most students, while acknowledging the obvious disadvantages to being a female, expressed pleasure with their own gender. *“I like being a female, as much as we are not equal to men, I much prefer being a woman.” (F,R) “I really like being a female even though sometimes I do not feel equal to boys at all.” (F,R) “I think that being a female has its disadvantages, obviously. So, I’m definitely happy to be a guy.” (M,R)* Students admitted that it was harder to be a woman in today’s society. *“Personally, I feel that being a woman is comfortable in today’s society- although sometimes I feel that there is more stress on women and that it is harder being a woman.” (F,R)* They describe the position of women and link power with lesbians. *“I think females are still seen as foils to men. This is why a lot of people are intimidated by lesbians, they throw away conventions and are empowered.” (F,R)* A few students expressed direct displeasure with their gender because of this inherent inequity, *“I feel burdened being a woman because I have to work so much harder than males. For example, classroom favourites are always males.” (F,R)* These confessions reveal the gender inequalities that students feel exist within their own lives, within their classrooms, and in their society.

Self Reflection and Social Change

In recognition of their acceptance of these gender stereotypes and noticeable gender inequalities, students reflected on their own thoughts and feelings and suggested ways in which to increase awareness and make positive changes in their world. Many students indicated that they learned a lot throughout the unit. Important historical facts helped them better understand the role of women in society. *“This unit makes me have a different outlook on the society I live in. All of my life I have assumed that everyone is*

equal and believed that I was free. I now realize that life is not what it seems.”(F,R) It gave many female students a better appreciation of their own lives and increased their confidence. *“This knowledge is extremely useful to me because it helps me to appreciate all that I have. I am reading a lot more books now, especially by female authors. I take more offence to sexist comments and I stand up for what I believe in more than ever. I believe in myself and have confidence in these beliefs.”(F,R)* It challenged their views and increased their awareness of important topics. *“It encourages me to become more aware that there are still women in the world who are oppressed.”(F,R)* *“This unit has challenged my views regarding women. It has taught me not to accept first impressions and look deeper into the thoughts of women and men.”(M,R)*

Many students indicated that there should be an increase in female writers in the curriculum. *“I think they should make a more conscious effort to include more female authors.”(F,R)* Female voices should be taken more seriously and studied more intensely, *“they should be taught instead of just brushed upon.”(M,R)* Some suggested the creation of a women’s literature course while others suggested better promotion of realistic female heroes in literature, movies and media, presenting females in a more serious and less stereotyped role *“Focus on famous events or movements where females play a more important role.”(F,Q)* The self- reflection of these students allowed them to re-consider their own conceptions of gender and led them to consider ways in which to address the current gender discrepancies within the curriculum.

Adolescent Psychology and Development

Adolescent Development is the second theoretical perspective through which the data for this study is presented. These theories have been explicitly described and

examined in Chapter Two and are further outlined in a comparative chart in Table 2. Adolescence has generally been described as a time of crisis. It is characterised by confusion, distortion, and struggle. Adolescents attempt to find their own identity as they deal with the pressure of parents, peers, and society. It is often a time that is met with anxiety and depression and is greatly influenced by societal and media stereotypes. The students in this study range between the ages 17 to 19. This situates them within the adolescent developmental stage. Their responses must, therefore, be considered from within this contextual perspective in order to fully understand and appreciate them. The data presented in this section are framed around these adolescent theoretical perspectives. The dominating themes surfacing through this lens are Egocentricity and Generality, Confusion and Insecurity, and Societal and Media Pressure.

Egocentricity and Generality

Many of the student responses were centred on their own personal experience, and were not inclusive of all or any other experiences. This focus is evident through the constant use of personal examples and sweeping generalizations. *“There is no difference between women’s literature and men’s literature. We’re all people who experience similar things.”(M,Q)* *“Falling into the category of a white hetero male, I focus very little on the things outside my world. I do not read books written by women and know little about women’s literature.”(M,R)* Their ideas were often presented as facts: *“Women writers are depressed whiners while men are hero adventure writers.”(M,Q)* Their responses were definitive and authoritative *“Women in literature are emotional, impulsive types.”(F,R)* *“Women’s literature is more emotional, male literature is more aggressive.”(F,Q)* *“I know all teenage girls have obsessions they don’t want to talk*

about.”(F,R) These statements are presented as known truths that everyone accepts and adheres to.

Students often implied that if this was their experience then it must be the experience of everyone and there was no possibility of change. “*There are inherent restrictions placed on us that are unavoidable.*”(F,R) “*Classroom favourites are always males.*”(F,R) “*Biology does not allow women to have an equal role in the work environment.*”(M,R) Students present these statements as known facts and seem to accept this fate without any consideration of making it different. These generalizations and presentations of predetermined ‘facts’ imply characteristics of egocentrism and modernism and are consistent with the generalizations adolescents make during this stage of development.

Confusion and Insecurity

Adolescence is characterized by feelings of anxiety, confusion, and insecurity. Within the responses students admit to feeling this uncertainty and confusion. They struggle to find their own identity and express dissatisfaction with their own positions in their world. “*I feel burdened being a woman because I have to work so much harder than males.*”(F,R) “*I realize that to be woman, there are limits as to what you can be. You cannot have it all.*”(F,R) “*I feel vulnerable; I could be overpowered at anytime.*”(F,R)

Some students felt a direct connection with the protagonist, Esther Greenwood because they could identify with her feelings of insecurity and unhappiness. “*I can really identify with the protagonist. It is motivating for me as a partially depressed person to be able to see someone be successful in overcoming their depression.*”(F,R) Students appreciate a character to whom they could relate to and identify. “*I really enjoyed The*

Bell Jar. I felt like I could relate to Esther and what she was going through.”(F,R) “I am a fan of poetry and especially women’s poetry because I can identify with it so much.”(F,R)

Societal and Media Pressure

Adolescents feel a great deal of pressure from their parents, peers, and culture. This pressure adds to their confusion when making decisions for themselves. Literature has a large role to play in the development of gender perceptions and stereotypes. *“We take things we read and translate them to our own lives.”(M,Q)* Within the data students identify the literary stereotypes of male and female writers and characters. *“When I think of a female author, I think of only love stories and stuff like that. When I think of males it’s the complete opposite.”(F,Q)* *“Females seem to focus more on details and the emotions of characters, whereas males seem to focus on plot.”(M,Q)* *“Men are generally the hero or at least the person who turns to violence, whereas a woman would find a peaceful way to solve the problem.”(F,Q)* These perceptions influence their own development of concepts and ideas. *“Maybe these stereotypes are, in an odd sense, our values. I hope not, but maybe people like to read these stories because the generalizations and characterisations reflect their own beliefs.”(F,R)*

Throughout the women’s literature unit students were asked to consider and reflect on a ‘coming of age’ novel for future adolescent readers. Students identified a variety of important subjects that they believed were relevant to teenagers today. *“I would write about the stereotypes of women, how they are perceived as looking a certain way (e.g., Skinny, blonde, Barbie image)”(F,R)* *“I think I would write about girl’s obsessions.”(F,R)* *“It would most likely be about the teenage experience revolving*

around sex, drugs, and the tough decisions girls face (abortion / peer pressure)”(M,R) “I would write about the negative connotations associated with female body parts, the language that we use and how women are being sexually exploited more and more.”(F,R) “I would write about a girl in university, struggling with what she wants to be. She has to find what she really wants out of life and thinks about such issues like if she wants to have a child, if she can balance a career and children, if her husband should stay home with the kids, if she should even get married.”(F,R) These subjects reveal topics that are important to students, topics that reveal the values, issues and concerns of adolescent students.

Reader Response Theories

Reader response is the third and final theoretical perspective through which the data are presented and interpreted. Reader Response refers to the various ways in which a reader responds to a literary text. These theories have been defined and explained explicitly in Chapter Two and are further summarized in a comparative chart in Table 2. This theoretical perspective is characterized by meaning making (objective or subjective), constructions of reality, reflection and reassessment of personal lives, and influence of social context. The student responses included in this category consistently involved discussion and concern with these issues. The dominating themes found within student responses are; Social Influence and Context, Meaning Making, and Reflection and Reassessment. These are very closely connected and often overlap concepts and ideas.

Social Influence and Context

Reader response theorists consider to what extent texts and interpretations of these texts are conditioned by the social and cultural experiences of the reader. Students

offered definitive responses to these considerations. *“Any writing reflects the values of society in some way or another.”*(M,Q) *“Society influences everyone and I think that it bleeds through just about any aspect of artistic creation.”*(M,Q) Many students felt that literature *“is a reflection of life”*(M,Q) while others felt that *“literature does not necessarily reflect our values, but rather our hopes and dreams.”*(F,R) It *“presents us with a necessary ideal of life.”*(F,Q)

Many students translate this influence to a more personal level, indicating the great influence that literary texts have on their own lives. *“We take things we read and translate them to our own lives.”*(F,Q) *“It may help you deal with a situation or understand one better.”*(M,Q) *“Sometimes books open your eyes and show you new perspectives and give you better understandings to different situations that people go through.”*(F,Q) *“They can challenge my ethical and moral beliefs and my views on society and individual roles.”*(F,Q) *“Subconsciously I think I take something from every book I read.”*(M,Q)

Meaning Making

The understanding and personalizing of literary texts is often derived (as confirmed above) by the interpretative community. This community often dictates how readers interpret and make sense of what they read. Adolescent readers can also make meaning through the relationship they develop with the character(s). They often learn from his/her experiences, without having to experience events personally. *“They (novels) allow me to see the world through someone else’s eyes”* (F,Q) and possibly grow or learn from these experiences.

Literature can often teach adolescents how to increase their own social and cultural awareness and improve their confidence. *"I take offence to sexist comments and stand up for what I believe in more than ever."*(F,R) It *"has challenged my views regarding women and has taught me not to accept first impressions."*(F,R) *"I believe in myself and have confidence in these beliefs."*(F,R) Their meaning making is highly personal and encourages readers to reflect on and reassess their own lives.

Reflection and Reassessment

Reading literary texts often allows readers to reflect on their own lives and learn from the experiences of the literary characters. Many students revealed that they have learned a great deal of information. They indicated that this information has helped them to become more knowledgeable about the struggles of women and have a better appreciation for their lives. *"I have more appreciation for the freedom that I now have."*(F,R) *"It has given me a perspective into the individuality of people."*(M,R) Some students struggled with this new awareness, *"This unit has made me depressed in a way because I realized that to be a woman, there are limits as to what you can be. You cannot have it all."*(F,R)

Some students were able to identify with Esther Greenwood from *The bell jar*. *"I can really identify with the protagonist. It is motivating for me as a partially depressed person to be able to see someone be successful in overcoming their depression."*(F,R) *"I really enjoyed The Bell Jar. I felt like I could relate to Esther and what she was going through.(F,R)"* *"I learned that you can have everything but without happiness and positive influences you will not be able to truly live."*(F,R) They have learned about their own lives through the experiences of this literary character.

This women's literature also appeared to increase student's level of social and cultural awareness. *"This unit makes me have a different outlook on the society I live in."* (M,R) *"All of my life I have assumed that everyone is equal and believed that I was free. I now realize that life is not what it seems."* (F,R) *"This unit has challenged my views regarding women. It has taught me not to accept first impressions and look deeper into the thoughts of women and men."* (F,R)

Summary

The theoretical perspectives of Postmodern Feminism, Adolescent Development, and Reader Response provided me with a useful way to present my data within this chapter. These theories act as the foundation for this study and will assist me in my interpretation of this data in Chapter Five. The student responses included within this chapter enable me to capture the thoughts and feelings of these students as they experienced the women's literature unit. My goal is to present these authentic voices in a systematic and organized way, making this chapter easy to follow and understand for readers.

As a feminist researcher it is very important for me to present this data in an 'unframed' way, and resist the urge to impose arbitrary categories. Although I organized the data for ease of discussion I tried to be open and fair in considering each response as unique. I must consider that some of these students may not have had the language or skills to express themselves clearly or adequately. I also realize that these responses are in a state of constant flux and should I have the opportunity to interview these same students at a later date their responses may be completely different. This present data simply reveals (limited) responses from a particular student body within a fixed period of

time. Some of the key points emerging from the data are the homogeneity of responses, the presence of stereotypes, the egocentricity and universality of responses, the influence of modernism, and the constructions of meaning from the text. These themes will be further explored in the next chapter. This data is imperative to the authenticity of this study and it is my hope that I have provided my students with a fair and accurate voice within the research community.

CHAPTER FIVE : INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

Making connections between the voices of my students and the current research is an integral part of this study. These associations are the most meaningful and important part of this project. The interpretations, implications, and reflections found within this chapter substantiate this research project and may provide educators with further insight into the present high school literature curriculum and offer valuable information to the educational research community.

As a female teacher of English Literature, I recognized a shortage of literature by women within the high school curriculum. Therefore, in an attempt to provide students with a more balanced curriculum, I created a women's literature unit within my Grade 12 Writer's Craft course. I continued to revise and reorganize the unit based on the reactions and responses from students and on my own personal feelings as I taught and experienced the unit. For this particular research project I wanted to further investigate the use of women's literature and explore student responses to the female voice in literature. Four research questions became the basis for the study: How does a women's literature unit affect students' personal, social, and historical constructs of gender? How does studying a women's literature unit affect students' development and social identity? How do students learn and make sense of literature? What effect did the creation of this unit have on me as a female teacher of literature? This chapter will revolve around and attempt to address these questions.

In Chapter Four, student responses were organized within the three theoretical perspectives that I selected for this study: Post Modern Feminism, Adolescent Development, and Reader Response. The student reactions were grouped within these

perspectives based on the nature and content of each response. I have organized this chapter in a way that revolves around the main research questions proposed in this study. I connect these responses with the theory presented in Chapter Two and include implications for future curriculum development and academic research.

Addressing The Research Questions

1. How does a women's literature unit affect students' personal, social, and historical constructs of gender?

This women's literature unit enabled students to explore and become aware of their personal, social, and historical conceptions of gender. Through the exploration of the questions and reflective journals students revealed their thoughts and feelings about inequity, gender stereotypes (of male and female authors and characters), and knowledge about women's history and writing. Their responses revealed their concerns about being presented with unbalanced perspectives and distorted visions of reality. Students were able to consider and explore questions about the curriculum that they are being taught within the literature classroom. Overall, this unit seemed to stimulate discussion on gender issues and allowed students to discuss and possibly project revised images of stereotypes and gender into their future.

From the very beginning of the unit many students expressed a desire to learn more about the history of women in literature. Their initial responses acknowledged a lack of exposure to female writers and female characters. Their responses indicated a minimal remembrance of female authors and female characters (many of whose names could not be remembered). This suggests that students do not read many pieces of literature written by women and the female characters they meet in literature are not

memorable and have no lasting impact. The reason for this shortage could suggest a number of possibilities, the first being that there are no female authors of any value; therefore, they are not included in the curriculum. The second possibility is that educators are unaware of this discrepancy in the curriculum, and simply continue to teach the same curriculum each semester. The third possibility is that educators are aware of this discrepancy but are not concerned about it. Personally, as a female teacher at this school I initially did not realize how few female authors were being studied. When I began teaching 6 years ago I simply taught the books that had been taught previously and never thought to question the gender of the author in the literature I was teaching. I presume this was because I was conditioned to accept the material without question and did not see gender as a relevant part of the literature program.

In consideration of this under-representation of women in literature, students offered a variety of explanations as to why they thought it was important to study females in literature. The most common new awareness acknowledged the dominant male perspectives in literature. Students were most concerned with the development of a skewed vision of the world. This initial concern was substantiated by their own views within the research. Their responses were very one-sided and ethnocentric; they often (without even realizing) identified stereotypes within literature with gender stereotypes. This response is consistent with Slack's (1999) detection of a warped perception of society. She believes that an unbalanced curriculum gives students a distorted perception of society and ultimately impacts the self-esteem of females in a classroom. Some students may be left feeling undervalued and ignored. Student's responses were

consistent with this concern; they were unable to escape from their own limited perspectives.

The problem with this one-sided perspective is that it can promote inaccurate gender stereotypes within a society. Students revealed a variety of definitive stereotypes in their discussion of male and female authors. These differences were most commonly revealed in their interpretations of the subjects and themes presented in the literature. Students portrayed these authors in very stereotypical ways, describing the female writers as being concerned with fine details, emotions, and love stories, while male writers were obsessed with action, violence, and horror. Students described similar stereotypes in their discussion of male and female characters. The traditional gender roles were described. The main difference identified by students today was that females were now permitted to have the initial appearance of strength even though, in the end, they would inevitably reveal their inner weakness and have to be saved by a male. These responses coincide with Chodorow's (1978) Object Relation Theory and Slack's (1999) perception of male and female books. There is a societal stigma that becomes attached to male and female books; this stigma is promoted at a very young age. As a result, female readers are more conditioned to read and accept male books while male readers are unwilling to read and accept "chick" books or "chick lit". Female readers become what Judith Fetterley (1978) calls *immasculated* readers who are conditioned by the traditional male system of values, ideas, and viewpoints.

These stereotyped perceptions were also consistent in discussions of male and female attributes and/or qualities. Females were often associated with negative connotations, especially within the context of motherhood. Students associated female

characters with weakness, vanity and manipulation, and associated male characters with strength, aggression, and reason. These responses suggest that students continue to read literature that presents these stereotypes *or* that their own perceptions of male and female writers are influenced and defined by these stereotypes. In either case, male and female stereotypes continue to influence and characterized students' perceptions of literature. Trepanier-Street and Romatowski's (1991) study of six-graders describes a similar phenomenon. They propose that children tend to mimic the stereotypes they see in books, media, and school texts. The students in this study describe similar stereotypes and declare similar influences. Books present students with new perspectives and situations, which ultimately aid them in their understanding of themselves and the world around them. It is, therefore, imperative that educators present texts that promote equity and present students with balanced perspectives. *The bell jar* is a text that presents students with an alternative perspective of a 1950s girl and reveals her resistance to this conventional society. It simply reveals the thoughts and inner struggles of a girl living in a restrictive environment. It does not, however, necessarily present students with a well-balanced and equitable gender perspective. In fact, it may work to promote stereotyping by presenting many stereotyped male and female characters. This novel's salvation, I believe, is in the way the female protagonist refuses to succumb to these stereotypes and challenges her oppressive society. However, if students do not recognize or join in Esther's struggle, this novel may help perpetuate these gender identities.

The introduction of women's literature in this unit encouraged students to reflect on their own perceptions of gender and encouraged them to explore the stereotypes that invade these perceptions. In consideration of these ideas students

identified a variety of ways that these labels might be overcome. Suggestions included more women's literature units and courses, a conscious inclusion of women in history and a focus on the events in history that involve women. These responses were quite concrete and reasonable. They all involved a conscious inclusion of women in the curriculum.

As an educator and teacher of these students I am astounded at how insightful and honest students were in their responses. They all certainly acknowledged the inequality that exists within the curriculum and connected this to the inequality that exists within their own world. I was amazed at their responses to gender and the presentation of traditional stereotyping. I was also surprised at how easily some of the females seemed to admit and accept the repression and inequality that surrounds their gender. Many students felt that the women's literature unit was a necessary and worthwhile unit and was helpful in alleviating the inequality that exists within the curriculum and promoting gender awareness in society.

2. How does studying a women's literature unit affect adolescent students' development and social identity?

The experience of this women's literature unit encouraged students to explore their own individuality within the context of the world surrounding them. It required students to consider their own perceptions of themselves, each other, and the various positions of men and women within society. Many reflected on their own insecurities and expressed a desire to identify with other students and literary characters. Many considered the influence of peers, parents, society, and the media. Other students declared no connection or desire to examine themselves or literary characters.

Initially most students described the world as a place that was essentially equal or, at least, becoming more equal. However, as they explored the history of women and read more about female authors, characters and theoretical positions, many students reconsidered these initial statements and began to express feelings of intolerance and discrimination. There was a consistent mention of voice, questioning the value of the male voice over the female voice. Some students suggested that the female voice is heard but it is not taken as seriously as the male voice. The females who demand to be heard were often seen as being overly strong and aggressive, attributes that are not consistent with the stereotyped female figure. This presents females with a compromising position; they either adhere to the norms of society living in fear of being labeled or ostracized, or continue to be silenced.

Many students acknowledge that they do not know very much about women's literature. Some males indicate that they do not know and really did not need to know or care about women's literature: for them good literature is good literature. This statement contradicts other comments offered throughout the unit. Students indicated that there were great differences in writers, characters, and overall life styles of females, and yet when asked about studying females in literature many males indicated that there is no difference and books are books. This response suggests an indoctrination of a Modernism (one truth for all) rather than a Post Modern viewpoint (multiple truths).

Other (mainly female) responses were different in tone; many were apologetic and expressed shame about their ignorance of women's literature. Some showed more anger and frustration towards this under-representation in the curriculum and expressed a

desire for change. Overall, students recognized the differences between males and females and the inequality that accompanies these differences.

Many female participants referred to themselves as the “weaker sex” and expressed frustration over this label. Other students expressed irritation with the conflicting media messages and often felt trapped by these social stereotypes. This expression is consistent with Gilligan’s (2003) projection of inconsistent messages. Adolescents feel significant inconsistencies in what they want and what they are told to do, (by parents and society) and, therefore, struggle to live within these conflicting boundaries. Many students equated equality with leadership and connected women with other minorities. There was an apparent inconsistency in the way gender equity was presented and the way that it was lived. Students recognized and described these inconsistencies. There were also many references to the physical differences between males and females. These comments seem to be surrounded by fear and frustration; they were presented as the definitive reason for the impossibility of true equality between men and women. This dichotomous position is the overall impression presented by students. Presumably there were alternative thinkers within this group, however these unconventional views were not expressed within the data. Perhaps this is due to a desire to ‘fit in’ and adhere to the view of the majority. Alternative lifestyles, such as homosexuality, were not areas that evolved within the student responses. Only one female made an indirect comment about lesbians within her response journal, connecting them with power and resistance.

The majority of students expressed pleasure with their own gender; however, many included corresponding justifications for their responses. Females used derogatory

statements and admitted to the disadvantage of their gender. These qualified explanations highlight the difficulty of being female. Many of the males also justified their responses with negative statements about females. They strengthened their statement of male preference by outlining the *obvious* difficulties with being a female. Both genders agreed that being a female is harder than being a male. Some females did propose that the ability to have children was a positive female quality; however, this did not appear to outweigh the other negative female characteristics. One particular response described this reproductive natural ability as a 'burden' to women, stripping them of their sexual freedom and life opportunities. These responses are inconsistent with the current beliefs about women, jobs, and life options. Clearly students continue to hold a traditional view of men, women, and childbearing. Cleary and Whittmore (1999) recognize this perplexity as a common element of adolescence. Adolescents continuously struggle with their own gender identities and the language that surrounds their gender. They need a safe space in which they can discuss these issues and express their concerns. These doubts and assumptions are evident in the participants' responses; many fully recognize the pessimistic aspects surrounding the female gender and surrender themselves to the idea that this is simply the way life goes. There is a sense of inescapable powerlessness.

Throughout the unit students expressed a desire to participate in self-reflection and personal identification. Many students were shocked by the history surrounding the women's movement and were surprised at their own ignorance of women in history and in literature. Many students revealed a connection with the female authors and characters they studied within the unit. Esther Greenwood from *The bell jar*, was a character that many students could appreciate, understand, and identify. Through her thoughts, feelings

and actions she offered readers a lot of support, solace, and comfort. Some of the students seemed to directly relate to her feelings of depression, anxiety, and suffocation. They, too, felt suffocated by the bell jar of society and needed an outlet in which to express themselves, a forum from which to be heard, and a new understanding and appreciation of self.

Overall, most student participants revealed a new understanding of women in history and in literature and were provided with new information and ideas about gender. For some students this was the first time they had thought about these issues and they responded in various ways. Some felt frustrated, others were indifferent, and a few were inspired. Some students were left with feelings of insecurity and frustration due to the perceived limitations surrounding their gender and their society. Their personal reflections made them feel more apprehensive and disempowered because they were lifted out of their comfort zone and asked to think about issues that made them uncomfortable. Other students were simply left indifferent and unchanged, and were probably happy to be through with this *women's* unit. Some students were awakened by this unit and were surprised by the existence of the gender inequities that exist within their world. Their consideration of these issues was totally new and this unit presented them with ideas and ways of thinking that they had not previously considered or even knew existed. Other students who had this previous knowledge felt encouraged to continue to re-evaluate these societal perceptions and / or expectations, and were pleased with their new level of social consciousness making them more sensitive to gender issues. They felt encouraged to continue to strive for a more receptive and equitable social environment.

3. How do students learn and make sense of literature?

Students believe that literature is directly linked to the world and reflects the morals and values of a particular society. Students learn about literature through direct identification with the content, characters, and plot. They must be able to connect these elements with their own lives in order to make sense of the literary text. Students find it difficult to project beyond the text. However, a discussion of the history and circumstance before reading is helpful in their dissemination of meaning and understanding. The reading of literature induces self-reflection and enables students to explore emotions, actions, and implications. It allows them to reflect on and learn vicariously from these fictional experiences.

Most students indicated that literature is a direct reflection of life. Literature reveals the morals and values of a society and, therefore, is constantly changing. This view is consistent with many of the Adolescent Reader Response theorists, namely Trites (2001) and Pratt (1981). They contend that many adolescents rely on literature to dictate their prescribed roles within society and teach them how to act and respond to others. Other students believed that literature is not consistent with the values of a society but rather presents a necessary ideal, reflecting the hopes and dreams of the people within a society. This view is consistent with the early theories of Aristotle. He asserts that literature reaches beyond history and is more important and philosophical; the goal of literature is to represent that which is universal.

Student responses indicate that they often translate literature into their own lives. They describe how literature helps them to understand situations and explore ways in which to deal appropriately with these circumstances within their own lives. Literature

presents students with new perspectives and will sometimes challenge their own perceptions about individuals and society. This is consistent with Aristotle's development of *literary mimesis* suggesting readers are creatures of imitation who are constantly learning through influence and replication. This process allows readers to predict and make sense of the actions within a text. Readers take pleasure in this experience because they can distance themselves and learn from their literary counterparts (Grodén & Kreiswirth, 1987). Students describe the protagonist from *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, as an important literary counterpart. Some students empathized with her thoughts and feelings of frustration and confusion, without having to experience her dramatic actions of suicide, hospitalization, and psychotherapy. They may learn from her experience without having to actually take part in it and reassess their own actions and emotions. Other students contrasted their own lives with Esther's life and, although were entertained by her literary plights, felt lucky that their lives were so different and less tragic. The students who did not relate to Esther's thoughts, feelings or actions did not like the novel. They were unable to connect and/or empathize with her and were often left feeling frustrated by her dramatic and unrealistic actions. This asserts the Reader Response theories that promote personal connection to literature.

Some student readers interpret and make meaning of the text through the relationship they develop with the character and through the understanding of the social context surrounding the text. These views are consistent with three of the theoretical positions: The Hermeneutic, The Political/Ideological, and The Post-Structuralist. Some students described their understanding of the text as it pertained to their own lived experiences. Those students who could not personally relate to the actions and feelings of

the character described the text as boring or uninteresting. This is consistent with the Hermeneutic view contending that meaning is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader; the reader decodes meaning in accordance to his/her own history or world view. Other students related to the text directly through their own understandings of the 1950s culture and the gender inequities that existed at that time. Their appreciation of the text was dependent on their knowledge of this culture. This is consistent with the Political / Ideological View asserting that meaning is determined by the social and political realities of the reader and the text; the reader may connect with these realities if they are consistent with his/her own ideology. Other students discussed the text only in terms of how they could personally relate to it. They had multiple interpretations and these interpretations seemed to change daily, depending on their particular thoughts and feeling that day. This is consistent with the Post-Structuralist View and the Adolescent Development Theories, contending that meaning is indeterminate and the reader constructs a text as he/she participates in the reading of it.

Clearly, some students are greatly affected by what they read. They describe literature as a reflection of our society (reflecting the values and/or the ideals) and make meaning based on their own understanding of themselves and the world around them. Books allow adolescent readers to experience emotions without directly being affected by their outcomes. This enables these readers to reassess and learn from these experiences. It is, therefore, imperative that educators seriously consider the content and the diversity of the texts that are being taught in schools. Students seem to enjoy literature that they can personally and socially relate to and, therefore, educators should seek out literature that is relevant and meaningful to students. Traditionally, this process has been dictated

by school boards; however, in my personal experience, teachers are being given more and more choice as to what they want to teach. My women's literature unit is an example of this option. *The Bell Jar* was a text that was chosen mainly because I had access to a class set and it had a female protagonist and was written by a female author. Certainly, money and availability are practical things to consider. However, in my experience I have found that students are the best critics for literature and often have strong opinions as to what they like or dislike. There are many obvious difficulties with this solution (time, availability, money); however, giving students a choice about what they want to read may be the best way to engage and encourage students to read and appreciate literature. This is consistent with the Post Modern perspective of diversity, multiplicity, and validity.

4. What effect does the creation of this unit have on me as a female teacher of literature?

In recognition of my own voice I have become aware of the things that have both hindered and advanced my life as a female. This study has allowed me to reflect on my life and give greater value to it. In re-reading my narrative I can further understand and relate to my feelings as a young girl and, although I realize that I have lived a life of luxury, it is important for me to acknowledge my feelings of insecurity and unhappiness. Perhaps this was simply part of being a dramatic young girl or maybe it was the product of being the youngest in a family of five and having to compare myself to a popular and outgoing older brother. Either way, I was happy to find such compassion and patience in a loving mother and lucky to have found such comfort and consolation in writing and literature.

Now, as a literature teacher, I have connected my life to the lives of the students whom I teach. I realize that their lives are equally as important and valuable. I know that as a teacher, I have a great impact on them through what I teach, what I say, and how I treat them. I have the privilege of exposing students to great works of literature and discussing these with them. I also have the privilege of teaching them how to find their own voices and encouraging them to experiment in their own creative writing. This experience is greatly fulfilling and empowering.

A Summation of the Key Findings

This research project has allowed me to explore the impact of the literature curriculum on students. As a high school teacher, I have the privilege of being able to directly create, deliver, and assess curriculum within the context of a classroom. The creation, implementation, and examination of this women's literature unit has given me this unique opportunity, and allowed me to re-examine my own perceptions of my students and my perceptions of myself as a teacher and as a researcher.

I realize that a four week women's literature unit is not going to change the world of an adolescent, nor can I expect that it will have any life altering effect on student participants. I have, however, reached three key conclusions from this study: the first, that this unit provided students with a forum for discussion that may not have otherwise existed; the second, that by the time students reach grade 12 they are already indoctrinated with gender stereotypes; and the third, that students enjoy and appreciate literature with which they can personally connect. These three significant findings make this research worthwhile and valuable.

An Open Forum

In my experience as a classroom teacher I do not believe that gender issues are a common area of discussion, even though it is a subject that inevitably affects everyone. Students within my classroom were presented with a background on the women's political and literary movement, exposed to various female poets and short story writers, and studied a literary novel written by and about a female. Throughout this unit, gender was discussed, examined, and sometimes argued. As previously discussed, students had a variety of reactions to this unit. These included: astonishment (with this new, unexamined area), frustration (with the acknowledgement of inequality), indifference (did not care or see it as valuable), and consolation (reinforced their own perceptions and gave value to them). No matter what the reactions were, this unit provided students with a safe environment for discussions of masculinity, femininity, and the perceptions that surround these concepts.

Indoctrinated Stereotypes

Many of the grade 12 student participants entered my classroom with pre-conceived gender stereotypes. Some students resisted all challenges made to their personal constructs of gender, while others were more easily influenced. A few females were disheartened by their newly dislodged perceptions. Before the women's literature unit began most students already seemed to have stereotypical images of male and female writers and characters. When asked to discuss these images they often used stereotypes to describe the stereotypes that exist. This was done without their conscious awareness. Some students were quite defensive, while others were more open to at least consider alternative views from their own. A few female students were left feeling frustrated and

disheartened by the end of this unit, claiming that I had ‘ruined it for them’. Perhaps their small town foundation was shaken and their low-growing roots were uplifted too quickly. I think it is difficult when an individual’s traditional value system is called into question, and disturbed. Defensiveness is a natural reaction.

A Personal Connection

Overall, the students who could personally relate to the material being taught within this unit (mainly to the novel *The bell jar*) enjoyed and appreciated it. Those students who could not personally connect with or relate to this material did not find pleasure in the unit. This suggests that students need to find relevance and personal connection to the literature they read in order to fully appreciate and value the literature being taught. Many of the girls enjoyed the novel probably because it was the story of a nineteen-year-old girl and her struggles within her oppressive environment. Only a few of the males liked the novel and I believe this was because these males could not only relate to the protagonist but even more, they could connect with the main themes (oppression, death and insanity). The students who did not like the novel (mainly males) expressed a total disconnection with the protagonist and had no attachment or understanding of her actions throughout the novel.

Implications for My Own Practice

I believe it is important to extend the thinking of adolescent students. It is easy for them to follow and be manipulated by the environment in which they live. Presenting them with new and alternative perceptions, encourages them to at least question their own thinking. By the age of 17 adolescents appear to have well-developed conceptions of what it means to be male and female. They have well-defined conceptions of male and

female characters or characteristics, qualities, and societal expectations. Certainly there are adolescents who challenge these identities; however, from the small sample of participants from whom I collected my data these 'alternative thinkers' appear to be reluctant to articulate their protest. As a result of this finding, I believe that students need to be better equipped to discuss and acknowledge gender identities by having these stereotypes addressed at a much earlier age.

In an age of Post- Modernism we need to go beyond presenting a pseudo-philosophy of political equity and enter into deeper discussions about what this really means. What does gender equity mean? Where do these perceptions come from? How can we effectively change them? It is easy to jump on the modern day bandwagon and pretend we have broken the gender gap, stridently declaring the unrealistic stereotypes that bombard us in advertisements, magazines, television shows, and literature. However, having identified these stereotypes does this mean that we now function beyond them? Clearly, we still buy into these images; we still purchase the merchandise, watch the shows and read the books. We know these stereotypes exist and we can articulately define and discuss them, yet we continue to be influenced by them and seek to adhere to these unrealistic conceptions. As an educator, I believe that we need to provide students with better tools in which to combat these stereotypes. This needs to be done at an early age. The curriculum needs to address these issues across all subject areas and go beyond a simple inclusion of a four-week women's literature unit taught within a grade 12 classroom.

In order for students to thrive in a classroom they must be in an environment that promotes security, fairness, and understanding. Therefore, presenting students with an

imbalanced curriculum adds to the confusion of their own identity and their understanding of the world. Women are currently not being represented adequately in the high school curriculum. As a result, some female students feel inadequate, undervalued, and insecure, and develop a skewed perception of the world in which they live. Some male students feel entitled, privileged, and superior to women. As an educator, I consider it no longer acceptable to have students feeling dichotomized because of a male-dominated curriculum. I feel that it is an obligation to teach literature that represents and balances both genders. Silence and repression should be feelings of the past, not promoted in the current classroom; therefore, educators must consciously make an effort to present information that includes both genders.

In my own school I will continue to teach this women's literature unit within my grade 12 Writer's Craft course. I will also encourage other teachers across all disciplines to include women in their curriculum and look forward to the day when school boards can support or even mandate a certain percentage of female authors to be taught within the curriculum. They could ensure that the history of women is included in historical textbooks, they can include female statistics and culture in geography textbooks; and they should provide extra funding in order to purchase new, gender inclusive novels and texts for teachers to use in their classrooms.

Secondary school is a time of great growth and development for adolescents. They look for guidance and acceptance from their parents, teachers, and friends. Gender plays an important role in their lives; therefore, it is essential that educators acknowledge and confront these differences and present both genders equitably and realistically. This enables students to make intelligent and mindful decisions. We must be advocates for our

young people and teach them to become people who value sensitivity and equity. We must promote respect and encourage our young people to admire and value diversity.

Myself As Action Researcher

As an action researcher, I responded to an area within my own context that I saw as problematic and attempted to make a change within this area. I recognized a great under-representation of female authors within the literary curriculum. Initially, I responded by creating a women's literature unit. This evolved into a research project in which I presented this unit to my grade 12 Writer's Craft class and examined their responses. It is difficult to fully account for the change that took place among my participants. At best, I think it gave them something new to think about and, for some, it may have increased their level of social awareness. However, the greatest area of change within this action research project is the effect it had on me, as a teacher and as a researcher.

Certainly, as the deliverer of this material, I directly influence the impact it has on students. My passion and dedication to women's issues and literature undoubtedly became apparent as I taught this unit. Clearly, I am an advocate for the voice of women and believe that their contextual history is essential to the growth and understanding of women today. My agenda is clear: I really want students (and people) to see beyond traditional, male-dominated stereotypes and I want them to see the importance of diversity. I want students to value themselves as unique individuals without feeling the pressure to have to adhere to the unfounded and unrealistic gender stereotypes that pervade our society. This personal desire may be misconstrued (I have recently learned that my students call me a "die hard feminist"). I feel conflicted by this title – I welcome

and resist it! In some ways I feel frustrated and irritated; I have worked so hard trying to teach students about equality and have tried to break down the negative connotations associated with feminism only to be dismissed as a *die hard feminist*! I feel that students have not heard anything I have said and have totally missed the point! On the other hand, I am concerned. After learning about the social environment of these students and acknowledging their developmental stage, I become more empathetic and welcome the challenge of continuing to challenge them. How can these students have advanced thinking when they are constantly bombarded with mixed messages in their homes, in the media, and within their school environment? With this thought in mind, I will continue to fight for knowledge, equity, and awareness.

Having taught this unit two more times since this project I have become more sensitive to the needs of my students. I am more aware of the way in which I present this material. I have learned to enter more slowly into the material and now begin with an explanation of my intentions. I clearly explain why I have created this unit and discuss why I think this material is important to them. I try to present this unit as a celebration of women and their achievements. I encourage students to welcome and embrace this material instead of feeling that their backs are against the wall. I have also altered the material based on the students' reactions to it and my own experiences. I continue to explore the world of female literature and include this material in my unit. I have also learned that the greatest thing about teaching this material and teaching adolescent students is that I am constantly learning from them. They challenge me to work hard as a role model and find new ways to create a safe, stimulating, and diverse learning environment.

Implications for Further Research

Currently, gender issues are a prevalent and important area in educational research. Many researchers are recognizing the importance of gender in the classroom and the great effect it has on the development of adolescents. This study highlights the importance of gender equity in literature studied at the secondary school level. Students are clearly affected by the existence and promotion of females in literature. The exclusion of female authors and reputable female characters promotes the acceptance of stereotypes among adolescents. It directly affects their sense of worth and presents them with a distorted vision of reality.

Improvements To This Study

This study has presented me with a lot of data. This information could be analyzed and interpreted in a countless number of ways.

- 1) Student responses could have been divided into male and female and analyzed in this way.
- 2) The questionnaire could be the only source of data collection and be analyzed more explicitly.
- 3) A researcher could have done only personal interviews, allowing him/her to probe students for more developed and thoughtful answers.
- 4) The three research journals could have been the only source of data collection and be analyzed more explicitly.
- 5) Students could have selected their own novels (written by a female), allowing them more freedom in choosing a novel that would better suit them.

- 6) Students could have been directly involved in the creation of the unit, reading and analyzing a variety of female authors and texts.

This Research Continued

This project has also introduced a variety of research topics that could be possible continuations or extensions.

- 1) Similar studies could be performed in other schools and/or school districts and compared to this project.
- 2) A similar project could be performed using different novels and authors.
- 3) Studies could be performed exclusively at the board level, analyzing the actual curriculum documents. (Measuring the number of females on the reading lists and comparing it with the number of female authors actually taught in classroom.)
- 4) Women's literature units could be created and assessed by other English teachers and/or students.
- 5) Researchers could create and teach a *Women's Issues* course and have it assessed by other teachers and/or students.
- 6) More research questions could be developed around the issue of gender and identity, possibly creating developing in- school or after- school programs for students.

Research is a vast and endless process and it is my hope that this study has contributed a small but important piece to that world. Certainly there is much more work to be done in this area. However, I anticipate that this project will provide educators with some important information and will aid in our understanding of adolescent concepts and expressions of gender in literature.

The sun emerged from its grey shroud of cloud, shone with summer brilliance on the untouched slopes. Pausing in my work to overlook that pristine expanse, I felt the same profound thrill it gives me to see trees and grassland waist-high under flood water – as if the usual order of the world has slightly shifted and entered a new phase.

(Plath, 1963, p. 228)

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Appendix A

The Bell Jar

Plot Overview

Esther Greenwood, a college student from Massachusetts, travels to New York to work on a magazine for a month as a guest editor. She works for Jay Cee, a sympathetic but demanding woman. Esther and eleven other college girls live in a women's hotel. The sponsors of their trip wine and dine them and shower them with presents. Esther knows she should be having the time of her life, but she feels deadened. The execution of the Rosenbergs worries her, and she can embrace neither the rebellious attitude of her friend Doreen nor the perky conformism of her friend Betsy. Esther and the other girls suffer food poisoning after a fancy banquet. Esther attempts to lose her virginity with a UN interpreter, but he seems uninterested. She questions her abilities and worries about what she will do after college. On her last night in the city, she goes on a disastrous blind date with a man named Marco, who tries to rape her.

Esther wonders if she should marry and live a conventional domestic life, or attempt to satisfy her ambition. Buddy Willard, her college boyfriend, is recovering from tuberculosis in a sanitarium, and wants to marry Esther when he regains his health. To an outside observer, Buddy appears to be the ideal mate: he is handsome, gentle, intelligent, and ambitious. But he does not understand Esther's desire to write poetry, and when he confesses that he slept with a waitress while dating Esther, Esther thinks him a hypocrite and decides she cannot marry him. She sets out to lose her virginity as though in pursuit of the answer to an important mystery.

Esther returns to the Boston suburbs and discovers that she has not been accepted to a writing class she had planned to take. She will spend the summer with her mother instead. She makes vague plans to write a novel, learn shorthand, and start her senior thesis. Soon she finds the feelings of unreality she experienced in New York taking over her life. She is unable to read, write, or sleep, and she stops bathing. Her mother takes her to Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist who prescribes electric shock therapy for Esther. Esther becomes more unstable than ever after this terrifying treatment, and decides to kill herself. She tries to slit her wrists, but can only bring herself to slash her calf. She tries to hang herself, but cannot find a place to tie the rope in her low-ceilinged house. At the beach with friends, she attempts to drown herself, but she keeps floating to the surface of the water. Finally, she hides in a basement crawl space and takes a large quantity of sleeping pills.

Esther awakens to find herself in the hospital. She has survived her suicide attempt with no permanent physical injuries. Once her body heals, she is sent to the psychological ward in the city hospital, where she is uncooperative, paranoid, and determined to end her life. Eventually, Philomena Guinea, a famous novelist who sponsors Esther's college scholarship, pays to move her to a private hospital. In this more enlightened environment, Esther comes to trust her new psychiatrist, a woman named Dr. Nolan. She slowly begins to improve with a combination of talk therapy, insulin injections, and properly administered electric shock therapy. She becomes friends with Joan, a woman from her hometown and college who has had experiences similar to Esther's. She is repulsed, however, when Joan makes a sexual advance toward her.

As Esther improves, the hospital officials grant her permission to leave the hospital from time to time. During one of these excursions, she finally loses her virginity with a math professor named Irwin. She begins bleeding profusely and has to go to the emergency room. One morning, Joan, who seemed to be improving, hangs herself. Buddy comes to visit Esther, and both understand that their relationship is over. Esther will leave the mental hospital in time to start winter semester at college. She believes that she has regained a tenuous grasp on sanity, but knows that the bell jar of her madness could descend again at any time.

Summary from : <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/belljar/summary.html>

Appendix B

Questionnaire

1. List as many female authors as you can.
2. List as many female characters as you can.
3. How many female authors have you studied in high school?
4. Is it important to study female writers? Why/ not?
5. Is there a difference between male and female authors? If so, what is the difference?
6. Is there a difference between male characters and female characters? Explain.
7. Do you believe the books you read influence you? If so, how?
8. What role does gender play in literature?
9. Do you believe women have an equal voice in today's society?
10. How might gender roles be better represented in the curriculum?

Appendix C

Journal Responses

JOURNAL #1

Do males and females have an equal voice in our world/society?

How do you feel about being a male/ female?

Describe what you know / think / feel about women in literature.

Is there a difference between male and female authors? Characters?

JOURNAL # 2

Respond to what you have learned so far in this unit (history , poetry, Plath ect.).

Do you think the writing of females today reflect the values in our society? Explain.

JOURNAL # 3

Respond to what you have learned from this unit.

Is this material helpful to you in your own life?

If you were to write a female 'coming of age' novel today what would it be about?

Appendix D

The Bell Jar Questions

1. What factors, components, and stages of Esther Greenwood's descent into depression and madness are specified? How inevitable is that descent?
2. In a letter while at college, Plath wrote that "I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar." Is this the primary meaning of the novel's titular bell jar? What other meanings does "the bell jar" have?
3. What terms does Esther use to describe herself? How does she compare or contrast herself with Doreen and others in New York City, or with Joan and other patients in the hospital?
4. What instances and images of distortion occur in the novel? What are their contexts and significance? Does Esther achieve a clear, undistorted view of herself?
5. Are Esther's attitudes toward men, sex, and marriage peculiar to herself? What role do her attitudes play in her breakdown? What are we told about her society's expectations regarding men and women, sexuality, and relationships? Have those expectations changed since that time?
6. Esther more than once admits to feelings of inadequacy. Is Esther's sense of her own inadequacies consistent with reality? Against what standards does she judge herself?
7. With what specific setting, event, and person is Esther's first thought of suicide associated? Why? In what circumstances do subsequent thoughts and plans concerning suicide occur?
8. In addition to Deer Island Prison, what other images and conditions of physical and emotional imprisonment, enclosure, confinement, and punishment are presented?
9. What are the primary relationships in Esther's life? Is she consistent in her behavior and attitudes within these relationships?
10. Esther bluntly tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother. What is Mrs. Greenwood's role in Esther's life and in the novel? Is Esther just in her presentation of and attitude toward her mother?

Appendix E

Permission Letter

November 18th, 2003

To parent/guardian,

Your son/daughter's Grade 12 Writer's Craft class has been selected to participate in a research project. This project is being conducted by their teacher, Kerry McNamara for the completion of her Master's of Education at Brock University. The title of this project is *Exploring Personal Awareness In Adolescent Students Through Women's Literature* (file # 03-054) This project has been approved by the school board (Frank Iannantuono, director of education) and the Brock ethics board (Ethics officer Deborah VanOosten). If you have any questions regarding research subjects rights you may contact Deborah at (905) 688-5550, ext.3035 / deborah.vanoosten@brocku.ca. The faculty supervisor at Brock University for this project is Sharon Abbey (905)-688-5550 ext.3349.

This topic stems from my desire to understand adolescent students and appreciate how they make meaning from the literature they read. During this unit students will be exposed to historical and contemporary writings of women in order to expand their understandings of the past and of the world in which they live. Students will be asked to complete a pre-study questionnaire and three response journals. Students may also be selected for personal interviews at which time you will be further notified.

The activities for this project are incorporated into this Writer's Craft course as a regular part of the curriculum. Therefore, all students will complete all classroom activities. Those students who are not able to participate in the research project will complete the exercises but their work will not be used in the project.

Pseudonyms will be used in this project to protect the identity of students. Students will submit their questionnaires and journals without their names on them, so there will be no segregation or individual judgment of particular students. No one other than myself will have access to the data (questionnaires, journals and interviews) and all data will be kept in a secure place at my home and will be destroyed immediately after the completion of this project.

The following is a description of the research as it will be experienced by the participant:

1. The teacher will explain the study to the students.
2. The students will complete the pre-study questionnaire.
3. The class will read and discuss a variety of short stories written by female authors.
4. The students will complete the first journal.
5. Teacher will collect journals.
6. The class will read and discuss a variety of poems written by women.
7. The students will complete the second journal.
8. The class will read and discuss the novel The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath.

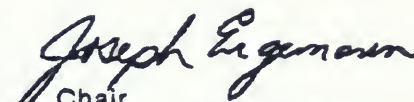


 Brock University

Senate Research Ethics Board

Extensions 3943/3035, Room AS 302

DATE: November 12, 2003
FROM: Joe Engemann, Chair
 Senate Research Ethics Board (REB)
TO: Sharon Abbey, Education
 Kerry McNamara
FILE: 03-054 McNamara
TITLE: Exploring Personal Awareness in Adolescent Students Through Women's Literature


 Chair
 Research Ethics Board

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as Clarified. Please send an additional copy of the permission granted from the school board to our office for filing.

This project has been approved for the period of **November 12, 2003** to **August 31, 2004** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The approval may be extended upon request. *The study may now proceed.*

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html to complete the appropriate form **REB-03 (2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application**.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **REB-02 (2001) Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

