

Christine Garside Allen

Conceptual History As a Methodology for Women's Studies*

Discussions about the structure of Women's Studies programs are often torn between two extremes. The first attempts to integrate the program completely within existing university disciplines, while the other aims to keep independence from the traditional university setting. Those who argue for the first extreme usually point out that there is a vast amount of knowledge already existing in universities, that the disciplines have developed over centuries of careful investigations of fields of study, and that an accredited program is necessary for students seeking employment. The supporters of "free schools" and other counter-university learning centers argue that it is contradictory to the nature of Women's Studies to be in a male dominated institution, that university disciplines are often arbitrarily distinguished, and that accreditation is a way of fitting women into the society that oppresses them instead of encouraging them to create new forms of life.

structure of Women's Studies programs

The difficulty is that programs which have sprung up totally outside of the university structure have no way of guaranteeing continuity, while those which are hidden away in a corner of a large university often lack cohesion and vitality. It is my belief that a compromise between these two extremes is most desirable. Women's Studies should have close ties with a university to allow for availability of resource personnel, library materials, and accreditation, but it should be directed by an active caucus of dedicated people. This steering committee must maintain control over the aims and practical implementation of the program taking into consideration the special characteristics of Women's Studies as a new subject area.

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One of the most obvious of these characteristics is the fact that Women's Studies programs are necessarily interdisciplinary. Again there are two extreme possible interpretations of "interdisciplinary." It can mean that each and every course offered within the program draws upon material from several disciplines, or it can mean that several courses from different disciplines are joined together under the same set of requirements. The difficulty with the first alternative is that the student never learns a methodology which can allow her the possibility of generating new research in existing fields; while the difficulty with the second is that no integration of material occurs. I would like to suggest, by way of compromise, that the best structure for a Women's Studies program involves interdisciplinary courses at the introductory and advanced levels with intermediate study in specific areas which correspond to her abilities and interests and, field by field, by being exposed to a wide variety of material, then she pursues specific areas which correspond to her abilities and interests, and, finally, she integrates her own perspective back into the field. The function of the interdisciplinary course at the introductory level is to expose the student to the various ways in which central issues in Women's Studies have been approached. Here the integration of the material is, for the most part, the responsibility of the teacher or teachers. An advanced interdisciplinary course, on the contrary, seeks to aid the student to integrate the material she herself has studied while in the program.

The importance and difficulty of integrating material cannot be over-emphasized. Frequently, interdisciplinary courses fail by creating a sense of confusion in the student. A classic example of this is found in those courses where the teacher acts as a moderator for numerous outside guests, never attempting to build a framework around the lectures to orient the student. Outside speakers and films may, of course, be used very effectively, but only sparingly and at carefully selected points in the course.

Where team teaching occurs, if possible each member of the team should attend every lecture of the other members. Furthermore, an orientation to the subject should be discussed in advance and evaluated throughout the course. It is important to strike a balance between commenting on each other's lectures, and outright debate. The former can be very edifying, whereas the latter tends to isolate students from the topic under consideration. Finally, it should be clear ahead of time which specific member of the team is in control of the classroom at each time of meeting. If a cohesive team can be developed, it is a superior educational experience for the student than if one person takes the sole responsibility for directing the course. Furthermore, the benefits for those in the team are very great. In addition to the opportunity to learn from one's colleagues, the teacher is able to grow and develop through sensitive criticism of her own

teaching ability. Therefore, in spite of the expense involved in hiring more than one teacher for the same course, in interdisciplinary courses team teaching should be encouraged.

content of Women's Studies programs

Women's Studies is a field of study which critically examines areas of thought that directly concern what it is to be a woman. This demands two different but related orientations. The first is historical and includes all those facts about women which have been neglected within traditional university teaching. It calls for research, reclassifying existing information, discovering unclassified material, and critically analyzing historical information. Some examples of titles of courses offered in this area are: "Women in Religion," "Women in Classical Antiquity," "Women in History," "Women and the Law," and "Women in Literature."

The second orientation in Women's Studies is directed towards contemporary research. It calls for a careful study of changing sex roles and identities, needs of education, political alternatives, and the like. It is not surprising that this is as concerned with the identity of men as of women. Some examples of courses offered reflecting this orientation are: "Sexual Differentiation," "Economics of Poverty and Discrimination," and "The Sociology of Sex Roles."

A rich program would combine both of these orientations so that the student becomes grounded in her own history as well as directed towards those contemporary issues which particularly affect her as a woman. The underlying assumption of such a program is that woman is conditioned to a great extent by her past, but she is able within this context, to form her own identity. However, personal search for meaning is not the only objective of such a program. It should seek as well to maintain the highest standards of research, scholarship, and the dissemination of knowledge. Finally, it should aim to inspire the student with a desire to change those structures in society which are judged to be detrimental to the full human growth of all persons. In short, a Women's Studies program should offer the student knowledge, an opportunity for personal growth, and a challenge to affect the direction of society in the future. Or stated in another way, it should address itself to the following three questions: "What is and has been woman's situation?" "Who am I — this woman, here?" "What can I do as a woman to make things better in the world?"

components of an introductory interdisciplinary course

The methodology which I have labelled "conceptual history" links together the above three questions by examining concepts or archetypes which have been particularly identified with women in western cultural history. Specifically, *woman as evil temptress, woman as*

virgin goddess, *woman as earth mother*, *woman as passive object*, *woman as genius*, and *woman as political activist* are delineated as areas of study.

In attempting an archetypal or conceptual analysis, it is necessary first to bring into question the existential roots of archetypes and concepts. What are they? How do they function in society, in personal identity, in history? How free are women to change them? To answer these questions, three alternatives are considered: Plato's view that natures are eternal and unchanging, Jung's view that archetypes dwell in the unconscious, and deBeauvoir's view that they are creations of humanity.

The specific methodology for examining the particular archetypes follows the same pattern in all six cases. First, the archetype is studied in its most primitive form in Western culture, in myths, in works of art, and in religious and philosophical literature. Then it is traced through to its contemporary status, paying specific attention to its unique forms which are often very subtle. As the course develops, attention is given to the way in which the various archetypes overlap and join as well as to the way in which they become polarized. For example, the *virgin goddess* and the *earth mother* become united in the figure of Mary, Mother of God, while the archetypes of *evil temptress* and *virgin goddess* become polarized in the antagonism between Eve and Mary or the archetypes of *earth mother* and *evil temptress* in the antagonism between wives and prostitutes, or mistresses.

Furthermore, there is a logic in the particular way in which the archetypes are chronologically situated. The first three (*evil temptress*, *virgin goddess*, and *earth mother*) are more clearly recognized as historical archetypes of women, while the last three (*passive object*, *genius*, and *political activist*) are more contemporary in their recognition. Another way of describing this progression is to say that the course seeks to bring the student to an understanding of the various ways in which women are beginning to transcend their situation through serious historical study, recognition of the temptation towards passive self-definition, and finally towards possibilities of change and transcendence through art and political activity.

elucidation of a single component

To indicate the power of conceptual analysis, it is useful to develop the example of *woman as earth mother* in some detail. The earliest roots of our Western spirit are recorded in myths and works of art. A careful examination of these remnants reveals a continual identification of women with the earth. This identification works in two directions. The earth is described as being like a mother, and mothers are seen as being like the earth. The qualities which they both share are derived from their basic functions of giving birth and

nourishing life. The woman and the earth carry the seed, provide the elements necessary for the maturation of the embryo, give forth the fruit of this effort at the right time, and continue to repeat this function until sterility or fallowness set in. The poetic force of the waters of birth, or the vitality of blood, or the richness of milk, and the mystery of the womb pervade early art. It is important to stress the richness that the *earth mother* concept had, the power of the fertility image, the mystery of the connection of women's cycles of menstruation with lunar cycles, and the profound love and fear that all people had for the mother.

In Greek philosophy a change occurs in which the symbolic *earth mother* concept experienced in religion, art and mythology is superseded by philosophical reasoning. Plato forms a link here in that he employs both discursive and poetic thinking in his dialogues. The crucial point is that the life of the mother concept gets lost when it is transformed into an identification with matter. In Greek philosophy all life comes from the form which becomes identified with the male. Matter, after Aristotle, is totally passive. Because conception was understood at this time as involving the mother purely as the empty vessel waiting for the active seed of the father, Aristotle ended by defining femaleness as being that which provides the matter for life. He drew the consequences of this biological hypothesis by stating that even in ethics and politics women were impotent males.

After an introduction to the symbolic and philosophical aspects of the *earth mother* concept, its political dimensions can then be studied. This can take the form of an examination of the controversy surrounding the question of matriarchy vs. patriarchy. Whereas previously the relationship most stressed in this study has been the mother-child relationship, now the mother-father relationship becomes central. How did the family evolve? What were the power structures of the family and its immediate society? What sort of prestige did the mother have?

The most recent controversy on this subject concerns the evidence for and against the theory that there was a period in history which could be called matriarchal. Some argue that this kind of a structure did exist, and that it was overthrown by patriarchy. Bachofen, Engels, and Freud all consider the matriarchal society to have been an inferior kind of structure. On the other hand, there are some recent writers who have attempted to argue that the matriarchal society was superior to present patriarchal structure. Diner, Johnson, Daly and those who wish to affirm "feminine" values find some historical roots in the belief in a matriarchal period in history. A further dimension of the controversy is introduced by those who claim that matriarchy as such never existed. Levi Strauss and deBeauvoir, taking this approach, claim instead that although some societies were matrilineal in that property passed down through the mother's line,

they were never matriarchal in that control of the property remained in the hands of men.

Leaving aside the question of how one might determine the truth of these conflicting theories, there is no doubt that present Western society is structured patriarchally and has been since its earliest written record. One need only chart the power structure of a familiar institution such as a bank, hospital, office, store, or school to bring this point to life.

In examining carefully the development of patriarchy, one is faced with an interesting change in the evolution of the *earth mother* concept — the emergence of the housewife. Instead of the woman being joined to the earth as mother, she becomes married to the house as wife. The house is a static piece of material when compared to the nourishing earth. One could say that the philosophical concept "matter" is more appropriate to house than to earth. To trace the beginnings of the change from rural to urban life, of the loss of a direct relation to the land, and of the introduction of the wide-spread sale of labor power, one should study Marx. When the earth is taken away and money introduced the function of the mother becomes one of consumer. With the rise of the middle class and the ever present problem of women needing to find someone who will support them, the links emerge between motherhood, private property, the need to be attractive to men, romantic love, consumerism, and alienation. The *earth mother* recedes into the background except for two caricatures: the fat woman with heavy breasts and the woman who produces many children. The housewife becomes the dominating image of woman.

Friedan carefully records the struggle for identity which women try to achieve through consumerism, having more children, or through avoidance. One can look at these mistaken alternatives in terms of the historical analysis already given. The first, or consumerism, is a consequence of the creative need of women being thwarted in society at large and therefore passing into creation of a new house or new self-image by buying. The *earth mother* must give birth to something new. It helps to point out how much the advertisers and capitalists contribute to this pattern of consumerism by playing on women's insecurities. The second attempted way to achieve an identity is to find it through having many children, through nursing them, through making their clothes by hand, etc. In short it demands a return to the primitive *earth mother* concept. Margaret Mead supported this solution to the housewife's malaise. The fact that it did not work is now widely accepted. The third attempt, avoidance through alcoholism, madness, a tedious life of social rounds, extramarital sex, prostitution, is no solution either and much is being written in contemporary women's liberation literature about this.

Two contemporary attempts to analyze the *earth mother* present

interesting differences. The first, that of Firestone, argues that women will not be liberated until they are free of childbearing. She looks forward to the day when test-tube babies will be commonplace. One can see here the historical archetype of the earth mother completely rejected in favor of technology and a concept of woman that in no significant way differs from that of man. Buried with the earth mother is also the housewife.

The second recent approach, that of James, concerns the central function of women in revolutionary struggle. Instead of seeing her, as traditional Marxists have, as being outside the struggle because of her position as unpaid laborer of premarketable goods, James redefines her place as central to the revolution as provider of labor power. She sees all women as essentially houseworkers and demands that they be paid for this work by the state. She derides the false dichotomy exposed by the question: "Are you a housewife or do you work?" All women are houseworkers first, and some work outside the house as well. The bond of houseworker unites all women, irrespective of class, and it has the potential for revolutionary redistribution of wealth if pushed to its logical consequence. She provides labor power for the State. Consequently, it is the duty of the State to pay for her contribution. The woman gains new respect because of her central function in society and this respect is recognized by the means our society uses to value its members — by paying a salary. In a most interesting way James' houseworker has achieved the vitality and significance of the *earth mother* in more primitive cultures. In so doing, she has not followed the road suggested by Margaret Mead, the road to imitation of primitive tribal role patterns. She has attempted to integrate the political needs of contemporary society with the active participation of women.

the various components

From the above example of the study of the *earth mother* using a methodology of historical analysis, it should be clear that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary. It might be possible to study Engels in a Political Science course, the identity crises of housewives in a Psychology course, the history of matriarchy in an Anthropology course, the changing structure of the family in a Sociology course, and Plato's Theory of Forms in a Philosophy course. But there would be no way for the student to integrate these various studies. In the first place, in most university courses the situation of women is still neglected and, in the second place, most students do not have the training or the time to make these extensive studies and syntheses on their own.

A brief look at the major subject areas falling under all the archetypes will further stress this point.

Methodology for Women's Studies

WOMAN AS EVIL TEMPTRESS

Eve	(Religion)
Pandora	(Classics)
Witches	(History)
Prostitution	(Political Science)
The <i>femme fatale</i>	(Literature)

WOMAN AS VIRGIN GODDESS

Mary, Mother of God	(Religion)
Athena	(Classics)
Chastity	(Psychology, Religion)
Iconography	(Fine arts)
Rape victims	(Political Science)
Courtly love	(Literature)
Double standard	
Sexual morality	(Sociology)

WOMAN AS EARTH MOTHER

Fertility symbols	(Arts, Classics)
Matter & form	(Psychology)
Matriarchy vs. patriarchy	(Anthropology, Political Science)
Transition to housewife	(Political Science, History, Sociology)

WOMAN AS PASSIVE OBJECT

Matter	(Philosophy)
Obedience	(Religion, Philosophy)
Sexual passivity	(Psychology)
Genetical & anatomical passivity	(Biology)
Socialized passivity	(Psychology, Sociology, Education)
The imminent other	(Philosophy)

WOMAN AS GENIUS

Muse	(Literature, Religion)
Intuition	(Philosophy)
The history of women's education	(History, Education)
The history of women's art	(Fine Arts, Sociology, Literature, Film)

WOMAN AS POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Woman as a political leader of men	(History)
Women organizing themselves	
Historical examples	(History, Classics, Anthropology)
Suffragists	(History)
Three wings of contemporary women's movement	
Moderates	} Political Science, Economics Sociology, Psychology Literature, Film
Radical feminists	
Marxist feminists	

It is evident that the above classifications, while extremely vague, none the less indicate the complexity of the subject matter. Women's

Studies must draw from all disciplines, and it must organize its material in such a way that the subject matter "woman" is absolutely central to the study. Even further, woman must be critically evaluated from a specific reference point. The use of archetypes or concepts is one way of orientation. There are, no doubt, others equally interesting. As Women's Studies develop other methodologies will emerge.

The particular methodology called "conceptual analysis" has been used successfully for five years in the introductory course in Women's Studies at Concordia. It was developed by two professors, working continuously as a team. It is not surprising that the two fields of training were literature and philosophy. Both of these fields tend to draw upon a wide base of material, seeking to integrate and synthesize images, ideas and theories. Professors from other fields, however, have a great deal to offer from the particular perspective of their own disciplines and, at Concordia, new sections of the introductory course are being offered by women trained in psychology, religion, and sociology. It is expected that while the same concepts or archetypes will provide continuity of structure, the particular works chosen to exemplify the archetypes will relate specifically to the resources of the teacher. Plans are also underway for a text which may be of some use to those teaching Women's Studies elsewhere in North America.

It should also be emphasized that the particular course described above is *introductory*. This means that it introduces the student to a new area of study. It raises questions. For example, if a student becomes interested in the matriarchy-patriarchy controversy she should be encouraged to take a course in anthropology; if in economic aspects of women's work, then to pursue courses in economics or political science; if in genetic aspects of her identity, then to turn to biology, and so on. Therefore, while it takes a great deal of experience to teach an introductory course well, it is essential to recognize and admit one's limitations so that the student is excited to go on further to get the answers the teacher at the introductory level might not be able to provide. It goes without saying that the more faculty members who can work together as an interdisciplinary team, the better resources there will be available to the student.

The whole question of what constitutes a viable interdisciplinary *program* in women's studies must still be faced. It may very well be that the thesis of this paper, that the program involve interdisciplinary work at the introductory and advanced levels with intermediate work in particular disciplines will prove to be extremely traditional when students who have been exposed to innovative methodology from the beginning of their studies begin creating beyond what they have been taught. It is a pioneering time for Women's Studies, and one

which offers a great opportunity for those who are able to teach and do research in this new field of study.

appendix **

I. Selected list of authors and titles mentioned in the paper in order of appearance, with specific reference to the Earth Mother archetype.

Plato, *The Republic, The Symposium*; Karl Jung, *Man and His Symbols, Psyche and Symbol*; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Aristotle, *De Anima, Metaphysics, Ethics, Politics*; Engels, *On The Origin of the Family and Private Property*; Freud, *General Psychological Theory, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*; Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons*; Jill Johnson, *Lesbian Mothers*; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*; Karl Marx, *Early Manuscripts*; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Margaret Mead, *Male and Female*; Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*; Selma James, *On the Power of Women and The Subversion of the Community*; Bachofen is summarized in Engels (see above); Levi-Straus is summarized in deBeauvoir (see above).

II. Examples of related resources for the earth mother archetype.

A. SHORT STORIES

Anton Chekov, *The Darling*; Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss*; Joyce Carol Oates, *Accomplished Desires*; Katherine Anne Porter, *The Old Order*; Tillie Olsen, *Tell me a Riddle*.

B. NOVELS

Janes Austin, *Pride and Prejudice*; Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*.

C. POETRY

Sylvia Plath, *The Disquieting Muse*; Anne Sexton, *The Farmer's Wife, Her Kind, The Double Image*; Denise Levertov, *The Ache of Marriage*; Bev Jonson, *To Fine Lady Would-Be*; George Barker, *To my Mother*; Irving Layton, *Keine Lazanovitch*.

D. OTHER HISTORICAL REFERENCES

Eric Newmann, *The Great Mother*; Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*; Mary Beard, *Woman as Force in History*; O'Faolain, *Not in God's Image*; Mrs. Beaten's *Book of Household Management*; folk songs; children's stories.

**For more complete bibliographical information contact the author.