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MAKING *MISSING PAGES*: INTEGRATING AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS INTO THE
LITERARY CANON

Making *Missing Pages*: Integrating American Women Writers into the Literary Canon

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Women's & Gender Studies

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Abstract

Women writers are severely underrepresented in the current literary canon of middle and high schools in the United States. For decades, the works of many women writers have been excluded from classroom curriculums, which have traditionally been dominated by white male authors, impressing harmful, misogynistic ideas on students. The aim of this project was to combat this by first revising a paper written by the student researcher on the relationship between the historical and canonical exclusion of women writers, which was submitted and accepted for presentation at the 2021 Midwest Modern Language Association's annual conference. The bulk of the student's research then involved writing biographies of 70 little-known American female authors from the 17th through the 20th centuries, and compiling them into a free Google Website database and resource for educators entitled *Missing Pages*. The ultimate goal of this two-fold project was to take steps to increase the visibility of women writers and promote public access to their work in order to diversify the American academic literary canon.

“I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
 Who says my hand a needle better fits.
 A Poet’s Pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
 For such despite they cast on female wits.
 If what I do prove well, it won’t advance,
 They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance.”

Poet Anne Bradstreet wrote those words almost 400 years ago. Yet in them, she perfectly captures much of the sexism that has been plaguing American literary society, and, consequently, the literary canon, for generations. Since then, such famous writers as T.S. Eliot have claimed women were not worth printing, and, as recently as 2011, V.S. Naipaul referred to works written by women as “feminine tosh” and “unequal” to him (Dean). Due to this kind of lingering sexism, many women have been left out of the literary canon, disappearing from society’s collective consciousness as if they had never been. As a result, in one 1990s literary textbook, women made up approximately 20% of the curriculum, and, in a 2015 play anthology, that number was as low as 6% (Coryat, Billington, Women).

Prior to her summer research, the student researcher explored these and other statistics on the dearth of female writers in popular literary canons and textbooks in an academic research paper. The paper examined how the historical exclusion of women from canonical spaces reflects their contemporary exclusion from educational spaces, and how this exclusion can inadvertently promote misogynistic stereotypes of women’s inferiority by implying women writers are not worthy of study. The first several days of the research program were spent revising and editing that paper with Professor Kelly Jo Fulkerson-Dikuua, and preparing it for submission to the 2021 Midwest Modern Language Association’s annual conference, to which it was accepted. In the remaining weeks of the Summer Scholars program, the student took her research further.

Wanting to address the problem identified in the MMLA paper, the student used Google Sites to design *Missing Pages*, a free online database and resource for educators, dedicated to the preservation of women's voices in literature and their further integration into the American literary canon. This integration poses a daunting challenge, particularly since many educators may not know the names or works of many American female writers, and thus cannot be expected to teach them to their students without additional information and support. *Missing Pages* simplified this critical diversification process by organizing information on these women for educators, including original biographies of 70 women from four centuries (1600-2000), five genres (*Novels, Short Fiction, Poetry, Nonfiction, Plays*), six historically underrepresented groups (*Black Writers, Latinx Writers, Native American Writers, Asian American & Pacific Islander Writers, Queer Writers, Writers with Disabilities*), and 25 U.S. states and territories.

From the home page of the website, viewers can navigate to any of the tabs listed at the top of the screen, including where writers are organized by time period, by genre, and by historically marginalized group. Under their respective time period section (*Pre-19th Century, 19th Century, or 20th Century*), each author has a profile consisting of a paragraph-long biography outlining their work and achievements; common topics they explored in their writing; links to where their work can be purchased and read; and a list of the other categories on the site where they can also be found. Formatting the website in this way allows it to accommodate era, subject, and genre-specific literature classes, and to highlight groups of historically marginalized women who faced especially high levels of discrimination throughout history and may have previously been barred from or misrepresented in the literary limelight. Additionally, the *Historically Marginalized* section is designed to promote not only the gender, but also the racial,

cultural, and orientational diversification of the canon, providing a more complete and inclusive picture of the literary past.

The last section of the website, *Tips & Resources for Educators*, was designed specifically as an additional way to provide support to educators as they work to integrate these and other women into their curricula. It consists of a curated list of tips, online tools, activity ideas, and advice from educational experts to help aid in the integration process in classrooms. Sharing this research can help promote progress towards large, long-term goals, such as diversifying the literary canon, preserving and raising up the voices of forgotten women writers, and ultimately ensuring that every student, no matter who they are or what background they come from, is able to connect with literature and see the diversity of their world reflected on the page and in the materials and writers they study. To learn more, please visit *Missing Pages* [here](#).

Works Cited

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See website for citations of the information in each woman's biography.