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**LITERARY LESSONS AT CZECH HIGHER SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS IN GENDER PERSPECTIVE**



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**Abstract**

On the basis of an analysis of professional texts on the topic of women's writing theory, gynocriticism and gender studies and a material study of relevant curriculum documents, a research plan was formulated to monitor the real state of teaching literature in secondary schools with a focus on the application of knowledge in the field of gender and gynocriticism. The research was targeted at secondary school literature teachers and understanding their teaching preferences in the field of literature in the early 20th century. Fourteen teachers participated in the investigation, with a gender representation almost replicating the composition of secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic from different types of secondary schools and with different lengths of teaching experience. Its results indicate that teachers overwhelmingly do not perceive the inclusion of topics and knowledge in the field of gender and gynocriticism in the teaching of literature as essential. This fact is confirmed by an analysis of the titles offered in the catalogue of requirements for the Maturita examination and school reading lists, where women writers are minimally represented. The same situation is observable in secondary school literature textbooks. The accompanying analysis of 320 teaching practice records of students of Czech Language and Literature for Secondary Schools at the University of Hradec Králové, 62 of which related to the defined period, confirmed this fact again, with only 5 records reporting the inclusion of material about a Czech female author from a more narrowly defined period in the teaching of literature education.

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## 1. Introduction

The Czech Republic has committed itself to active promotion of gender equality in accordance with international documents by Resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic No. 236 of 8 April 1998 on the Priorities and the Government's Procedure for Promoting Gender Equality. The resolution setting out priorities for equality is repeatedly issued with the definition of objectives for the near future. Since 1998, addressing gender equality issues has also been the responsibility of individual ministries, including the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). Following the government document, the Ministry prepares a study entitled Priorities and Procedures of the MoEYS in Promoting Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, in which it formulates and updates annually the direction and sub-tasks for gender equality policy under its responsibility.

The study The State of Gender Equality and the Plan of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, reflecting the period 2014 - 2020 mentions that the issue of gender is very sparsely represented in the Framework Educational Programmes (FEP), which define the general framework of education in the Czech Republic, or, if it appears, it is defined very vaguely (The State of Gender Equality and the MoEYS Plan 2014, 2020). Only the area of education Human and Society is touched upon in the same way for primary (RVP ZV - Framework Educational Programme for Primary Education) and secondary education (RVP G - Framework Educational Programme for Gymnasiums, RVP OV - Framework Educational Programme for Vocational Education). It is not specifically mentioned in the learning outcomes for literary education at secondary level (Jeřábek et al., 2007).

In the framework of the curriculum reform of 2005 (Jindráček, 2018), which for literary education in Czech conditions was to mean primarily a shift from the transmission of factual information about literature and literary history in chronological order to a greater focus on understanding the text and a shift of the dominant focus to literary interpretations, A year later, the Czech School Inspectorate conducted an analysis of selected curricula at all school levels, which found that the application of key competences and cross-cutting themes in individual curricula was deficient, but this analysis did not focus primarily on gender (The State of Gender Equality and the MoEYS Plan 2014, 2020).

More recent available research (Čuřín & Bubeníčková, 2013) that has examined the outcomes of secondary education, including in the form of high school graduation reading lists, has shown that the issue of balanced representation of male and female authors in the school environment is not even hinted at in practice. A follow-up investigation of our own confirmed that the teaching of literature is oriented towards the expected outcomes - the Maturita examination reading list so that literary interpretations are not dominated, to a greater or more equal extent, by available texts by Czech women writers, who, with few exceptions, do not feature in the reading lists. This state of affairs is also reflected in the list of selected authors and texts from the catalogue of requirements for the common part of the Maturita examination in the Czech language.

## 2. Problem Statement

Since the end of the 1960s, theories about the discourse of women's writing, its development, structures and specifics have come into the field of interest of literary scholars in the context of social

changes and the so-called second wave of feminism, and the basic concepts of the study of texts written by women have been defined - for example, "feminist reading", "gynocriticism", and many scholarly studies have been written on the theories of "women's writing". Yet Spender still points out in *Women and Literary History* in the 1980s that literary meanings and values created by women are not included in the literary tradition (Oates-Indruchová, 2007). In our milieu, the question of the representation of women authors in literature is still a hotly debated topic, but so far mainly on a scholarly level (Matonoha, 2010). In the light of the ongoing revision of the Framework Curriculum programmes (see Fryč et al., 2020), it is appropriate to ask how to apply it to school practice.

Within the framework of the cited document and the strategic goals mentioned therein, represented primarily by the listed competences for a quality civic life, it is necessary to consider now, in view of the discussions on the content of education, whether it is not the right time to reconsider the penumbra of literary texts in literary education and to make more accessible to pupils a more comprehensive view of values, proven experiences and traditions transmitted also through fiction and the work represented by women.

### **3. Research Questions**

What literary periods and literary themes are popular among teachers? What literary periods do teachers think are among students' favourite ones? What authors do educators include in their literature classes during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and do the authors appear on graduation reading lists? What authors/author(s) or literary periods do they work with gender studies concepts (emancipation, equality, family function, male and female roles, social convention, gender discrimination)? How would teachers like to change the current trend of teaching literature? Why do teachers think pupils lose interest in their own reading activities?

For the supplementary investigation based on the material analysis of the students' observation records of the Czech Language and Literature Focused on Education, the criterion of defining the period and the representation of a Czech writer in at least part of the teaching unit was used. The examination focused on the analysis of the methods used in the teaching unit, the analysis of the methods of working with the text, the choice of the type of excerpt, the inclusion of the excerpt in the context of the author's work and the inclusion of the author in the context of Czech literature.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the analysis of the available curriculum documents, whether binding, issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, or school documents (school curricula, graduation reading lists), is to explore the content of the curriculum of literary education at the upper secondary level through the lens of gender studies and gynocritical theories. Through the research, a questionnaire is implemented, which aims to find out teachers' preferences in teaching literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the actual practice in teaching literature in the period under study, including monitoring the proportion of female writers in different types of secondary schools. The additional analysis of the observation protocols from the teaching of literature, made during the teaching practice by the students of Czech Language and

Literature Focused on Education at the University of Hradec Králové, is intended to provide a broader view of the methods chosen in teaching and working with literary texts, with an overlap to the conception of the context of the author's work and the socio-historical context in individual types of schools.

## **5. Research Methods**

The research investigation was designed as a mixed-methods study, with both quantitative and qualitative components. The data were obtained through material analysis and a questionnaire of a proprietary format to investigate real teaching practice during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The development of the questionnaire was based on the analysis of government curriculum documents for the field of literature education, available school documents (school curricula - 85 in total, reading lists for the matriculation exam - 200 in total) of different educational disciplines related to literature education from different geographical areas of the Czech Republic, and a comparison of the content of secondary school literature textbooks and reading books (in a proportional representation of 10 textbooks, 10 reading books from different publishers). As a supplementary material analysis of observation protocols of students of the University of Hradec Králové in the field of Czech Language and Literature for Secondary Schools from the implemented literature lessons was carried out.

### **5.1. Questionnaire survey**

The selection of respondents for the questionnaire survey was carried out among teachers at the upper secondary level. In order to balance the sample, questionnaires were distributed equally to both secondary and high schools. The original intention of the survey was to conduct the survey in hard copy, but due to pandemic measures, it was decided to create and distribute the questionnaire in an online interface as well. In the final stage of the survey, a total of 14 respondents (11 women, 3 men, which roughly corresponds to the gender distribution of teachers within the Czech Republic) worked with the assessment of preferences. Within the return rate, questionnaires from secondary vocational schools and gymnasiums were equally represented. Teachers with more than 5 years of experience were included in the survey with a justification of relevant assessment of the content of literary education within all secondary school classes.

### **5.2. Material analysis of observations protocols**

Observation protocols are a standard evaluation tool for recording the actual course of a teaching unit, its objectives, teaching methods and teaching aids used. Out of a total of 320 observation protocols of students of Teaching Czech Language and Literature for Secondary Schools taken during their teaching practice in literature education classes in different types of secondary schools, in different geographical parts of the Czech Republic, 61 were selected for detailed analysis, which focused on the period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the criteria under observation.

## 6. Findings

The issue of gender is sparsely represented in the framework educational programmes defining the general framework of education in the Czech Republic. For the field of literary education, it is not elaborated in the curriculum documents. An analysis of school educational documents and textbooks has shown that the work of women writers is marginalised in the curriculum (the representation of women writers is below 10 % of the total number of writers included). Despite the fact that it is the responsibility of individual schools to draw up the Maturita reading lists, women writers are not even proportionately included in these lists.

Due to the size of the research sample of the questionnaire survey, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions regarding preferences in teaching literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at individual types of secondary schools for the whole educational system in the Czech Republic. However, the questionnaire survey of pedagogical preferences confirmed what is based on the analysis of government and school curriculum documents and the content of literature textbooks and reading books for secondary schools, that the proportion of female writers in the teaching of literature is not reflected by teachers. The content and pedagogical preferences of teaching are in the majority (96 %) based on the expected outcomes determined by the requirements for the common part of the oral part of the Maturita examination in literature. An interesting finding of the survey was that themes in the field of gender, especially female emancipation and the status of men and women in society, are often discussed in the context of the work of writers. In their open-ended answers, the educators interviewed consistently mentioned that they did not consider the work of women authors to be so fundamental that they would include it in the teaching of literature education. For the sample of educators surveyed, in the rare case of a gymnasium, a writer from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was included in the list of titles chosen for the oral part of the Maturita examination. The interviewed educators consistently identified the works of authors who dealt with the depiction of the theme of war as the most attractive and also the most popular among students. Among the most preferred and most frequently mentioned authors was Karel Čapek. This fact is reflected in the frequency of his works appearing in the Maturita reading lists.

The results of the questionnaire survey were also confirmed by the analysis of the actual state of teaching for the monitored period from the observations of Teacher Education students taken during their teaching practice. Out of a total of 62 observation protocols relevant to the research criteria, five contained a record of the inclusion of the writers' work in the period under study. For three of the protocols, the topic was a whole-hour topic, where students were most often introduced to an overview of the writer's work and the content of selected works through a frontal method. In only one case was the interpretation supplemented by an analysis of a sample from the reading list. In terms of the historical context, the topic of the authors' position in society and its historical development was never particularly mentioned or taken into account. The authors were included in the lesson from a chronological point of view, which corresponded to the literary period under discussion. In all three cases, these were observation protocols taken in literature classes at gymnasiums. Further acquaintance with the writer's work was made in connection with the introduction to the literary period - the author was mentioned in the list of writers

falling within the introductory overview of the period discussed, in one case only her name was given, in the other two representative works were added with a brief addition of the content of one of them.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

The research investigation provided suggestions for current discussions on the revision of the framework curricula, possible innovative teaching tendencies for the field of literary education, and provided the initial material for a more in-depth follow-up research aimed at reaching a larger number of respondents and subsequent trial application of knowledge about women's writing and texts from the women's literary canon in secondary school literature classes. Because the chronological-historical approach is still preferred over the thematic aspect in real practice in literature teaching and the focus on the quantity of knowledge is still only slowly giving way to the consolidation of key competences and the requirements of literacy development (Potužníková et al., 2019) we consider it necessary to work further on an independent survey of real teaching practice and monitoring of the current preferences and needs of literature teachers. Among the respondents with more than ten years of teaching experience, there is a noticeable reluctance to change the experienced content of teaching, which on the one hand we perceive as a consequence of the traditionalist conception of university teacher education at the time of their studies and empirical experience with the way of transmitting knowledge of literature during their own secondary school studies, on the other hand, as the lack of adequate postgraduate education that would systematically deepen and develop the existing professional literary knowledge after teachers enter teaching practice.

In view of the increasing frequency and quality of literary works by women authors and the changing status and role of authorial subjects from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, we consider it inappropriate to continue to neglect this part of literary discourse in the teaching of literature. Taking into account the knowledge in the field of gender, the sophisticated terminology of gynocriticism and the rich literary tradition of not only Czech women authors, we consider it appropriate and desirable to include women's work more in the teaching of literature in upper secondary education, taking into account the binding positions of the Czech Republic on gender equality and literary education. We see the inclusion of women's discourse in writing, at least in proportional representation, as an enrichment and as a possible increase in the pupils' reading attractiveness of the literary topics included, taking into account current social trends. This is one of the possible ways to innovate the teaching of literary education, especially the way of developing functional contextual thinking of pupils, which goes beyond the established content of the teaching of the subject of literary education towards the development of civic competences, especially in the field of equality, understanding its development and principle and consequently defining oneself against collective stereotypes.

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