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Is There a Text in This Class? Adolescents and Literary Theory

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Teachers' Report Card - On Equity in the Schools

Must Literacy Achievement be Boys vs. Girls?

**Edna Brabham
Auburn University**

Last April, The Nation's Report Card on reading achievement for fourth-graders ([NAEP, 2001](#)) increased awareness that girls continue to outperform boys on national literacy assessments. These findings added momentum to a trend that makes boys a focus of concern in literacy educators' professional publications and presentations at national conferences. Alarmed by evidence that boys are academically and socially at greater risk than girls due to lower literacy achievement, many teachers and researchers have called for changes in literacy instruction that include: accommodating learning styles that may be different for boys than girls; recruiting more male mentors and teachers of reading and writing; and, most frequently,

providing boy-friendly literature that will motivate boys to read, engage in literacy instruction, and achieve.

Critically examining the trend to demand actions and remedies addressing boy's underachievement in literacy, Josephine Peyton Young and William Brozo (2001) debate the appropriateness of changes recommended, especially those that exhort teachers to provide literature with strong masculine themes for male students. Brozo argues that "a feminized school environment, at least in the elementary and middle grades, results in literary experiences and texts that work for girls and unwittingly punish boys" (p. 322). He encourages teachers to provide more books with male archetypes such as warriors, wild men, and kings. Young, however, rejects this recommendation, insisting that archetypal literature will further divide the literacy curriculum by sex, perpetuate male stereotypes that dominate existing collections of children's literature, pit boys against girls, and fail to "benefit boys' or girls' literacy educations" (p.320).

This article brought to mind an exchange between a fifth-grade boy and a teacher that I became involved in several months ago. Reading a picture book, the Usborn World History: Ancient World (Chandler, 1999), the student remarked that males--all of them warriors, kings, emperors--were responsible for all world changes and contributions depicted in this book. When the teacher replied that many women have made equally important contributions to the world, he said, "You mean like Queen Cleopatra, the one who lost Egypt to Rome and then killed herself?" He pointed to page 35, which, indeed, was the only page in the book with information about a female in a position of power. The student issued a challenge, "If women have made so many contributions, show me some books that tell what they've done!" The bad news is that this task proved to be more difficult than the teacher or I expected. The classroom library had no such books, and the media center had very few books about historically important women.

The good news is that we have increased our own and students' access to texts that describe contributions of women to the world. This teacher and I have discovered a growing number of recently published trade books that allow us meet the challenge presented by this young man. We even found The Usborne Book of Famous Women (Dungworth & Wingate, 1996) with strong female leaders from Nefertiti to Diana that expand notions of who can be an archetype beyond the male figures featured in the Usborn World History (Chandler, 1999). We have included many other trade books about women making important contributions to life and literature in our collections, but three stand out as favorites of teachers and students with whom I work.

Girls Think of Everything (Thimmes, 2000) gives new meaning to "necessity is the mother of invention" by introducing readers to mothers of inventions that have changed lives from inside the home (Ida [Forbes' electric hot water heater) and automobile (Mary Anderson's windshield wipers) to outside earth's atmosphere (Jeanne Lee Crews' space bumper for shields that protect spacecraft, stations, and astronauts from orbital debris). These short stories invite readers to create their own unique inventions, obtain patents, and make profits as they highlight the ingenuity, enterprising spirit, and, in some cases, financial successes of women and girls from five years up who have come up with inventions of their own.

Fourteen poems, each about a woman who devoted or risked her life to accomplish goals, save lives, or do what women had not done before, constitute a work of art in All By Herself. 14 Girls Who Made a Difference (Paul, 1999). The poetry captures the determination, bravery, and tempo of life for well known women such as Pocahontas, Amelia Earhart, Rachel Carson, Wilma Rudolph, and Golda Meir and for unknown heroes such as Harriet Hanson who led mill strikes to improve working conditions and helped win women the right to vote.

The last book is the thickest, which is appropriate because it fills a large gap. Girls: A

History of Growing U12 Female in America ([Colman, 2000](#)) is a series of short chapters which personally connect readers to experiences of real women as they have grown up in and also grown America. Letters, diaries, authentic illustrations, photographs, and first-hand accounts never compiled before make the book itself a contribution to the history of the world. The first chapter is my favorite because it explains how gender roles have been defined and have evolved over time--in terms that elementary students and readers of all ages and genders can understand and appreciate. The rest of the book tells the stories of girls who came to America and shaped its history, transformed themselves and other women from followers to doers, and now "defy limitations and stereotypes placed on their lives by society" ([p. 181](#)).

Teaching the Holocaust to Middle School Students

**Maureen Dolan
Breed M. S.
Lynn, MA**

Recently I attended a three-day conference for educators given at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. I had become interested in learning more about teaching this material when I was (extremely) successful doing *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry with my 6' graders. The story concerns ten-year old Annemarie Johansen, who becomes separated from her best friend Ellen Rosen in Nazi-occupied Denmark in 1943. To escape capture by the Nazis, the Rosens, along with thousands of other Jews, escape by boat to Sweden. The Rosens are only able to do this with the help of the Johansens and other courageous Resistance members.

My students love this book. Many of them wrote in their journals that it was the best book they ever read. They love the theme that it's worth risking your life for a friend who is in danger.

The conference was excellent: among the many guidelines shared with teachers, the course emphasized the importance of giving an individual voice to a collective experience; i.e., first person accounts instead of equating people with objects. One such example of the latter was the use of 6 million paper clips to represent the Jewish victims. The Museum also does not approve of simulations such as cramming students into an enclosed space to get them to experience what a transport to a camp would feel like. It is impossible to feel what the victims felt since students won't feel the humiliation, fear, hunger and thirst that they felt. An activity like this trivializes the experience since students know the bell will ring and they'll be going to lunch. They feel it is better to rely on primary source accounts and ask students to empathize with them through writing or class discussion.

The Museum publishes a 120-page book entitled, *Teaching about the Holocaust: A Resource Book for Educators* that is free of charge to teachers.

The conference included the testimony of two Holocaust survivors. This was an extraordinary 45 minutes for the attendees of this conference, and an experience that teachers are encouraged to bring into their classroom. I spoke with an eighth-grade teacher who said that the survivor talk at her school was "the highlight of my students' year." There are several places to look for a survivor to come to speak to your class, e.g. synagogues, the Jewish Labor Committee, the Anti-Defamation League and the VFW (for liberator accounts).

I was, however, appalled when a professor gave a talk about anti-Semitism, during which he referred to one of his students as a "blonde, blue-eyed shiksa." Imagine this stereotyping coming from an expert on prejudice; apparently, in his view, there is only one prejudice.

Is There a Text in This Class? Adolescents and Literary Theory

Joanne Marshall
Loyola University Chicago

Browsing the NCTE bookstalls at the convention last year, I spied a new book by Deborah Appleman, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literacy Criticism to Adolescents* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000). Ha, I thought, right. Adolescents and phallogocentrism. Or semiotics. They'd love that. I remembered once mentioning literary criticism to a class of "average" juniors. Kyle, folded into his desk, looked at me with complete incredulity: "You mean people write books about other people's books?!" Yes, I assured him. He still looked disbelieving.

At any rate, I picked up the Appleman book and was immediately hooked. The introduction describes Appleman's visiting a classroom and introducing them to literary theory by passing around a pair of driving sunglasses and asking students what they've noticed. "The reds stand out...the greens are way green," say the students. "Do the glasses turn colors that aren't green or red into green or red?" Appleman asks. "No," says a student, "They just seem to bring out what's already there" (xvi). Ah ha! From there, it's a quick step to literary theory, in this case feminist perspectives on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The introduction to the book makes a case for critical theory, for teaching students how to read critically -- and thereby how to think. Subsequent chapters are devoted to particular branches of literary theory: reader response, Marxist, feminist, and so on. The chapters are refreshingly readable and offer classroom exercises and reading lists.

Curious about whether anyone else was actually using literary theory in the classroom beyond, perhaps, the AP classroom, I did a quick Internet search and found a lesson plan and student work samples from Gail Meighan, now retired from George Mason High School, Falls Church, VA. at (<http://www.fccps.k12.va.us/gm/faculty/english/littheorists.htm>).

I also found three other potentially helpful sites for the teacher who wants to introduce her or his students to literary theory:

- A list of literary theory links: <http://vos.uscb.edu/shuttle/theory.html>
- A glossary of literary theory:
<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/headerindex.html>
- And just for fun: The Amazing and Incredible, Only-slightly-Laughable Politically Unassailable, PoMo English Title Generator: <http://www.brysons.net/generator.html>

If any of you are already using literary theory in your high school classroom to discuss whether "there is a text in your class," I'd love to hear more about it: jmarsh8@luc.net.

Reflections on Gender, Sexuality, and the Teaching of English

William J. Spurlin
Cardiff University, UK

As one largely positioned in queer studies, and as a feminist, I am intrigued by the powerful intersections between feminist and queer studies, and often disappointed by the ways in which the potential for coalition between these very vibrant disciplines often falls short politically, academically, and pedagogically. Having been taught by impassioned feminist theorists in graduate school, I learned to resist the powerful hold of the male gaze, which served as a valuable tool for questioning the straight male gaze later on, for (re-)conceiving patriarchy as

'hetero-patriarchy,' for coming to the realisation that various forms of power intersect and converge in culture. In other words, feminism and gender studies provided me with an institutional space from which to speak as a queer academic. Yet there is much more than a simple debt to be repaid at work here (though I remain disappointed by the lack of an acknowledgement of this vital connection to feminism amongst many fellow gay male scholars). If, as Judith Butler reminds us, sexuality is regulated in culture thorough the policing and the shaming of gender, how can we theorise them as separate? How can we talk about sexuality in queer studies without talking about gender? Doesn't homophobia, such as that often directed against gay men, imply gender oppression, not to mention misogyny, insofar as femininity and weakness become conflated in this particular instance? This is not to assume that queer studies and feminism are reducible to one another, but is to acknowledge the ways in which gender and sexuality are intimately intertwined.

At the same time, it is difficult to theorise gender without theorising sexuality. While there has been a history of a sometimes strenuous relationship between lesbian and feminist positions, especially given the debates in the late 1970s and the early 1980s between cultural feminists, who saw pornography and S/M as denigrating to and exploitative of women, and radical lesbians who saw these as ways for women to explore their sexuality in ways that had been previously marked as taboo, lesbian-feminists such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and others have helped feminism to rethink many of its heterosexist presumptions and [College Representative, cont'd] to critique romantic notions of 'sisterhood' which close off discussion on the radical differences between women according to race, gender, social class, religion, geo-political location, and, of course, sexuality. More important, while the masculine bias in queer studies tends to read cross-gender identification as the paradigm for homosexuality, lesbian studies has helped us to realise that it is not the only paradigm, as it renders the lesbian femme, the gender-conforming lesbian, invisible. The axis of gender and the axis of sexuality cannot operate separately, nor can they operate apart from other axes of difference. Otherwise, we repeat the (hetero-)patriarchal gesture of reducing cultural groups to a fantasized unity or self-sameness.

What we must avoid is prescribing 'gender' as the object of feminist studies and 'sexuality' as the object of inquiry for queer studies, particularly as both fields become more firmly entrenched in the academy. Rather, it might be more productive to keep gender and sexuality in dialogical relation to each other in our teaching and in our research. For instance, in language arts and English education, pre- and in-service teachers need to theorise lesbian and gay issues in terms of gender and question how the reinforcement of gender norms in schooling, and in culture, is not unrelated to the prevention of queer outcome in children. In the study of literature and culture, we need to question the implications of conflating queer sexuality with cross-gender identification. For instance, we must challenge the received opinion in Holocaust studies that lesbians were not as systematically persecuted as gay men under the Third Reich. The fallacy operating here is that lesbians are being read only through the lens of sexuality. Further inquiry using gender may show that women who resisted, as lesbians often did, the Nazi ideology of domesticity and perpetuating the Aryan race through childbirth, were very much in danger of persecution and being sent to camps such as Ravensbrück for betraying the nation-state through betraying their prescribed gender roles. In writing about queerness in English composition, students might reflect in their writing how queer inquiry questions all normative ideologies, including those pertaining to race, gender, class, and nationality, in addition to sexuality. Along these lines, they might consider how such issues as women's reproductive rights, nationalist fantasies about race and nation, and constructions of the family might be queer and gender issues. The coalitional efforts already begun between WILLA and GSEA at NOTE can be a productive site for further questioning the interimplications of gender and sexuality in teaching and in research.

Carpe Diem, or Seize the Day

Jo Gillikin

Came diem, or "gather ye rosebuds while ye may," is the main subject of this column, and it's meant for those of you who are still working as well as those of us who are now retired. Most of us retired folk had not thought about what retirement would really be like. Who had the time, and when we retired we imagined our time filled with trips abroad, with reading whatever we like for as long as we liked, of dabbling in the garden or walking or biking or seeing plays every night or finally writing the definitive critical essay or the great American novel. And a lot of that does happen.

But there is the other side for which you should be preparing yourself now. Be sure that your health policies are in order while you're working, that you're taking sufficient monies out for your pension needs. Care about and act on what is being proposed about social security. After all the monies recently lost in the stock market (Those were some of my savings!), are you really sure you want to invest money in it for your retirement? My COLA (cost-of-living-adjustment) from social security for this year is the magnificent sum of \$38, plus \$2 extra in my monthly check, hardly enough to pay for the stamps to remit my bills. I weep for those whose only income is social security, and I sign petitions and send messages to my representatives.

Oh, yes, I have my pension and it's not bad, but I need that social security. Rents do go up (and not by \$2). Taxes do increase. Food prices climb and clothes go up, though if push came to shove, I'm not sure I'd ever need any more clothes. Here on Upper, Upper Broadway, near Columbia University, everybody wears blue jeans and t-shirts and those sneakers (really best for my feet now) do last a long time. No, I'm not lacking for funds. I did, during the last months of teaching, do the right thing about my pension so that I'm doing okay. I'm just telling you some of the facts in the hopes that you will plan further ahead than I did. And be prepared for some losses, no matter what. Only you know what your pension and health plans are. If not, find out now. My pension plan, for example, will pay me a 3% COLA if I live five years after my retirement. I'll resist saying something cynical here, but I will live to collect it, believe you me.

The good news is Medicare. Every time I go to the doctor, I thank the foresightful ones for setting it up. I haven't a thing to complain about, nor do other retirees that I know. You hear what I'm saying, don't you? You're reading between the lines, right?

Another important thing is this: If you know that there are pre-existing medical problems in your family, get regular check-ups concerning them. Don't do what most of us did, get caught up in work, like an ostrich with its head in the sand, and neglect your health. Sudden heart problems, cancer, accidents are not the surprises we had planned for our golden years. And, through reading or some other process, strengthen the third key element in our compositions (There's that word again!) Being composed. Learn how to be composed. Of the three--mind, body, soul--you know which one I mean, no matter how you define it or exemplify it. Just find a way to be composed, even if it's putting the states in alphabetical order. When you've done that, add the state capitals, whatever (My nephew will kill me for using that word.) Well, I could do a riff on "composition," but I'll spare you. Say, "Amen!" somebody.

There is no blessing like knowing how to read. Those days and nights while I was sitting in the hospital with the one who failed to get her heart checked know how it affects us. For example, who'd a thought that coughing and shortness of breath were signs of a heart attack, not asthma? Much more needs to be done to inform us and other women of our health issues.

And what did I read while I was doing all this waiting in the hospital room, the doctors' offices? Well, I read Ruth Rendell, another page-turner, but mostly I read the newspapers and worked the crossword puzzles. I wasn't up to much then. But I'm eager to read Anne Tyler's new book and want to re-read Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," surely one of the funniest

short stories ever written by one of the most gracious literary people who ever lived. Makes me think, too, of Flannery O'Connor, who lived at 108th Street, just off Broadway for a while. Welty almost became a New Yorker while she was attending Columbia University, but a promise to her father and the people of Jackson, Mississippi, her subject matter, called her home.

One of the great responsibilities of teaching reading and writing and speaking is to help our students to take care of themselves so that they can be workers, citizens, parents, caretakers. They have got to be able to read and interpret their bodies as well as read the poems, stories, plays, and novels, not to mention newspapers. They have to be able to determine which medicines are good for their bodies and which ones are harming them, to speak up to their doctors about what hurts, what helps them. Those allergy and asthma medicines might injure the heart more than it helps the lungs. That estrogen might not be helpful in all cases. The best survivors are those who can read themselves and the world and make informed judgments and reading and understanding literature helps that process. Now that we have so many search

engines available to us on the computer, there is no reason not to be informed on just about anything you want to know. Just the other day, a columnist of the New York TIMES was detailing the best sites for having informed discussions about the books we read. In some ways, I can't think of anything that teaches how to follow instructions better than the computer, and in a few minutes I'm going to find out just how successfully I can follow instructions as I try to transfer this column from Word Perfect to e-mail it to Lee Williams. But, be sure I am going to print it out first.

Well, folks, carpe diem. I trust that you're doing that very thing during these summer months as well as keeping up with all that's new in the field. I'm off to Vermont soon for gardening and cool breezes. And don't let all that stuff in the media get you down. If it weren't for us teachers, the world would fall apart, and you know it.

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