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Seeing through the Lenses of Gender: Beyond Male/Female Polarization

VICKY GREENBAUM

It's OK, for a girl book," said my brightest sophomore boy during the first week of classes in September as we began a discussion of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*. I watched the other boys nod and explain their responses: "Girl books are about love . . . girls care about family problems . . . there's never any action or adventure." Meanwhile the girls shrugged, looked defensive, or put up their hands to offer arguments like, "What's wrong with love? All during ninth grade we read boy books!" And, most telling, from a particularly articulate girl, "You guys are just afraid of complexity between human beings."

A rich discussion, full of complex conflicts, took shape between my students as they talked about definitions and questions: What are the parameters of male and female experience? Is there a shared or common ground between boy and girl in literature and in life? Eventually I gave them an adjective, "gendered," to work with. What did it mean for a book, poem, or play to be gendered? To what extent were their experiences gendered? How did the world get that way? Did they like it? Why or why not?

The Metaphor of Lenses

Thanks to Sandra Lipsitz Bem's book, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, I discovered the metaphor of "lenses" by which someone becomes able to see through the eyes of another and comes to understand their experiences via the metaphorical "lens" that one may consciously or unconsciously put on. I offer my students the image of putting on a pair of contact lenses, or a pair of sunglasses, which they may don and doff at will. We discuss the possibility of resisting lenses: What makes one afraid to see through another's eyes? We discuss the possibility that ac-

cepting a lens, a viewpoint vastly different from one's own, is not the same thing as becoming another person. We ask, What does it take for someone of one gender to appreciate, understand, or see life through the lenses of the other gender? At year's end, my goal is to have students reflect on their awareness of gender as a lens to view the world: To what extent are they able to don other lenses, very different from their own, in order to understand others or to engage in a new dimension of literary experience? To what extent does a writer impose or seduce with a lens of gender through which a character or a voice within the literary work might see?

Bem's concept resonated with me when a fellow teacher first mentioned the title of her book because for thirteen years I and like-minded colleagues have been trying to balance our classroom readings in literature to ensure that women's voices are heard. We've embraced Alice Walker, Barbara Kingsolver, Zora Neale Hurston, and Amy Tan, seeking to bridge racial and gender gaps with just a few worthy books. At times we resort to quotas, assigning equal numbers of male and female authors, and we seek to heighten student awareness about female roles, voices, and presence in all novels, regardless of authorship. Most of us are fortunate

enough to notice a slow shift within our classrooms as students, exposed to more varied reading in grades 1–8, express greater awareness of and, at best, sensitivity about people whose gender and other features differ from their own. Yet there remains a definite tension: between self and others, between genders, between the idea of diversity and the idea of political correctness. Resentful of the need to defend against the tension of political correctness, I sought a new way of looking at gender and other differences, hopeful of bringing students to a new way of seeing, a new awareness of what drives the all-male reading lists that they will continue to encounter and may even continue to crave.

Bem's idea that "hidden assumptions about sex and gender remain embedded in cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyches" (2) is borne out in experiences with teaching all kinds of literature, and her term for these assumptions, "lenses of gender," reflects the idea that they "shape how people perceive, conceive and discuss social reality" (2). I find myself hoping, like Bem, that if we "render these lenses visible rather than invisible" we will be able to "look at the culture's gender lenses rather than through them" (2). Bem defines three particular lenses—*androcentrism*, "male-centeredness"; *gender polarization*, "the male-female difference . . . superimposed on so many aspects of the social world that a cultural connection is thereby forged between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience"; and *biological essentialism*, treating these lenses as "the natural and inevitable consequences of intrinsic biological natures of women and men" (2). While all three work together, I find the second to be particularly relevant to our work as high school teachers, and I have taken the concept one step further in defining the ways I and my students, as readers, can look at the world.

One Step Further: From Polarization to Juxtaposition

My fellow teachers often agree that gender polarization remains alive and well in our high school classrooms, despite the efforts of enlightened teachers and curricula. While more girls than ever seek careers in sciences and engineering, all students and many teachers assume literature to be gendered. While there tends to be no discussion in high

schools about women's ways of being engineers, or astrophysicists, or brain surgeons, the world of literature, with its inescapable issues of voice and viewpoint, remains divisible between the poles of gender. Some of us are beginning to ask if this polarization is necessary or desirable. Why not make oppositions into juxtapositions? I teach my students that a juxtaposition occurs in literature, art, or life when two different entities—characters, concepts, metaphors, or meanings—interact or grow close in a way that allows each to influence the other. The path to juxtaposition emerged for me in the metaphor of lenses: One may remove them, examine them, question their construction, and perhaps, for just a short while, don another lens by way of experiment. Seeing through two lenses, perhaps our own and an author's, or character's, allows us to experience juxtaposition, to be influenced by another point of view.

A Curriculum of Lenses

A curriculum of lenses seems to me a natural extension of the voice and viewpoint curriculum currently in place for sophomores at the school where I teach. Focusing on how voice works to shape narrative writing (we use James Moffett's excellent *Points of View* anthology to begin our studies), we see that the narrator's viewpoint emerges naturally, communicated to the mind's eye of the reader. As the year continues, we venture into many other topics and issues, but the concept of gendered experience returns to haunt us in subtle ways. Willa Cather, author of *My Antonia*, which we read in October, tells the story of a female character, Antonia, through the voice of a male, Jim; students puzzle over whether the female author gets the voice right for "a guy" and whether Jim is able to capture Antonia's voice through his stories. Then, as we read *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx in November, we note how the female author uses third person to get inside the head of Quoyle, her male protagonist. Is the novel a male or female tale, or is there a middle ground? In March, we wonder about the effect upon a girl of reading Camus' *The Stranger*—a book with only two female characters, one dead, the other practically unheard and unseen.

Awareness of the concept of lenses allows students to examine the assumptions behind the

viewpoint, which, in turn, shapes the voice narrating a tale. This year, the following questions arose:

- How do lenses evolve within us? Are they implanted by parents, or do they grow from the seeds of attitudes?
- To what extent does the way we (or characters) see the world through our lenses shape our inner life, how we think, and how we react?
- What do our lenses allow us to accept? To reject?
- Are lenses absolute, irrevocably in place, or can we consciously change the way we see?
- Can we find the power to take off our lenses, like a pair of sunglasses, and don new ones for awhile?

Throughout the year, I provide reflective assignments in first person, interspersed with analytical writing in the scholarly third-person voice, allowing students to explore various facets of the concept of lenses. (Often I forgo mentioning the term “lens” in order to avoid what some students term “beating the idea to death.”) For instance, after reading *Hamlet* in February and exploring the Elizabethan world view, reading *Arcadia* in March and examining Enlightenment and Romantic lenses, and reading *The Stranger* in April to examine an existential viewpoint, I ask students to write a reflective paper in which they examine where they fall within the spectrum of literary ideas (or lenses). Do they see the world through a lens dichotomizing order and chaos, or reason and passion, as Elizabethans did? Do they fear one or the other? Are they Enlightened thinkers who always must have their notebooks in order, lest they go mad? Or are they Romantics, feeling imprisoned whenever order, limits, and an immersion in the cerebral is required? Students are free to design new definitions for the ways in which they see the world; often, writing the paper involves a struggle for self-definition as students try to figure out the relationship among seeing, feeling, and living.

One product of this study is that students find fewer polarities and more similarities between genders; they also realize that the polarization inflicted by some social norms or customs may be misleading and sometimes false. Most important, in my view, they can arrive at this realization without overt preaching or moralizing by me, which some might interpret as use of class time to promote

social agendas. As Bem writes, “Gender polarization operates in two related ways. First, it defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. Second, it defines any person or behavior that deviates from these scripts as problematic” (80–81). Students may realize the problems inherent in gender polarization through reading *My Antonia*, for instance, where Antonia diverges from social norms by dressing as a man and working in the fields, then coming home to remove her manly boots and give birth to her child. Cather makes clear that the frontier community in which Antonia lives is divided in its view of this gender-bending: Farm women sometimes take on “masculine” work and roles, while town girls keep closely to stereotypical feminine ways of manner and dress. When students write their *Antonia* papers, some will write about how the lenses of gender in Cather’s novel lead the reader to sympathize with the unpolarized, androgynous heroine.

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Yet this kind of reading, allowing for a juxtaposition rather than an opposition between gendered norms in a character’s life, goes against the grain of most feminist interpretation in recent years. For instance, Blanche H. Gelfant writes:

In discussing works like *My Antonia* . . . I have looked for the intersection of American motifs with themes pertinent to women: female patterns of development, mother/daughter relationships, romance and marriage, conflicts between caring for others and the self response to a demand for passivity, and disguised forms of rebellion. Points of intersection between setting and sex have become, I believe, the nexus of subversions appealing to women writing in America. (4)

Rather than encourage students to find “themes pertinent to women,” I invite them to examine the intersection of gendered norms within one person. Antonia’s androgynous moments (and Jim’s) allow us to see how the polarized vision of feminine and

masculine norms may not be the only way to see gender in society. Indeed, a discussion of connections between Antonia's world and ours leads some students to remark about how much the polarities have been eased in the modern world—for instance, through the universal wearing of pants by both genders—though not eliminated entirely. Indeed, polarization and its consequences remain alive today, especially in certain constraints placed upon male behavior. Appearing “like a guy” remains more acceptable for girls than appearing “like a girl” for boys.

I have found that depolarizing readings, through an examination of the lenses of gender we all wear, allows my students to become aware of the social constraints behind some boys' objections to “girl books.” As Phyllis Burke notes in her recent book, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female*, boys in certain case studies often made “a conscious decision not to perform what was perceived to be a ‘girl’ behavior, not because they preferred same-sex models, but because they avoided anything that might identify them as engaging in a ‘girl’ activity” (197). However, if boys learn to see “female experiences” in various novels as accessible through a lens they may consciously put on and take off again, they have the option of defusing the socially threatening feeling implicit in “girl books.” Meanwhile, girls who seem to more easily don and doff lenses, gain a vocabulary and a new access to conscious viewpoints that may be shared

with the newly aware males in the class. Sharing experience—even at a distance that seems metaphorical and therefore safe—opens worlds to these readers, allowing them to broaden the horizons beyond the familiar sights of their everyday lives.

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EJ 25 YEARS AGO

How to Grow a Student

“As a fantasist, I wish I had been able to offer you a magic formula, an all-powerful spell that would instantly give all of us our heart's desires. As a realist, I know there is no such thing. We can find what we want, some of it at least, but I'm afraid we have to do it the hard way, bit by bit, as a book is written word by word. But if in any way we can help our young people grow wiser than we are, it's worth the effort. Besides, we should be used to difficulties. After all, we are teachers.”

Lloyd Alexander. “Seeing With the Third Eye.” *EJ* 63.5 (1974): 35–40
