Reading as Resistance: Gendered Messages in Literature and Media

Students may be surprised to discover the extent to which print and visual texts shape our concepts of gender. Focusing specifically on how literature and media construct femininity, Laraine Wallowitz and colleagues created a unit that “enabled readers to recognize the mixed messages in the media about body image and culturally constructed notions of gender.”

“I took me five pages into the reading to realize the narrator was a girl. I assumed she was male,” Laurie casually mentioned during a discussion of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. In my high school Women’s Studies classes, there were many readers who, like Laurie, made assumptions about gender, assumptions shaped by family, culture, literature, media, and education. By paying attention to what students are thinking and feeling, we can teach to uncover bias and challenge commonplace notions of gender.

During my years as a public school teacher, I designed and taught with my colleagues, Nicole Rossi and Kerry Baldwin, a Women’s Studies class for high school seniors. Our purpose was to provide students with knowledge to analyze the ways in which social constructions of gender shape the experiences of both men and women. Students were asked to consider four essential questions: How do women use language to overcome obstacles? How has “woman” as a cultural construct changed over time? How do race and gender shape identity? How do literature and media influence ideas of femininity?—with its emphasis on reading both the canon and popular culture. By the end of the unit, Reading as Resistance: Messages in Literature and Media, students had analyzed a variety of texts and media by applying feminist theory to construct meaning. I wanted them to understand that reading a text from a feminist perspective changes their understanding of its meaning, that literature and media both reflect and create images of femininity and masculinity, and that readers project their own assumptions about gender onto a text. The texts and activities in the unit enabled teen readers to recognize the mixed messages in the media about body image and culturally constructed notions of gender.

This unit and, indeed, the entire course drew from the concept and practices of critical literacy. The critical reader understands that how we read is as important as what we read and asks questions about the construction of a text: Who is the assumed audience? What is the hidden agenda? How does the text reflect and shape notions of gender? What ideal audience is being created? Miles Myers contends that literate students in a postmodern world are expected to learn to read from different stances, express themselves in diverse modes, shift between varied speech events, and translate among sign systems. Such an undertaking requires teachers to look to a new notion of literacy—critical literacy—for guidance as we prepare a diverse population for citizenship and employment (see Ogbu; Sadker and Sadker).

Empowering students by teaching them how to read the “word and the world” (Freire and Macedo) necessitates a new way of thinking about English instruction. Myers states that critical literacy encour-
ages a diversity of responses to a multitude of literacy events, "opens up texts to new [interpretations] and refines the distinctions between literary and non-literary readings" (297). Furthermore, students need to actively participate in making meaning. Reading is not a passive process (Brooks and Brooks; Freire and Macedo; Langer; Probst; Rosenblatt).

When we rely solely on what Myers calls analytic literacy and rely on traditional texts to inform our understanding of reading, we ignore other equally important but nontraditional texts, such as TV, advertising, music, clothing, film, art, and other sign systems. Without a broadened sense of the variety of texts that create and reflect notions of gender, students, like Laurie, make false assumptions both about the texts they interact with and about themselves.

**Uncovering Hidden Assumptions**

When we began the course, students did not believe that they were being manipulated by the messages we receive from what we read, see, and hear; they resisted believing that they were not free thinkers. One of my objectives for the unit was to teach them how our notions of femininity and masculinity are socially and culturally constructed by the music we listen to, the books we read, the television we watch, and the stories we heard growing up. We began by uncovering assumptions through assigning gender to excerpts from literature, switching gender, and writing personal narratives before moving on to examine the gendered messages in media.

An exercise I adapted from Wayne Martino and Bronwyn Mellor's book, *Gendered Fictions*, uncovers the students' gender biases. Modeling Martino and Mellor, I chose two short excerpts from a piece of literature that do not include the protagonist's name or gender. Next, students read the excerpts and decided whether the protagonist is male or female by making assumptions based on where the character is located (indoors or outdoors), what he or she is doing (passive or active), and how the character responds to his or her environment (victim or hero). Once students hypothesized about the context and their own gender preconceptions, they shared their ideas with a partner, noting differences and similarities, before engaging with the whole class. Variation among the students provoked dialogue about what is considered typical female and male behavior and how texts construct stereotypic notions of gender. After the conversation, I asked the students the following questions:

- What assumptions about gender did you bring with you as you read?
- What are some of the common gendered assumptions of the class?
- Where do you think these come from? TV? Books? Advertising?
- Do you think literature perpetuates gender stereotypes or creates them? Or both?

This exercise did not convince students of the impact of external influences on their understanding of what it means to be male and female. But the exercise did excite interest.

Another powerful way to make visible the seemingly invisible is to break a gender norm or pattern in literature. I used an activity called Changing Gender that appears in the first chapter of Martino and Mellor's book to help students understand how they readily accept gender norms (3–5). Students read a passage from literature dealing with relationships between females and males. Then, Martino and Mellor switched the characters' genders, and students reread the passage with careful attention to how the boundaries were crossed and to any dissonance they experienced as readers. Students quickly learned that characters who do not fit stereotypic images of men and women are read as abnormal. A boy who is sensitive is considered a coward; a girl who is tough is considered a tomboy. Students were learning how texts position them as readers. Martino and Mellor write, “In this way, texts help reinforce gender assumptions, making them seem inevitable” (5).

Personal narrative provides another opportunity for students to explore the connection between gender bias and environment. Gender as a cultural construct is not an easy concept for high school students to grasp; moving from personal stories to fiction, and then on to other texts such as TV, film, and advertising, makes the transition both understandable and applicable. I often asked the Women's Studies

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students to write about their first gendered moment—a time when they realized others’ assumptions about gender either impeded or advanced their situation. John Gaughan recommends that students write “silence narratives” as a way to “break their silence” about a time when “their surroundings made them feel insecure to the point that they wouldn’t risk exposing their views” (61). Students reflected on their personal experiences to answer the question, What do I think it means to be female or male in the society in which I live? Framing their investigation into gender as a cultural construct were the following queries:

- In what ways were the gifts you received gendered?
- What did others assume about your interests and hobbies?
- Did gender assumptions confine your experiences?
- In what ways did you challenge gender stereotypes? How did others react?
- What do you think it means to be female and male in the environment in which you live?

Once they recognized that their gender identity is tied to the context in which they were raised, students were in a better position to think critically about gender as a cultural construct and the ways literature and media shape elements of identity. Teachers and students can further discuss the construction of male and female characters in literature and read gender in the media using their frame of reference as a legitimate and informed lens.

Recognizing Messages in Literature and Media

Once students have a better understanding of the ways in which environmental factors, such as childhood and family culture, influence concepts of gender, they are ready to recognize subtle (and not-so-subtle) messages in literature and media. Again, Martino and Mellor’s suggestions about how to teach students to “read gender” offer several instructive and tangible examples. Much of their book informs my pedagogy.

I began with nursery rhymes and fairy tales because they reinforce the point that, as soon as we are born, we are bombarded by gendered messages. My students and I analyzed Disney’s Cinderella from a feminist perspective. We started with Martino and Mellor’s nursery rhyme activity that requires discussing the ways texts often dichotomize gender attributes (7). The charts and questions Martino and Mellor provide suggest that male spaces are often “outside,” like the world of work and commerce, while female spaces are “inside” the home. Boys are written as “active” agents and girls are featured “passively” waiting or watching. Once we had practiced as a class, I placed the students into groups and asked them to complete a chart based on the tale (see fig. 1). The questions that follow the chart facilitate further analysis into how the folk story constructs gender.

Folktales serve several important functions in a society that include projecting values and expressing a culture’s taboos and anxieties. By uncovering the hidden gender biases in Cinderella, my students learned to critically read cultural artifacts such as fairy tales.

This activity served as a template for further investigation into how short stories, novels, and other, nonliterary texts construct images of gender. However, one does not have to teach Women’s Studies to help students uncover hidden assumptions about gender, race, class, sexuality, power, and privilege. This activity can also be done in an English or social studies class to examine how male and female characteristics are often dichotomized.

Resisting the Canon

Introducing feminist scholarship gives students a framework in which to place their new experiences with both traditional and cultural texts. Judith Fetterley’s The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction and Jonathan Culler’s chapter, “Reading as a Woman,” both place resistance and critical thinking at the center of their arguments. Concerned that the material would be too difficult for high school students, I chose sections from Fetterley’s introduction and Culler’s article and used questions to guide the reading, such as What does...
it mean to read like a woman/man? If, as Fetterley argues, the American experience is betrayal by a woman, who is the assumed audience? What do you think happens to female readers as a result of donning a male mask in order to experience the text?

Students then read canonical fiction by an American author and wrote an essay in which they “resisted” the construction of gender. In their papers, students resisted the construction of woman as passive and powerless and recognized that, as readers, they were being asked to identify with the male protagonist. Thus, they were being asked to read as a male (Fetterley).

Students became more confident in their reading. They did not rely on me for answers in class discussions; they looked to theory and trusted their own reading of texts. Casey, who read “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, discovered how women are objectified in literature and noted the narrator’s unfair comparison of his wife to a flawless statue, an ideal impossible for her to achieve. From her reading, Casey made a profound connection between beauty standards of today and two hundred years earlier; we have not come a long way. Women were expected to look flawless in the eighteenth century, as they are today, with the aid of science and technology. Casey wrote,

Hawthorne signals to female readers that they must please men with [their] appearance. They are to be looked at and showcased. Towards the end of the story the wife is compared to a “diseased geranium” . . . which needed scientific help to restore its beauty. . . . A woman takes in this information and unconsciously acknowledges she must resemble the flower and act as it. They are their trophy to be flaunted.

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<tr>
<th>FIGURE 1. Reading Cinderella</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MASCULINE QUALITIES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Who is active?</td>
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<td>Who is outside?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who is mobile?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who is demanding?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who desires?</td>
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1. Look over the chart. Which character most reflects qualities that have been considered “female”?
   In what ways is she specifically “feminine”? Provide examples from the book.
2. Which character most reflects those qualities that have been labeled “masculine”? Why?
   Provide examples from the book.
3. Besides motherhood and domesticity, what other roles are offered to young girls reading this story?
4. What does the fairy tale Cinderella teach young girls about what it means to be “feminine”?
   How do beauty pageants compare to the ball?
5. List instances of the Cinderella Myth today. What movies are contemporary versions of the tale?
   How do you think we are supposed to “read” these characters? Do we admire them? Dislike them? (for example, the Wicked Stepmother)
Casey’s analysis of Hawthorne illustrates the kind of reading possible using critical literacy.

As a result of this process, students could juxtapose their readings of canonical works against the media’s representations of women and men. To this end, I showed them Jean Kilbourne’s documentary, *Killing Us Softly*, in which she investigates images of men and women in advertising and shows viewers how to read the hidden agendas of the media. I also invited a woman from the local women’s center to facilitate a discussion about gender images in the media. She gave the students an informative handout that explained advertising techniques, such as “The Feminine Touch”—a technique that “reinforces the stereotype of females being passive” by showing women “cradling objects, caressing bars of soap, gently holding products, or sitting around the table laying their hands around products” while “males are shown using the product.” With this information, students then analyzed the construction of gender in magazine ads and other photographs, looking for such things as the product the woman or man was selling, if the characters were active or passive, what assumptions advertisers made about their audience, and who that intended audience was. Through these activities, students could see the continued—and misdirected—social expectations regarding perfection in both men and women.

**Final Products**

For their final products, students applied what they had learned about the word and the world to other texts. Students chose from exercises that allowed them to read literature, media, music, or magazines. I used Sternberg’s ideas about intelligence to create categories on my handout that I thought would be meaningful to the students (see fig. 2). Students’ responses varied, but even the reluctant students were motivated by the opportunity to read texts that were part of their world outside of school. 

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Paul analyzed *Jurassic Park* using a feminist lens: “The dinosaurs are contained by fences. All the dinosaurs are female and men try to control their bodies so they can’t breed.” Phil decided to analyze the female characters in *Native Son* by arguing that Wright’s female characters are depicted as powerless throughout the novel. Other products emphasized the visual. Kerri created a pop-up fairy tale fashioned after VH1’s *Pop-Up Video*. She pasted a copy of a fairy tale on poster board and uncovered the gendered subtext in the pop-up balloons that surrounded the tale. The projects proved to be both creative and original.

**Conclusion**

With the current focus on standards, teachers may feel pressure to stick to analytic literacy with its emphasis on one way to read and one answer. However, as American society becomes increasingly pluralistic, in-

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**FIGURE 2. Choices for Final Product**

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<tr>
<th><strong>ANALYTIC</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Analyze a popular movie for its representation of femininity and masculinity. Feel free to use any of the handouts from class to help you with your thinking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Analyze song/rap lyrics for messages about gender. How are women and men represented? Are there any rap artists who do not objectify women? How are female artists responding?</td>
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<td>• Analyze a magazine for the mixed messages it sends its readers about femininity and masculinity.</td>
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<th><strong>CREATIVE</strong></th>
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<td>• Rewrite a fairy tale or nursery rhyme by changing traditional gender roles, or write an original tale or nursery rhyme.</td>
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<td>• Write a children’s book with a strong female character or one that does not stereotype gender.</td>
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<td>• Invent a magazine for teen boys and/or girls that does not stereotype its audience. What kind of models would you use? What kind of features would you include? Who would you want to interview? Pitch it to the class.</td>
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<th><strong>PRACTICAL</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Interview a teacher, student, parent, or sibling about their attitudes toward gender. Create a list of questions for the interview and apply what you have learned so far during this unit to write up as the results.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Create a questionnaire that would reveal the school’s attitudes toward gender differences. Hand it out to as many people as you can and apply what you have learned during the unit to present as the results.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Write a review of a novel from a gender perspective for Amazon.com.</td>
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integrating different perspectives into both the nation's definition of citizenship and the workplace, teachers must prepare students to be comfortable with the complexity they will encounter. Equally important, today's students are open to the change. Students, particularly those who feel excluded by traditional literature instruction, came alive during this literature and media unit. Many came to me during the school day to tell me about gendered moments in their life: “My mom told my sister she throws like a girl” or “The girls at the day care center are never asked to lift anything heavy.” Indeed, they are reading their world.

Shannon, a jaded and reluctant student, wrote in her final evaluation, “I did think this was one of the most helpful things I’ve learned in English. This should be taught to all high school students. I will use this next year.” When students have employed critical literacy, they are likely to carry this new lens with them as they negotiate their way through the world.

Works Cited

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Neil Postman Dies at 72

We were saddened to hear of the death of Neil Postman on October 5, 2003. This provocative thinker, writer, and cultural critic taught at New York University for nearly 40 years and founded the program in media ecology there in 1971. Early in his career he was a teacher educator and advocate of education reform. Later he turned his attention to the role of media in our lives and especially in the lives of our children. The connection between education reform and media education was present in much of his work. In The Disappearance of Childhood, he wrote, “We have always felt it appropriate that the study of media be pursued in the School of Education. The lives of our children are shaped by what they will see and hear in the media. Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see” (http://www.nyu.edu/education/steinhardt/historyphotos/postman_sound.html). We will miss his ability to make us look carefully at the world we are creating and consider the one we want our children to inherit.