

Outspoken Tomboys and Arrogant Women: Four 10th-Grade Girls' Talk about Female Characters in English Class

by Pamela Hartman

When Peter¹ asked me to visit his 10th grade Honors English class, I was excited. He knew that I was interested in issues of gender and literacy, and he described his class as “priding itself on focusing on a variety of multicultural issues.” He felt that this focus was particularly important since his school, while located in a first-ring suburb of a large city², was 97% white. He explained that through literature students could discuss topics such as race, class, religion, and gender, leading, hopefully, to greater awareness and acceptance of cultural differences.

When I looked at Paul’s syllabus, however, I was immediately struck by the fact that except for one text, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, all were written by men. When I asked Peter about this, he said it was the only text by a woman that was approved for the 10th grade. I began to ask myself how the girls in his class perceived the predominately male-authored texts that they read in their English class? For instance, did they identify with the male characters or search for women’s experiences in minor women characters? I also wondered how the girls perceived the representations of women that did exist in the texts. In other words, did the female characters seem to reflect the experiences of actual women? Also, I questioned how the girls related their own experiences with the representations of the women’s experiences in the texts. I wondered if the texts challenged or supported the girls’ understanding of gender.

With these questions in mind, I began a 9-week (one marking period) observation of Paul’s 10th grade Honors class. I talked with four girls in his class about what they thought about the literature they had read in high school thus far. By examining these four girls’ perceptions about the literary characters as well as their ideas about gender, I uncovered how the girls actively sought out women characters and applied sometimes contradictory notions of gender to their interpretations.

Identifying with Female Characters

If classroom research (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1997; Hartman 2001) is correct in concluding that girls’ definitions of gender identity are influenced by the women characters they encountered reading in English class, then the girls that I interviewed must have formed their understanding of these roles from a very small pool. All four of the girls said that they could “hardly remember” any female characters in their high school literature thus far. With the exception of Scout, the female protagonist in the Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (read in 10th grade), and Juliet in the Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (read in 9th grade), women and girl characters seemed to play a limited and largely insignificant role. Females were described as not having a “big role,” not being “really important,” and representing groups of people rather than being developed as individuals. For example, Laura discussed *Inherit The Wind*, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, as one of her favorite texts, saying that Melinda, one of the only females in the text, “pretty much represented like the younger half of the citizens there. . . . I think that’s why they put her in. But she wasn’t really important.” She went on to say that not only was Melinda one of the only females in *Inherit The Wind*, she was also one of the only female characters Melinda could even recall from the texts she read in 10th grade.

Although the overwhelming number of characters that the girls encountered in school were male, all four girls identified female characters as the individuals that they found the most interesting and the most important from the texts they read. When the girls were asked to discuss the literature that they had studied over the course of this year, all of the girls named Scout as their favorite and as the most memorable character. Their descriptions of Scout were very similar. They described her as being outspoken, smart, independent, and a tomboy.

Ann: She’s a tomboy because she, like at the beginning of the book, she got offended

¹All names are pseudonyms.

² By first-ring suburb I mean one of the suburbs bordering the city limits.

when her brother called her a girl. I think she's just used to being around her brother. . . . I like her attitude. She just won't let people do what they want with her. She has a mind of her own.

Laura: She was like a tomboy. She didn't know what was going on in the world, like a little kid. It was really cool as she learned everything that was going on, really. . . . She's like outspoken. She just yells out whatever.

Becky: I liked Scout. I thought she was like a typical tomboy. Because she had an older brother, she wanted to like be a guy sort of, but her feminine qualities were still like coming out in her towards the end. You saw it more. She'd be more the motherly type because she didn't have a mother. She'd be like, "Well, I don't think you should do that. That's bad news." And he'd [her brother Jim] be like, "You're being such a girl." And she'd be like, "Oh yeah." And then she'd stop, and she'd go back to being like a tomboy. [Scout was] funny and fun to be with. Kinda like sporty, like outdoorsy. She'd rather be outdoors than indoors. [She was] nice, caring, considerate, nonracist.

Kim: She was like kind of mouthy and she was kind of tomboyish. She did what she wanted even though what people [might say]. She seems open-minded. . . . And she was opinionated. She didn't really hold in what she thought. She would just say it. And she was a tomboy. She did a lot of stuff guys do. And she dressed like a guy and she didn't like to wear dresses.

Most strikingly, all the girls characterized Scout as a "tomboy." In addition, she was described by all as being smart, naive, outspoken, independent, and disdainful of being called "a girl." The 10th grade girls said that they all liked Scout and seemed to like these qualities about

the character. Becky noticed and admired that Scout possessed "feminine" and "motherly" qualities toward the end of the novel, but she also recognized that Scout was criticized for these qualities.

Besides liking Scout for her personality traits, two of the girls said that they chose Scout as their favorite character because they could relate to her as a person because she reminded them of someone they knew. Specifically, Scout reminded them of female family members, and two of the girls said Scout also reminded them of themselves. "She is kind of like my sister was, when she was younger," recalled Ann. "We were like tomboys. . . . She [my sister] was really like outspoken. . . . So she reminded me of [Scout]. . . . I liked it about [them]." Becky also recalled liking Scout because the character seemed familiar:

She [Scout] would play like outside a lot, and I remember that I used to love to play outside a lot, and also I couldn't wait for summertime. And she used to run around without shoes on, and I used to also do that. I didn't use to wear shoes ever when I was little. . . . She just sounded like a fun person to hang out with.

All of the girls expressed the idea that Scout seemed like a real girl either because she reminded them of a person they knew and/or because of, as Laura puts it, her "human" character traits. Laura explained that even though Scout is "outspoken," she can also admit that she was wrong. For example, Laura said that "she [Scout] makes a lot of mistakes but she can like open her eyes to what happened and be like 'Oh I did do that wrong.' And she'll learn from it. She listens to what people have to say and tries to accept it. That makes her more human." The girls explained that it was these "human characteristics" that made Scout "interesting," "likable," and "easy to identify with."

In addition to Scout, all the girls talked about Juliet, who they read in the 9th grade. However, only two of the girls said they admired her and that she was "strong-willed." In contrast, the other two girls thought Juliet was "weak" because she did not take control of her life. What was important to their choices, then, was not the characters themselves but the way in which each of the girls constructed the characters. Laura and Karen liked Juliet because they interpreted her as being independent. "She did whatever she wanted," stated Karen. On the other hand, Ann and Becky did not find her remarkable.

Ann thought that Juliet was “forced into things” and was more “stereotypical.” Becky thought that Juliet seemed less real than a character like Scout.

I would argue that the girls did not passively read the texts, accepting the characters as they were given, but instead actively constructed the meaning of the characters’ roles. They admired the young female characters that they found to be assertive and frequently rejected the characters they found to be weak. The girls’ analysis, however, seemed limited in scope. They all identified with characters they interpreted as independent and outspoken. However, the girls seemed to only accept independence and outspokenness in child characters, not in adult women. Scout was labeled a “tomboy,” but was expected to become more “ladylike” when she grew up. The girls did not seem to have difficulty with the idea that what they found to be strong in a female character could also lead to her downfall. For example, Juliet was admired because she did what she wanted to do, with little regard for the wishes of others. Laura found little trouble reconciling this with the fact that Juliet’s actions later led to her death.

Conflicting Discourses of Gender

As the four girls reflected on the texts, it became apparent that they were maintaining two seemingly contradictory beliefs about femininity and female characters. On the one hand, they talked about how they admired young girls who were strong and independent, outspoken and straightforward. On the other, the girls said that these female characters must give up these personality traits as they grew up and became women. The girls seem to possess competing discourses--one informed by mainstream feminism and the other informed by traditional cultural roles. First, the girls talked about how females should be independent, speak their minds, and stand up for what they believe in. But they also said that women should do what they were told, keep their opinions to themselves, and sacrifice themselves and what they believed in for the wishes of their husbands, lovers, fathers, and families. While these two sets of beliefs would appear to be in total opposition to one another, the girls embraced both. In some cases the girls were able to resolve the conflict by requiring the female character to fulfill both roles at different times. In

other cases, the girls were unable to resolve the conflict, but maintained the two discourses, nonetheless.

The girls were able to resolve this conflict with Scout by claiming that she would eventually change. As previously indicated, all of the girls described Scout, as a young girl, as being outspoken, independent, and a tomboy. While the girls saw these characteristics as being not only acceptable for a young girl but also preferable, they also viewed these traits as inappropriate for an adult woman. Ann made the strongest statements about the necessity for Scout to change:

I liked it [that Scout was a tomboy and outspoken]. I think you might not like it when [she] gets older but usually people grow out of it. I liked it since she was so young. . . . I think they [girls] should realize they’re not like boys. They have to grow up and, you know, they can’t just get away with doing all the things like guys do. Like when boys used to like fight, like when Scout would want to fight with the boys, it was kind of like—I don’t know. When she gets a little older she won’t be able to do that anymore. They [boys] shouldn’t fight] but it’s more, uh, stereotypical³ for them, I think, to fight. But, it’s not really any better, but it just seems like she shouldn’t be.

Ann not only has different expectations for males and females but also different expectations for women and girls. It’s all right that Scout as a young girl roughhouses and speaks her mind. It will not be all right for Scout as an adolescent or adult to act in the same manner. Later in the interview, Ann stated that when Scout grew up she would have to be more “respectful” to “get things” she wanted in life. The very traits Ann seemed to admire in Scout, and many of the other young female characters she mentioned, she claimed were not appropriate traits for adult women. Ann did qualify her statements about Scout by stating that Scout, as an adult, would “be going to college and . . . have high goals for herself and [wouldn’t] settle for anything less.”

Kim, too, voiced a strong opinion that Scout would have to change as she approached adulthood:

She [Scout] might like settle down and learn how to like hold her tongue and not say everything. She might learn the hard way. I don’t know. And she’ll probably be more like a girl and stuff. She’ll

³ I later talked to Ann about her use of the term “stereotypical.” In many cases, as in this one, she actually meant to use the term “typical.”

probably change. . . . She'll dress like a girl and she won't do all the guy stuff. . . . She won't wear overalls. She might wear like dresses and things. She'd probably want to be inside and do more things like with other girls. Because like all she really has is the guy fun. She might have girl fun.

When I asked Kim for an example of the “girl fun” that Scout might engage in as an adult, she suggested that Scout would enjoy dressing up and attending tea parties, as Scout’s aunt did in the novel. Kim did recognize, however, that this change in Scout’s role would not come without a cost, namely the close relationship Scout had with her brother, Jim. She said that with this change, Scout would “probably grow away from Jim.” Kim was able to justify this outcome by claiming that Jim had already begun to emotionally separate from his sister. “He [was] growing older too, and he [was] growing apart from her.” Kim saw this separation as an unfortunate yet natural and acceptable result of the two children taking on two different, gender-appropriate adult roles.

Both Ann and Kim were able to expand their definition of what is appropriate feminine behavior to include both of the competing discourses of femininity by separating what is acceptable for girls from what is acceptable for women. By doing this, Scout can be admired and both discourses are left intact.

Becky was the only girl out of the four who saw that Scout’s changing from outspoken to passive was not inevitable. When I asked her about what type of person Scout would be as she reached adulthood, Becky described a woman who was more complicated than the descriptions given by the other girls.

Becky: I think she’s going to be a little bit bitter maybe because of what happened with Tom Robinson.⁴

Pamela: That’s interesting.

Becky: [Scout would be] kind of angry, angry at the world, because why should [Tom] suffer when he was innocent? She’ll have a different outlook on life. Like she might not like some people. Like before she didn’t hate anyone. I mean, there were people at school that she

didn’t like that she would beat up, but maybe she’ll look down more on Whites, and she’ll be like, “Look what you’re doing to those people—they’re people.” And she might be a little bitter because of it. I think she’ll be fun to hang out with though at our age. I don’t think she’d be bitter about people her own age. But again the old people sit on their front porches and are like, “You bad black person.” She might be like throwing rocks at them at 15 still. I think she would because she’s that kind of person. She wants to stand up for everyone that’s different.

Pamela: And you still think she’ll be that way when she’s older?

Becky: Uh-huh. I think she’ll always be that way because that’s how the father was, Atticus. Atticus was like that, and I think that’s how she would be.

Unlike the other girls, Becky not only was able to include being opinionated and outspoken in her definition of what was acceptable for young girls but also in her vision of what was appropriate for at least some adult women.

When the girls talked about the women characters, rather than girls, in the literature from English class, the conflict between the two discourses became more apparent. The women who exhibited the very traits that the 10th-grade girls said they admired in young girls, including being a tomboy and outspoken, were the characters that the girls seemed now to dislike and reject. I asked each girl about her impressions concerning Portia, a main character in *The Merchant of Venice*. The girls read the entire play during the time of the study and Portia was one of the only adult female characters they had encountered that year as well as in this play. None of the girls particularly liked the character, although they all thought she might be a “nice” or “good” person.

Ann: I think [Portia] is the opposite of Scout. Like when she was younger I’m sure she wasn’t a tomboy. Because of the way she acts now. . . . [She is] kind of

⁴ Tom Robinson was convicted of a crime he did not commit because he was Black. He was shot and killed in prison before his case could be appealed.

prissy. Like you know she has money. She has possessions. But she's also caring about people. I think she's overall like a nice person.

Laura: I think she's sort of stuck-up, like she acts arrogant. . . . After she [was] married she was telling [her] husband what to do still. . . . She's sort of bossy.

Becky: I think she's kind of got a big head. She knows she's rich. She knows she's like quote-unquote pretty. She knows that she can like, guys are like lining up and risking to lose ever getting married just to marry her. I think she kind of gets a big head about it, like "All these people want me, and I'm rich. . . ." I just didn't like her.

The girls interpreted what might have been seen as Portia having a strong will and being outspoken, traits they claimed to admire, as her being "stuck-up," "arrogant," "conceited," and "bossy."

Ironically, the characteristics that the girls said they liked about Portia were the complete opposite of what they appreciated in young girls, such as Scout. For instance, while they liked it when younger female characters were outspoken and acted as tomboys, the girls said that they appreciated that Portia acted mature for her age and was "lady-like." And although all of the girls had expressed that they admired younger characters that "did what they wanted," two of the girls stated that they liked the fact that Portia obeyed her dead father's wishes by allowing her future husband to be selected by chance, even though this might have resulted in her marrying someone she didn't know or love. Kim was particularly adamant that Portia should be admired for obeying her father.

Kim: Well she [Portia] didn't like protest not having a choice [about who she married] pretty much so I guess she was like OK that way. She was open minded, I guess, like going by her father's wishes. That's how he wanted it to be done even though he wasn't alive. She was obedient to her father by doing that. And she was taking a risk

that she would marry someone that she didn't love or anything.

Pamela: What do you think about that?

Kim: That's good. It's respectable that she would do that even though [she was] taking a risk that she would, because I wouldn't.

Pamela: So you think it was a good thing she was doing?

Kim: It's good but not good. It's not a good thing that she would get someone she didn't love, but it's a good thing that she's following her father's wishes, and she's doing it anyways even though I don't know if she really agrees with it.

Pamela: You said it was good that she was doing it because "I wouldn't." Would you consider her—I don't know how to phrase it—would you consider her a better person than you because she let her father choose her husband?

Kim: Maybe, because she follows what her father says. If my father told me to, and I didn't, she would probably be a better person. But then she wouldn't be marrying for love, she'd be marrying for having to marry the person.

Pamela: Is that a good thing or a problem?

Kim: Probably a problem.

Pamela: But then you said that she was a good person for letting her father—

Kim: Well, it's better to obey your parents but I mean I wouldn't. Because it's not good to disobey your parents. . . . but she's not being exactly good because she's not standing up for what she believes in if she believes that she shouldn't have to marry like that.

Kim stated that Portia is a good person because she follows her father's wishes. However, Kim could not reconcile this judgment with Portia's inability to do what she herself wants, which is to marry the person she loves. In Kim's eyes, Portia could not be "exactly good" no matter what course she chooses.

Even though Becky expressed her dislike for Portia, she too admired her for following her father's wishes, even though she too says she would never do it herself.

If I were Portia, I would have been like, "Sorry, Dad. I know you're in heaven or below, but I'm—no boxes for me." Because I would want to choose the person that I love, that I wanted to marry. Instead of just kind of like getting stuck with him. . . . She's kind of—trustworthy. . . . And I guess she must have loved her father a lot if she trusted his system of finding a husband for her. I don't think I would have done that. . . . I think that she's a good person for like keeping with what her father says.

The girls respected Portia for following her father's wishes even though they said they would never do it themselves and despite the fact that they admired younger characters when they did what they wanted to do regardless of what others opinions, especially their parents, wanted. This apparent contradiction may have indicated a conflict in their conception of the proper gender roles of women and girls. On the one hand, the 10th-grade girls seemed to believe that women should be independent and make their own decisions based on what they believed. Thus, Portia is found to be lacking because she does not follow her heart. On the other hand, the girls seemed to assent to the traditional belief that women should trust and obey their fathers and husbands. Thus, Portia is again found to be lacking when she shows independence in her choice of a husband. In this instance, the girls cast Portia as prissy, bossy, and arrogant.

In another example, the girls seemed to be trying to define the borders of appropriate gender roles. While reading *The Merchant of Venice*, they became uneasy when the gender borders began to blur in the scene in which Portia dresses like a man in order to go to court (women weren't allowed in the courts at that time) to save a friend. Below are excerpts from the conversations I had with two of the girls, Becky and Kim, as they attempted to describe their uneasy reactions to this scene.

Becky: She [Portia] dressed up like a man and

pretended to be a lawyer. She kind of scares me a little. Because she dressed like a man and pretended to be a lawyer. I don't know—

Pamela: [laughter] Which part bothers you?

Becky: I find that very odd. I mean, I know that women weren't allowed to go to trials, but what would possess you to do that? Dress up like a man and be a lawyer? I don't understand why she would do that.

Pamela: I'm not sure I if I'm following you. What bothers you about it?

Becky: The dressing up like a man part maybe.

Pamela: Oh.

Becky: Why [would she dress like a man]? I just don't understand that.

Pamela: What do you think she should have done instead?

Becky: I think she should have—I don't know. Maybe she shouldn't have even gone to the trial at all. She should have just stayed home, or done something else, or prepared for the wedding after the trial was over. It wasn't her husband that was going to be murdered, was it? It was his friend, right? I don't understand.

Upon my suggestion, Becky brought this issue up in class the next day. She asked her teacher, "Why did Portia dress up like a man?" Her teacher replied, "Because women couldn't go to court back then." Unfortunately, Becky looked down at her desk and did not pursue the question further. Later she told me, "We don't talk about that stuff in class."

Kim also discussed Portia in the trial scene. I asked her if Portia was a convincing female character. After thinking about it for a moment, she replied, "She didn't. From what I've read [in this scene], she doesn't seem extremely feminine really. She played the part of the guy

really well so I don't know."

In both cases, the girls were uncomfortable with the fact that Portia had not only pretended to be a man but also had gotten away with it. She crossed the boundaries of appropriate feminine behavior and did it successfully. The girls were unable to fit this behavior into their definitions of femininity and were perplexed by the conflict.

One explanation for the girls' differing reactions to Scout and Portia may be that the girls respond to the characters' different stages of sexual development. As a child, Scout is allowed to be androgynous and can try out different sexual roles. She can speak her mind and stand up to her brother and male friends because she is only looking for playmates. There is plenty of time for her to develop more traditionally feminine characteristics in order for her to fulfill a traditional role as a wife and mother. However, Portia, who has reached sexual maturity, must fit a role which society has deemed appropriate for women. When Portia speaks her mind and stands up to her husband, she is said to be bossy and arrogant. Outspokenness and independence, which the girls say they admire, clash with their image of women as being more passive and obedient, which they see as necessary traits for women to get along with men. To attract men, women must become more feminine.

Conclusion

Although most of the texts that the four girls encountered in school were predominately about boys and men and their experiences, the girls that I talked to stated that they liked and identified with the female characters that they did read about. The girls did not blindly accept the roles in the text, but instead actively constructed interpretations of these characters. They admired young female characters who were active, outspoken, independent, and described as tomboys. The girls seemed to challenge traditional feminine roles. However, this challenge was limited. The girls had difficulty allowing adult female characters to be strong and independent when they had to be passive and agreeable in order to attract men.

If girls are going to be able to become equal members in society with equal benefits, they must be able to envision themselves in new, more equal roles. When the four girls described the female characters in the texts, they spoke of what they perceived as appropriate roles

for girls and women and how the characters either fit or did not fit their definitions. The girls, however, were often unable to resolve the conflict when the characters either simultaneously fit into both their competing discourses or when they went completely outside the boundaries of what they defined as feminine.

Teachers need to provide students with the tools to find the contradictions in their beliefs about gender. The students also need the knowledge necessary to analyze these contradictions. And, while reading literature that represents more diverse roles for both women and girls is certainly appropriate, it is even more vital that we have critical conversations about gender in our classrooms. In this 10th-grade English class, they did not talk about gender issues, and the girls were unable to effectively examine their own conflicting discourses on gender. If students begin to see female characters differently, they may be able to see new possibilities for women and themselves.

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