

Beyond Secondary Roles: What the Women of the Canon Teach Today's Girls

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As a high school student, I attended a small, private, Catholic all-girls school; to some extent I grant credit to that experience for my successes in academia and life. I also grant some of the credit to my various modes of involvement in the arts; those experiences carried over to my pedagogy and philosophy of education when I taught at the secondary level. Upon re-entering academia to pursue my doctorate, I found deep, meaningful connections to what I suspected all along in the theoretical works of Dewey (1934) and Vygotsky (1978), and in the more practical works of Wilhelm and Edmiston (1998). The arts, specifically drama, play a crucial role in the cognitive, affective, and aesthetic development of adolescents.

To that end, while searching for participants for my dissertation on the arts and literacy learning, I was delighted to come across Miss Gwen Williams at Girls Academy (all names used are pseudonyms). She was exactly what I was looking for: creative, energetic, and engaging. I thoroughly enjoyed spending a school year observing her interact with her students. During this school year, she taught three sections of English 11, American Literature. The major works she covered were *The Crucible* (1952), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Hamlet* (1603). Her methodology was brilliant – varied, engaging, and challenging for her “college-bound” students. What shocked me was what the combination of these literary works meant for an all-female, adolescent audience. It was not my original intention to consider the impact of a canon-only curriculum on young, female students; I merely wanted to look at the arts and how (or if) they affect literacy learning. I sought out the experts in the field

of education (Belenky, et al. 1997; Gallagher, 2000), as well as psychology (Pipher, 1994) and sociology (Gilligan, 1982) to frame my own thinking and understanding of the effect of this curriculum. As I muddled through data, transcripts, video, and interviews, my findings varied among the seven focal students, but I realized that it was the story of the curriculum and culture of the school I simply couldn't resist telling.

All Canon & No Contemporary

When I first arrived at Girls Academy for informal observations, Miss Williams was busy preparing to teach the popular drama *The Crucible*, written by Arthur Miller in 1953. *The Crucible* is based on real-life events that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, when nineteen men and women were accused of witchcraft and consequently executed. Of course, Miller himself has commented on the content of the story, admitting that it was just as much about contemporary events in America as it was about the witches in Salem.

Miss Williams described to me how she spent some time at the onset of this unit describing McCarthyism and the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee. She also pointed out that the students had just finished studying that particular era in history in their American History and Government class at Girls Academy. However, since I was not observing their history class, I am not sure just how in-depth they studied this particular phenomenon.

After the students read *The Crucible*, they transitioned to the futuristic novel *Fahrenheit 451*, written by Ray Bradbury in 1953. In this novel, the

main character, Guy Montag, is a fireman whose job is to burn books along with the houses in which they are hidden. It was a strange concept at first, but it seemed that once the students began reading and understood what type of setting they were dealing with, this world made sense to them and even scared some of them. Even more interesting to me were the modern-day connections the students made throughout the unit as the class discussed different technologies that Bradbury was merely alluding to back in 1953.

The students frequently commented upon entering the room by saying things like, “What’s going to happen?” or “It’s getting intense!” as they completed the reading assignments independently. They were eager to ask questions and make comments about the society, often wondering why Montag just didn’t stand up for himself. They were quite relieved in the end when Montag finally makes his connection to the “Book People” as they felt the novel ended with some hope for the world.

Miss Williams followed up *Fahrenheit 451* with a novel written by yet another American male author: *The Great Gatsby*, written in 1925 by F. Scott Fitzgerald. This novel is told by a male narrator, Nick Carraway, and it focuses on the elusive main character, Jay Gatsby. As the novel unfolds, we discover that Gatsby has accumulated wealth and stature in the hopes of winning over his long-lost love, Daisy Buchanan, who has already married for wealth and social status. The students continually complained about Daisy’s inability to choose between her husband and Gatsby, whom she claimed to love. They had no problem with the fact that she would have to divorce Tom Buchanan to be with Gatsby; they seemed more preoccupied with the fact that Daisy was too weak to even make the choice.

Miss Williams designed this unit to coincide with research projects centered around the 1920’s era, so the students were reading this fictional novel set at that time and then researching non-fiction sources about it as well. They chose from topics/themes such as prohibition, the American Dream, mob violence, and changing female identities. They spent about one class per week explicitly discussing the research

papers or completing steps in the process in class, but the work for the final deadlines was all completed as homework outside of class.

The final unit of the year was the iconic drama *Hamlet*, written by William Shakespeare in 1603. Reading a Shakespearean play at every grade level is a requirement at Girls Academy, regardless of the fact that the curriculum of junior year generally deals with American literature. This didn’t seem to bother Miss Williams as she admitted at the beginning of the unit that it is her favorite play to read and teach. Most of the reading was done in class, with short reading assignments given throughout the unit. The students seemed engaged in this unit more than any of the others, even though the classroom became increasingly uncomfortable as the temperature spiked at the end of May.

Overall, they seemed to relate to the confusion and agony of poor Ophelia as she stands by and loves Hamlet, despite his madness. However, most of them criticized the way she followed the orders of her brother Laertes and her father Polonius, quite often wondering aloud why she didn’t just stand up for herself. Although most were shocked, they dealt with her suicide in a very mature manner. By the end of the play, they also commented on just how many senseless deaths occurred and what could have been done to prevent them.

What was most striking to me as the year progressed was my realization that although I was in a progressive classroom with a progressive teacher and very open-minded students, I was immersed in very traditional literature studies. That is not to say that the way the novels were taught was traditional, but the units themselves represented white male authors of time since past. Miss Williams made every attempt to make this literature come alive so the students could relate it to their lives today, but I just couldn’t get past the notion that a school which seemingly boasts “girl power” chooses literature that teaches these students through what can only be called “anti-examples.”

Miss Williams’s teaching methods impressed me because of her attention to detail and her seeming ease in bringing multiple perspectives into the

conversation about each of the units of study. This pedagogical attitude seemed to counteract the overarching and dominating male-centered curriculum. For example, she used several film clips at the beginning of the school year to help students form opinions on the concept of “witches” before students read *The Crucible*. She frequently made references to popular culture and asked students questions that encouraged them to make similar connections, ultimately helping the students make connections between major themes of these classic pieces of literature and their everyday lives.

One of the elements of the *Hamlet* unit that I found particularly interesting was the focus on the minor character Ophelia, particularly starting the unit with an activity that focused on her. In one of our conversations, I asked:

PS: With Hamlet...starting with Ophelia, what is your take on that? What do the girls get out of that? Is that the perk of the unit? Is that the attention-getter?

GW: I did that because they're all female students. I've toyed with the idea about making character observations...because a lot of plays don't look at gender roles. And why do characters make the decisions they do. That is a way for my students to focus in because it talks about relationships. I used Ophelia because I'm interested in her but not every classroom is. I had hoped to do more with that. Last year, I had an extremely perceptive group and they WANTED to talk about Ophelia and I was FASCINATED by that. This year, they weren't as interested... but it worked for the purpose of hooking them in.

Once hooked, these students seemed to have a vested interest in the lives of these characters, even when they saw them as starkly different human beings. The students paid particularly close attention to the weakness that they saw in Ophelia; during interviews, most of my focal students told me that they didn't like her because they would never kill themselves if a boy didn't love them back. Regardless of their own resolve, they could empathize with Ophelia and actually felt bad for her, knowing she felt trapped.

Since Miss Williams seemed likewise trapped in terms of curriculum choices, she describes her approach to teaching the canon in this way:

GW: Well, I usually deal with trying to turn a negative into a positive. Stereotypically weak women--I figure something good has to come out of that, you know. But a lot of the arguments I got was that they [Ophelia and Gertrude] are both products of their environment. And they both are. And I think it's REALLY important to analyze that. And society plays so much into things. At the end of the year, I kinda made that statement that literature is meant to be a message about society. Here we are in the modern age, modern women, what can we learn about women who were NOT independent? I think that came out in the classroom. A lot of negative stereotypes, a lot of negative reactions to Ophelia. You know, I get that. I like that they had a reaction, that it was passionate, that it was angry, they HAD a reaction, they weren't just passively taking it in.

Even though Miss Williams was told at the beginning of her career at Girls Academy that she had the freedom to choose “anything” to read in her curriculum, she was steered away from authors with diverse backgrounds and yes, even female authors. Regardless of that roadblock, her goal remained to have the students actively engaging with the literature.

Identity Shaping, or Cutting Out the Paper Dolls

Adolescent girls can be influenced by many elements: friends, parents, and school. Yet the world around them also includes such entities as what they read, see, and experience on a daily basis. The identities of the focal students in this study were shaped and influenced not only by the canonical literature but also by the trade paperbacks they read with their peers, the use of popular culture (movies, TV, and music) in Miss Williams' class, their interaction with popular culture outside of school, and their position as compliant or “good students” in this school.

The students I observed were not only planning on taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) this school year, but also the New York State Regents

Examination in English Language Arts in June. In most of my observations, Miss Williams mentioned specific literary elements when discussing a chapter or scene from one of the units, to which the students were directed to “write that down” or “remember that, it’s important.”

This activity of learning the literary elements associated with classic pieces of literature sets up a very traditional classroom. The pedagogy of the school then implies that the students are “knowledge getters” and that they are there to learn the “right answers” to questions about the literature they read and study. There also seems to be the message that the students should learn these things for their own individual benefit. Being a “knowledge getter” doesn’t necessarily mean that a student will construct knowledge with peers or with the teacher. The students simply want to read the required literature, learn the necessary components, and take a test where they will demonstrate their knowledge in a very individualistic manner.

The problem with this approach is that these students are not learning the skills necessary for the spirit of innovation and collaboration needed for the 21st century (Miller, 2003; Miller & Borowicz, 2005). The students may seem intelligent on the surface since they are rewarded with good grades and recognition, with their names prominently displayed on the honor roll posters that line the main hallway of Girls Academy. Yet, they are not true intellectuals who thirst for knowledge for its own sake. These young women may do well as they further their education, but they are not being empowered to ask the essential questions that lead to a truer, more organic education.

These students are successful when they are correct in a school where traditional literacy prevails. They seek out this approval in many ways. The focal students all indicated a sense of apprehension over the “right” answer. Two students specifically, Brooke and Elizabeth, both mentioned being afraid to speak in class at the beginning of the year because they were unsure of their answers. Two others, Mallory and Veronica, the “Straight A” students, both talked about handing in drafts of their major

assignments so they could be corrected before they were actually evaluated for the real grade they would receive. These students all set meeting the teacher’s expectations as their ultimate goal in the classroom. There was definitely a preoccupation with the final outcome of learning, and it always connected to the student’s individual grade.

What seems most problematic in this setting is that it is an English classroom where the students are examining literature. From my own experience, literature poses questions and is perplexing at times; it deals with life’s greatest mysteries and conundrums and is rarely neat and clearly cut. These students, in this setting, have been taught to see the canonical literature they are studying as linear and to seek out definitive and correct answers to specific questions.

Further, the types of literature to which these students were exposed are problematic. Miss Williams told me during one of our formal interviews that when she was hired, she was assured that since Girls Academy was private there was more autonomy in terms of required curriculum. The reality, as this study revealed, is that the students read very traditional, male-centered, canonical texts. I’ve struggled to determine whether the school administration has reflected on the impact of this policy. Whether intended or unintended, there are consequences for these students. It was outrageous to me to hear Veronica tell me her thoughts about women authors. When she said, “Maybe a woman hasn’t written anything worth studying,” it nearly broke my heart! And yet, when I think about the message the students are getting by not reading any prominent or contemporary women authors, a statement like that makes sense. If these young, impressionable female students are trained to learn what’s important for tests and their subsequent education, then the components of the curriculum are just as important in shaping their knowledge as is the knowledge itself. If they have accepted that what they are learning is important and is written by important people, it seems valid that they would view the writing of women as sub-par within the academic realm.

This notion is reinforced by the female characters they are reading about in these canonical texts. As a whole, regardless of achievement or participation levels, all of the focal students described the major female characters they studied as weak, silly, ditsy, and one-dimensional, terms usually not coupled with positive connotations. As Mallory said, “these characters are the ‘anti-examples’ of what a woman should act like and be.” I couldn’t help but wonder why a school that markets itself on producing women who are capable of leadership roles would have students who read about women who do not personify these real-world examples.

Possibly the final predicament here occurred when Elizabeth told me that she never really thought about the lack of female authors and characters in the English curriculum. At first, I wondered if the question itself was too sophisticated and if adolescents are just too preoccupied with themselves to consider what they are studying. However, as I reexamined the transcripts of several different groups over the course of the school year, it seemed that the conversation always came back to the roles that these characters played. Ultimately it seemed that the worldview of these focal students was distorted by this exclusion tactic. They genuinely came to believe that what women write must not be worthy of academic analysis, otherwise it would be included in the curriculum at Girls Academy.

In sharp contrast to what was considered the required reading of the classroom were the trade paperback books that these students shared among themselves and read for pure enjoyment and entertainment’s sake. Almost all of the focal students paused when I asked them what they read in their individual interviews. Some even asked me to clarify the question, saying, “You mean like...*Harry Potter* or something?” When I reassured them that’s what I meant, they provided me with a variety of contemporary authors and titles, most of which I recognized.

Overall, it seemed they sought out modern day, realistic settings and even told me they enjoyed reading about things that could really happen. I also noticed that several of the books they told me about

were also recent movies or television series; for example, the *Harry Potter* (1998) books, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2003), and *Gossip Girl* (2002). The girls would share the books by reading them and then passing them onto a friend and then another and so on, then they would gather to informally discuss the books, creating an amateur book club or literary group. What seemed remarkable, and predictable, was that they all talked about how they enjoyed the books much more than the films or television series.

It seems that at a time when trade paperback books by certain authors are published in a serial manner while films are being released based on those books, it’s difficult to discern what was having more of an impact on the focal students at any given time. In most of the research I’ve reviewed, using any references to popular culture can prove to be advantageous in the academic setting. That being said, for this particular group of students, it almost proved to be more of a liability than an asset.

I noticed the distraction that occurred the day Miss Williams was using artistic renditions of Ophelia to introduce her as a character at the beginning of the Hamlet unit. The first class analyzed a painting and did quite well as far as staying focused, but the second class examined a photograph of the actress Kate Winslet from the 1996 film version. This second group of students was immediately distracted by the actress, instead of being focused on the activity. They were rattling off all their favorite Kate Winslet roles; my initial observation notes led me to believe that they were engaged in the lesson, but then when I reviewed the video tapes, I saw small groups of the students carrying on hushed conversations, long after Miss Williams made a noble attempt to refocus them on that activity.

In all, I wonder if it is the formality of the majority of the school that renders the students confused when they are presented with an innovative or creative lesson. After all, they are used to competing for top grades in an extremely individualistic setting. The focal students told me that most teachers lecture and give tests, so perhaps

they are simply confused when they are asked to work together or think critically when there may not be one right answer.

To Be (Compliant), or Not To Be

My initial observations at Girls Academy were faintly reminiscent of my own experiences in high school. Everyone was pleasant, most students were well-rounded and involved in several different aspects of the school, and the competition for good grades was fiercely apparent. As previously mentioned, the school itself uses an interesting marketing technique: naming the alumnae. Upon visiting the school's website, there is a link to a long list of powerful women in several different fields: medicine, law, education, and the arts. The way that it is presented would lead someone to believe that these women became powerful during their formative years at Girls Academy.

The majority of the school's faculty is female, including the key personnel in the administration. So, the students saw powerful women in action in the classrooms, at major after-school functions, at sporting events, and at any of the artistic performances or shows. These strong female role models certainly assert power over the students, their grades, and their dress code. The students see that authority as leadership. There are no public negotiations apparent to the students, so they rarely see how these groups of women collaborate.

During my individual interviews, the students were very intelligent in the way they carried themselves, and it reflected their training well. They could recognize characteristics of strong females in real life and in fiction but for the most part, they were not displaying these same characteristics. They all turned in assignments on time, they came to class on time and prepared, and they raised their hand before they spoke, waiting patiently to be called on. For all of these girls there was the underlying fixation with the "right answers" and "good grades" beyond their own goals for their education.

I've imagined that if Girls Academy had a motto it would be something akin to "empowering young girls for nearly one hundred years." But I can't help

but wonder what kind of leaders are being developed in a context where the English curriculum remains male-dominated, where there is still an obsession with grades and high-stakes tests, and where these young girls are trained to be compliant, unquestioning students. Is part of the training then to learn how to play the "male-dominated" game and succeed beyond Girls Academy where the world is co-ed? Or, is the leadership characteristic ingrained in certain girls who just happen to choose to attend Girls Academy?

The dominating epistemology of Girls Academy and its students is very traditional, linear, and cognitive. Yet, so much of what I observed Miss Williams incorporating into her English classroom was not. Even though she successfully met the requirements of her job, she did not stop classroom discussion and activity at the objective level; students were socially and emotionally engaged. There is hope for the girls in her classroom.

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