

Reading and Fighting Patriarchy

Book Groups and Young Adult Feminist Fiction

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Abstract

In a course whose goals are to unmask patriarchal structures and understand the difference between patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism, students read young adult (YA) feminist novels and critiqued them in light of their new knowledge of issues in education, gender, and politics. In the context of a term-long project, students were asked to write a synopsis of their chosen book, and an analysis of how the author illustrates gender-based oppression and young people's resistance. Using Manne's (2018) definition of patriarchy as an overarching structure, students recommended their books in a series of reviews for distribution to local middle and high school libraries.

Introduction

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (2011)

Inspired by Kate Manne's (2018) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, and Roberta Seelinger Trutes' (2018) *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, I engage my Equal Opportunity: Patriarchy class in critical thinking about sexism, resistance, and the subtle ways biases creep into our lives, and what it means that even when we are working against the patriarchy, we are inscribed within it. The course and the Book Club assignment create authentic writing opportunities, contribute to the community, and promote reading for enjoyment. The course is housed in the Department of Education Studies at the University of Oregon. The Department of Education Studies at UO offers degrees and licenses for students seeking to teach elementary and secondary education. The theory behind this course is radical intersectional feminism.

By employing Manne's (2018) definitions of structural patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism in young adult (YA) analyses of our novels, I nudge my students toward a deeper understanding of the many ways systems of oppression work to keep some of us in safe places of privilege. Manne defines misogyny as "the law enforcement branch of the patriarchal order" (p. 88) and sexism as that which "serves to justify these [gender] norms – largely via an ideology of supposedly 'natural' differences between men and women" (p. 88). Students are at different places in the social justice continuum, so this work can be challenging. They come with their own identities and biases, and I bring mine. Their pre-class reflection assignment lets me know where they are on the spectrum of social awareness, and some things always surprise me. In this class group, we had at least one white female student who felt that she had never been discriminated against, and that patriarchy had not touched her personal experience at all. We also had several members (white and Latin@x; male and female; one Native woman graduate student) who came in fired up and ready to talk about intersectional identities. Differentiating course content,

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including varying my own practice, speech, comments on papers, etc., especially for a group like this, is at the heart of teaching social justice topics.

Intersectionality and Whiteness

Equal Opportunity: Patriarchy addresses the role of oppression in its many forms, as enacted in our educational institutions. This course is one piece of a teacher education program that explicitly emphasizes the social justice work of educators; all students take an introductory Education and Social Change course and also a course on critical media literacy and media that helps students identify and resist the common tropes that inform our identities as teachers. By the time they take Patriarchy, they are ready to closely examine the injustices in schooling processes across multiple dimensions (e.g., racism, homophobia, colonialism, poverty). The overarching goal of this course is to unmask patriarchal structures. We work to understand the differences between patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism by problematizing, analyzing, and synthesizing the literature and various theories which examine patriarchal norms. By looking at multiple forms of oppression and the ways they intersect, students analyze current issues in education, gender, and politics to become familiar with the ways in which patriarchal values and norms are replicated and maintained. They learn to identify real-life instances of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism in the schools where they are currently student teaching or volunteering, which informs their theoretical learning in the classroom, and vice versa.

We know that the majority of our teacher candidates are white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and that they come from different places of privilege within the identity “white woman.” White women sometimes lack the critical framework that separates strong social justice work from charity efforts motivated by pity or by white savior syndrome (Fasching-Varner & Mitchell, 2013). One goal of our program is to help white students to address racism, white supremacy, and whiteness. White people need to reflect on their own identities and consider how their positionality informs what they see and do not see; they need to carefully and critically evaluate their own assumptions in light of their own experiences and backgrounds. They need to make meaningful family and community connections across lines of race, class, and gender and adapt their mandated curricula and standards to address local needs (McGregor et al., 2019).

We in the service-learning and community-based learning world hope that our work can help students develop a more critical lens (Bruce, 2018; Falcón & Jacob, 2011). We know it will be difficult for white dominant culture students to overcome the many negative emotions they feel in their interrogation and disinvestment in whiteness, including guilt, grief, shame, and melancholy. Matias (2016) points out that upon learning that one’s identity is based on a false sense of superiority, many students feel “cheated, angry, and depressed” (p. 110). Scholars including Duncan (2002), Helms (1990), and Leonardo (2009) have also pointed out some of the many ways white students and teachers put up blockades to ease their discomfort and uncertainty when they find the knowledge of their own commitment to whiteness “percolating to the level of consciousness” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 112). Though this course focuses on patriarchy, we know that the nature of intersectional oppression prevents one problem from being isolated and “solved” by itself. Therefore, we explore readings that acknowledge and explore the complicated relationships between sexism and racism, sexism and settler colonialism, sexism and homophobia, sexism and ableism, etc.

Student Teachers as Readers: Fake it Until You Make It

“You cannot be a good teacher of literacy if you don’t read” (Powell-Brown, 2003, p. 285). Bixler et al. (2013) surveyed their teacher candidates at the beginning of the semester and found that “at least 50 percent of them admit that they rarely read for pleasure, do not like to read, or have a hard time ‘getting into’ or ‘sticking with’ a book” (p. 235). Powell-Brown (2003) counsels her teacher candidates who do not identify as readers to “... fake it ’til you make it. In other words, make yourself read anyway” (p. 285). I have learned from Christensen (e.g., 1989) and the English and writing teachers with whom I’ve collaborated, that students can get excited and motivated when they are writing for a “real” audience. The Book Club assignment ends with a celebration and meeting with local librarians and teachers who receive the reviews that students have produced. This gives students an authentic readership (teachers and librarians) for their work, encourages them to creatively present their books, and engages them in thoughtful analysis of the values embedded in the young adult novels and sci fi/fantasy novels they selected.

I bring feminist fiction into the teacher education classroom (often to the chagrin of non-readers), and I also honor my students’ needs and wants when designing assignments. They always want to do something that directly applies to their teaching, so while I don’t agree with the prevailing utilitarian view of college education as a ticket to a job, I do attempt to make every minute we are together, and every assignment, engaging and important to them.

Of course, I bring my own goals to each class that I teach. I want to connect with my students through our common experiences in classrooms and our shared struggle with the oppression in our institutions of education (including our own university). I want them (us) to have fun working collaboratively, as teachers do “in the real world.” As a reader myself (and mom of two teenagers), I had already read several of the selected novels, and I was able to use examples from them in our class discussions. I modeled the project by completing my own version of it. I wanted students to be inspired to put something of real value out into the world, and I wanted to show and tell these future teachers that there are many ways to interact with students, and to demonstrate strategies that de-emphasize the sameness that the process of institutional schooling too often demands. At the end of the project, I wanted students to reflect on what they learned and think about how their own thinking may have changed.

Lesson Planning and Execution

In our theoretically heavy program, students sometimes fear that they will be unprepared to do the actual work of teaching. In my classrooms, I develop assignments that might be adapted for middle school and high school students; exploring YA literature and the messages in popular fiction gives beginning teachers strategies for analyzing literature with their own students, as well as experience writing a rubric. The writing prompt asks students to think about how young adult novels contribute to social justice work. The assignment models culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and amplifies sometimes-marginalized voices. This emphasis on diversity—both among the authors and the students—encourages everyone to bring themselves fully to their work. I hope they take the knowledge created within this classroom community back to their families and home communities.

Given the rapid pace of YA literature’s recent r/evolution, it is important to bring in librarians at the beginning of the course in order to introduce students to the growing field and to talk in general about their libraries’ resources and services. Best of all, each of the guests brought a pile of books! Every student had selected “their” novel by the end of the second week.

Book Club is threaded throughout the entire ten-week quarter. Students break into groups of three, and each member chooses a different YA feminist novel. Each student reads all three

novels chosen by the members of their group. They then meet over three or four weeks to discuss the books. Students are wholly responsible for scheduling and conducting book club meetings and facilitating their discussions. Because students wanted additional guidance, we co-created a document called “What to do in Book Club” that discusses expectations for behavior and participation. Students also received a rubric to evaluate each other’s and their own Book Club work.

As we read Manne (2018) and other theoretical readings alongside our novels,¹ I encouraged students to apply elements of class discussions to the characters, plot, and incidents in their novels. Based on our learning from *Down Girl* and other course readings, we co-created a rubric in order to evaluate the novels as feminist books. Each student wrote a synopsis and a review of the book for an audience of middle and high school teachers and librarians. After a week of workshopping each other’s writing, and a couple optional crafting days to work on the covers, we were ready for the end of the course and our “publishing party.”² Finally, I compiled our reviews, rubrics, and artistic representations into a book for each school library in our three neighboring school districts. (These are available online at LiberatingEducation.org.)

Conclusions and Reflections

Two of our books produced particularly strong reactions from students. I was pleasantly surprised by one group’s reaction to *Some Places More Than Others* (Watson, 2019). *Some Places More Than Others* is set near us in Portland, Oregon. The female lead character, Amara, wants more than anything to visit Harlem to meet her father’s New York-based family, including her grandfather. In a three-person affinity group for men talking about patriarchy, three male-identified students applied Manne’s (2018, p. 47) conceptualization of “care work” to their critique of the book and wondered: “is Amara being pressed into a role as the emotional underlaborer within the family?” Based on Manne’s criticism of male need for, and expectation of, care from females, the group wondered: “does this include a daughter who tends to the rift between her father and his father, ultimately helping them do the emotional work of reconciling and healing?” The three male-identifying students were able to understand a very subtle manifestation of patriarchal systems through their reading of Amara’s story. Without a harsh light being pointed at them as men, they identified with Amara and her family and came to understand the subtle yet pervasive role that caretaking plays in upholding the subordination of women.

The Hate U Give (Thomas, 2017) was one of the first books claimed by a student in the class (from my own collection, before the librarians even arrived!). The movie (Tillman, 2018) was a box office success and reached millions of people, including many of my students. The group of young white American women who read the story of Starr Carter, her Black community, gang violence, and protests against police brutality, did not have an easy time with the book. Like many white feminists and liberal white folks, the students struggled to identify with the strong Black female character. Starr’s story centers around the murder of her lifelong friend Khalil by a white police officer during a traffic stop. But despite the clarity of the situation in the book, white students deflected their guilt and shame in what Bonilla-Silva (2019) and Matias (2016) call “white emotionality.” We see this in real life in the discourse around the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the trial of Derek Chauvin.

The next time I teach this course, in addition to reading the Combahee River Collective Statement (Combahee River Collective, 1978), I will offer additional readings on intersectionality, particularly femaleness and Blackness. Patricia Hill Collins would be helpful (e.g., Collins, 1990, 1996, 1998) or perhaps a chapter from Collins and Bilge (2016).

Social Studies is always fertile ground for social justice readings, so it is easy for me to imagine offering a social studies methods class that would include a similar project. A series of

historical fiction books related to or focused on social justice issues would make a lively addition to a middle or high school history class. A few classic titles spring immediately to mind—*Bud Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1999), *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac (2006), *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and J.D. Houston (1973), and *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters (1998). Perhaps a high school teacher working on a 20th century history lesson about conflict in the Middle East could assign one half of the class to read *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000) and the other half *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis (2000)—to compare and contrast the viewpoints of different authors and the characters they create, coming from their own places of relative privilege and marginalization.

We all learned a lot about ourselves and each other by engaging in a public-facing book group project. And it was fun. I hope folks will want to build on it and adapt it to fit their students' and the community's needs. I can imagine this in fourth or fifth grade classes, with the “big kids” talking to younger folks about their books—whatever the topic—to demonstrate how cool reading is! Of course, high school students could do a book group series on most any subject—and the size of the groups could be varied, from pairs to a whole-class reading of two or more books, perhaps over the course of a semester or a whole year. The possibilities are *literally* endless.

ASSIGNMENT

Book Reviews for Libraries & Classrooms

This assignment serves multiple purposes. (1) It should be fun— “Not all fun is learning, but all learning should be fun” (Art Pearl, always). And plus, “If we couldn’t laugh we would all go insane” (Jimmy Buffet, 1977). (2) It gives you a chance to practice your new analyzing-the-patriarchy skills and to flex your patriarchy-smashing chops on a real-life young adult literature. (3) You will hopefully find something you will be able to use in your classes in the future. (4) You will DEFINITELY learn how to critically evaluate what you use in your classes in the future.

We will assemble everyone’s book reviews into a resource for current teachers and school librarians, who I’m sure don’t have time to read 20+ YA novels and will be grateful to hear your perspectives and recommendations.

You will complete this assignment individually, but you are encouraged to share, discuss, troubleshoot, with your reading group/book club members and classmates. We’ll also have a class period to work with art materials in the classroom.

Your final product will be FOUR 8 1/2 x 11 pieces of paper (separate, not two sided). The first will have some kind of artistic visual representation of your novel; the second will have the basic information listed below (and other info you decide belongs in “basic info”); the third page will have your written review, including all of the elements listed below, and perhaps others, but no more than one page; finally ... the fourth page will have the YA Feminist Fiction rubric and your comments about the book in relation to the rubric’s categories.

Basic Info and Written Review (draft): due Tuesday Week 8 in class

Final Project due Thursday Week 10 in Class for SHOWCASE!!

Basic Info

Title: Author: Publisher and Year:

Main Character & brief description: (e.g. Joanna, a 16-yo trans-girl who lives with her strict dad and goes to a (very!) traditional school since last year when they moved to a small town.)

Supporting Characters & brief descriptions: (e.g. Dad, also known as Jim, also known as Mr. Gordon, a single dad who loves his child but cannot seem to understand what he calls “this whole being a girl all of a sudden thing” and “Roxie” Joanna’s BFF and #1 fan, furry, long tail.)

Setting (in narrative style, not a list): include place, time, descriptions (you can quote from the book!). You can note the season or change of seasons, add depth to your description by showing how the setting is important to the development of the character or how it is otherwise effective to the development of the story.

Story summary: (*with spoilers*—don’t leave something to surprise the teacher when they are reading the book together with their whole class!)

Your Review

Why this book is a great feminist novel for young adults (or not, using our rubric to explain):

- What interpersonal elements of sexism/misogyny/patriarchy are addressed in the novel? How are they portrayed?
- How are sexists/misogynists and their survivors/victims and resisters portrayed by the writer? What about bystanders? Upstanders? Authority figures such as teachers, other school people, parents? What stereotypes or tropes are upheld? Which are questioned / upended?
- How is structural patriarchy portrayed and addressed in the novel? Would this be a good book to use when talking to teenagers about patriarchy? What about misogyny and/or sexism?
- How does this book fit in with our larger work as social justice teachers? In other words: how does it help us, and our students, understand the intersectional nature of systems of oppression? ** You can and should refer to readings from class (using APA style of course!) as I will be making a References page for the end of our final product. But avoid being too wordy/philosophical. We don’t want to put more work on our colleagues!

Notes

¹I chose *Down Girl* as our main reading even though I was fully cognizant that Manne does not fully engage with Black Feminist standpoints, Indigenous Feminist epistemologies, and Latin@x feminist work. Manne (2018) acknowledges this herself: “A limiting factor for my authority is my own (highly privileged) social position and the associated epistemic standpoint...” (p. 12) while maintaining that her analytical approach to misogyny “leaves room for the diverse range of ways misogyny works on girls and women given their intersectional identities...” (p. 21). Supplemental readings included Arvin et al. (2013), Perales (2013) (on Anzaldúa, 1999), and Combahee River Collective (1978). I also shared current writings from the radical feminists I follow on my own, as they were applicable, (e.g. Gurba, 2020) and some humorous takes on the very serious issues we were examining (e.g. McGuire, 2020).

²Modeled after Writers Workshop’s community celebrations of student writing (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991).

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.80>.

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