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Addressing Gender Issues in the Secondary Language Arts Classroom Using E.R. Frank's Life is Funny, and Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak.

Secondary language arts teachers interested in designing critical pedagogy that focuses on issues related to gender should consider using young adult novels such as E.R. Frank's *Life is Funny*, and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. The portrayal of the feminine voice in both novels is noteworthy, and each book is a fine resource for drawing young people's attention to topics such as gender definitions, gender inequality in school, gender-specific expectations (what they are; how they are perpetuated), and how each affects individuals and society. Used as part of a language arts curriculum emphasizing critical inquiry and social justice, both books afford teachers an opportunity to illustrate to both male and female students ways that male-dominated, middle-class values and social structures are perpetuated and reinforced in our society.

*Life is Funny* is an intense, fiercely honest novel. Competently, Frank weaves together an unforgettable collection of stories about 11 New York City teenagers, stories that boldly address topics ranging from sex and relationships, race, parents, drugs, to broken families, and school. Admittedly, some may find a few of the novel's stories excessively graphic and inappropriate for student readers. However, to dismiss the book completely would be a mistake because the novel has much to offer readers. For example, besides the aforementioned topics, Frank also does an

exceptional job of addressing issues related to gender and identity. At various times in the novel, Frank asks readers to ponder girlhood and society's patriarchal definitions of gender, most notably in the story, "Grace." Gritty, pointed, and relatively free of naughtiness, teachers can use this story to show students ways society transmits and reinforces gender definitions, and how these ideologies can negatively affect self identity and lead to the objectification of women.

In "Grace," the domestic and social struggles of a physically attractive teenage girl named Grace are the primary focus. Readers learn that Grace's home life is dysfunctional and repressive. Grace's mother (a receptionist at an ad agency on Madison Avenue) is cast as a crazy, racist, overly-busy alcoholic prone to "falling apart" (Frank 75). According to Grace, she cannot make her mother happy. Grace mentions, for example, that her mother falls apart over little things such as Grace making dinner instead of ordering pizza, or when Grace orders pizza from the wrong place. Grace is so afraid of her mother that she goes to extremes to please her, such as eating chocolate chip granola bars "over the wastebasket" because her mother warns her "not to make crumbs" (82). When Grace does make a mistake, her mother scolds her unmercifully, exclaiming: "Why do you always have to make everything so hard for me? Damn it. You do this on purpose" (84). Throughout the chapter, Grace repeatedly uses words and phrases such as "bitching," "go off," "fake," "witchy," and "yells" when discussing her mother. By story's end, not only is it clear that Grace's mother is projecting her own unhappiness onto her daughter, but it is also obvious that Grace's oppressive, antagonistic home life is affecting her self image (manifested in Grace's interest in self-mutilation and cutting herself with a razor blade), and making her feel that she is mindless failure

Besides a turbulent home life, Grace's social life also appears difficult, particularly at

school. She feels that her high school serves as a social sorting machine, separating the “have’s” and “have not’s” by sex and physical appearance. Although she admits that it is “nice to be good-looking because it’s one less thing to worry about,” Grace also says that her beauty makes her “stand out” (76) in school. She says this often leads to aggression from other teenage girls: “Somebody’s always wanting to fight. Somebody’s always calling me stuck up or a bitch” (76). Moreover, Grace also notices the existence of a double standard in school when it comes to gender and physical attractiveness. She explains,

If you’re a cute guy, it doesn’t matter how you act. But if you’re a pretty girl, things are different. If you’re too nice, they call you weak. If you’re not nice enough, they say you think you’re better than they are. (76)

Grace’s observations are telling. They touch on the sad reality that societal definitions of gender continue to affect and shape society and education in the United States. Unfortunately, when it comes to gender-specific expectations placed on boys and girls, Grace realizes that no matter how much the “whole thing sucks” (77), girls like her are often held to a different level of expectation because they are pretty, white, and female. Ultimately, Grace comes to the conclusion that to escape her oppressive social and family lives, she needs to get modeling jobs, get famous, and become a celebrity “instead of a just a pretty white girl” (77). Grace assumes that once she becomes a successful celebrity/model, people will want to be her friend instead of always judging her based on outward appearance. Regrettably, what Grace fails to recognize is that the modeling/celebrity enterprise is based on superficiality: that once she becomes a model/celebrity,

Grace will become an object and a product in an oppressive, male-dominated cultural and economic system.

To illustrate this point, consider Grace's audition and her first modeling assignment. Before the audition, Grace's mother repeatedly asks about the product her daughter will be selling; Grace also wonders about the product, and whether she will need to "walk or turn or anything" (89). As it turns out, Grace is never expected to do much of anything. After just "one look" by a director (a director fixated on Grace's "stunning mouth" (90)), Grace is immediately hired to be "the talent" (99) for a television ad. Once shooting for the ad begins, Grace is asked not to smile or act; all she has to do is "hang out" in different poses, "look bored," and brood (100). What Grace fails to understand, of course, is that her outward appearance is the product, not some perfume called "Future."

Ultimately, Frank's "Grace" successfully articulates Grace's burden, her struggle with oppressive, patriarchal social systems. Reading "Grace" in a secondary language arts class creates a wonderful opportunity for teachers to show students exactly how Madison Avenue promulgates popularity, physical attractiveness, and female sex codes. Certainly, Frank is not arguing that being a model/celebrity is inherently evil. However, in a world bursting with women's publications that sanction youth, good looks, purity, girlishness, and passivity in women (magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Teen Cosmopolitan*), Frank does appear to be asking readers to ponder society's fascination with the business of beauty and femininity, the negative effects it has on Grace and "millions of other girls" (88), and how marketing false messages of femaleness contributes to the subordination and objectification of women.

Like Frank's "Grace," Anderson's commentary on femaleness in *Speak* is also intriguing.

Although the overall tone of Anderson's critique of gender may not be as aggressive as Frank's, it is no less disturbing. Insightfully, *Speak* examines the experiences of a young teenage girl named Melinda Sordino, a confused introvert coping with her freshman year of high school. At first glance, student readers will undoubtedly find Melinda's impressions of friends, parents, personal appearance, schoolwork, and the rest, quite familiar. Digging deeper into the story, however, reveals much more, specifically how social systems within schools help to define gender and establish gender-specific expectations. Language arts teachers looking to fortify curriculum on the feminine voice with literature that connects to students' lives will find Anderson's story a worthy resource for classroom analysis and discussion.

Similar to Frank, Anderson also casts schools as sorting and processing machines. In many schools around this country, students wind up (willingly or not) segregated, stratified, and labeled as a member of some type of group or social "clique." Likely, these groups are associated with factors related to socioeconomic background, physical appearance, athleticism, intelligence, or gender. Melinda's school, Merryweather High School, is no exception. According to Melinda, Merryweather has its share of cliques. For example, there are the "Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix" and "the Marthas" (Anderson 4). Of these cliques, when it comes to conventional notions of femaleness, the two most notable cliques are the "Marthas" and the "Cheerleaders." Ultimately, both the Marthas and the Cheerleaders serve to illustrate how schools support and reward gender coding and gender-specific social practices.

Without a doubt, the Marthas eagerly embrace traditional female social codes. According

to Melinda, the Marthas are “an expensive clan to run with” (42), a clique that draws its inspiration from “Saint Martha of the Glue Gun” (42), Martha Stewart. Interested in fashion, personal appearance, and acting girly, the Marthas favor “plaid for autumn with matching sweaters in colors named after fruit, like apricot and russet apple” (42). Moreover, the Marthas are given to servitude and are “big on helping” and decorating. For instance, they “tackle projects and perform good deeds” such as food drives and walk-a-thon’s to raise money for charities (43); they also make Valentine pillows for “little kids who are in the hospital” (79). Admittedly, the Marthas do appear non-threatening. Their seemingly harmless behavior could be a normal part of growing up. However, much of the discourse surrounding the Marthas is stereotypical. Overall, not only does this clique’s gossipy, prissy, self-absorbed persona support some rather negative social constructions associated with being female, but their subordinate behavior also helps to justify and reinforce another dominant societal myth: that women should be attractive, tidy, diligent caretakers.

Taken a step further, what is also disturbing is that Merryweather High appears to sanction this ideology. As proof, consider Merryweather High’s “school adults,” its staff and faculty. Not once does Melinda mention school adults scrutinizing cliques or the existence of a masculine “hidden curriculum.” In fact, Merryweather High’s school adults seem to encourage the Marthas’ interest in a subordinate, benevolent culture of femininity. Melinda says, for example, that the Marthas “Do Nice Things for Teachers,” such as decorating the faculty lounge for a “Thanksgiving party/faulty meeting” (43). In the end, this acceptance and/or lack of scrutiny 1. Although Melinda refers to herself as “clanless” – an outcast with the “wrong hair, the wrong clothes,” and the “wrong attitude” (4) – it is worth noting that even though she does not appear to belong to a clique, Melinda is labeled several times in the story. For instance, she is labeled “trouble” (9) by a

male social studies teacher named, “Mr. Neck”; she is called “Me-no-linda” (not pretty) in her Spanish class (42); she is called “creepy” by Siobhan (45); and, more importantly, she is known in school as the “one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers’s party at the end of the summer” (27). not only helps to protect the patriarchal social environment found in many schools like Merryweather High, but it also helps to validate hollow rhetoric regarding traditional gender roles.

The oppressive features of this rhetoric can also be traced to Merryweather High’s other womanly clique, the Cheerleaders. Similar to the Marthas, this social system also helps to shape gender roles and reinforce rigid social boundaries between men and women.

Unquestionably, school sports and sports-related events provide countless physical, social, and educative rewards for young adults. For many, athletics and activities such as cheerleading are an important part of the schooling experience. However, some of the rituals, representations, and social codes surrounding school sporting events do perpetuate myths related to femininity and masculine achievement. As proof, consider Melinda’s comments regarding Homecoming and the Cheerleaders at Merryweather High. For instance, while making pom-poms to cheer on the boy’s football team at the Homecoming pep rally, Melinda’s friend, Heather, wonders “what it must be like to be on the football team,” and to have so much power (27). Then, during the pep rally, Melinda notes that the entire school watches in awe as the Cheerleaders back-flip, “bounce,” “cartwheel,” and “bellow,” which causes the crowd to stomp the bleachers and roar back (28). Despite the fact that the Cheerleaders are also shallow, dim-witted whores, who “sleep with the football team on Saturday night” and then are “reincarnated as virginal goddesses on Monday” (29), according to Melinda, no one seems to mind. Tellingly, the Cheerleaders serve as “role models” to many at Merryweather. They are the “Girls Who Have It All”: a clique brimming with

“gorgeous, straight-teethed,” and “long-legged” young women who wear designer clothing and get graded on a curve by their adoring teachers (30).

Again, no one but Melinda questions the apparent hypocrisy surrounding the Cheerleaders, not to mention the ideology of femaleness and/or gender expectations that negatively affects this particular social system. On the contrary, like the Marthas, this clique’s identity is positioned and culturally mediated by Merryweather High; the Cheerleaders, like the Marthas are expected to be attractive, wholesome, and servile. Regrettably, when the Cheerleaders cheer on the boys, incite them to “violence” (30), and tell the football team to “Be Aggressive, BE- BE Aggressive! B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E!” (130), they participate (willingly or not) in a genderizing ritual that supports the notion that part of a woman’s social responsibility is to encourage and celebrate the power of masculinity. In the end, the Cheerleaders’ clique helps sustain a culture of power within the school that generally reflects the interests of males – a culture designed to propagate and preserve traditional masculine and feminine ideologies.

Although it may not be the novel’s central purpose, Anderson’s *Speak* provides a strong resource for examining male frameworks of thought, and the role schools play in creating and maintaining masculine ideology. In the end, *Speak* sends a clear message that society has a long way to go when it comes to understanding the female voice, the uniqueness of the women’s struggle, and the importance of gender issues. For student readers, the challenge is to figure out why.

Both *Speak* and “Grace” are refreshing stories because they allow student readers a chance to enter the minds of young girls to see how they think and feel. Certainly, neither author implies that young boys and men do not face similar struggles at home, in school, or in society. Arguably,

most young men face unique, societal pressures of their own. However, it is no secret that male struggles have been well documented in classroom literature for centuries, and English curriculum continues to be mostly about male problems and male solutions. Ultimately, language arts teachers that utilize young adult stories like these not only afford students the opportunity to learn more about recognizing and challenging historical and societal notions of female and male identity, but also with a chance to learn more about the importance of equity and social justice.

