Sugar & Spice and all things Stereotyped
by Judy Rose and Pym Schaare

“Critical Literacy”: A challenge to phallocentric literacy
practices in high schools

Abstract

High School English literature, as with mainstream texts and
visual media, adopt phallocentric language and gender
imagery. Phallocentric literature used in high school locates
male characters in dominant, empowered roles which
subjugate, control and exploit female and marginalised male
characters (homosexual, non-white) with historically ascribed
compliance. Phallocentric language locates the marginalised
characters as binary 'others' in de-authorised, disempowered
roles with no discursive space except in relation to the
dominant Eurocentric white male.

We propose radical changes to the structure of language and
the selection of texts for the high school English curriculum in
order to challenge the colonisation of the marginal discursive
space by dominant male language, and to change negative
imagery for characters deemed as 'other'. Critical literacy
approaches and gender reform policies, which have
attempted to address the gender equity issue in literary texts,
have acted as a panacea, unable to alter the gender status
quo. We argue that because critical literacy approaches work
within the phallocentric paradigm, they position gender groups
in opposition to each other, in polarised camps, thereby
limiting the genders and any debate about them.

This article proposes a 'critical' literacy paradigm (Cliterocentric
rather than Phallocentric) which promotes language and literary
texts that locate marginal characters in their own space rather
than the space designated by the dominant male paradigm.
Clitical literacy challenges the critical literacy paradigm by
incorporating 'cliterocentric' texts into the high school literary
curriculum, literature which features female and marginalised
characters in dominant and empowered roles. With the critical
literacy approach, the gender-inclusive curriculum has a better
chance to become a lived reality instead of a token
commitment to analysing gender differences. Furthermore,
exposure to positive gendered characters in literature may help
to deter discrimination and victimisation through sexism and
bullying in high schools.

REDRESS 14 May 1998
You were wired but not programmed for gender in the same sense that you were wired but not programmed for language. Your gender identity couldn't differentiate as male or female without social stimulation...


The literary texts which are chosen for study in schools reflect a tradition of white-male hegemony (Carty, 1992, Gilbert, 1989). This tradition of phallocentric dominance is imbedded in the language of literary texts and in the hierarchical structures which act to canonise them. In language and literature, the 'white European male', not as an individual but as an ideological construct, is the normalised universal self by which all 'others' are measured (Singh; 1994:92). In high schools and in English classrooms, it is through the 'male tradition' that students learn about their gendered identity and place in society (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991).

Research by Freebody and Baker (1985) into children's first schoolbooks ascertained gender identity as an important concept in children's literature. They found that difference in gender roles and stereotypes are established in children's first readers. In first schoolbooks, boys appear more often as individuals, whereas girls appear in groups. In addition, boys tend to be subjects who play active roles (hurt, shout, think) while girls tend to be objects acted upon - (to hold onto, kiss). Girls in first readers are exclusively described as young, dancing, and pretty, and are more likely to be described as little. The research by Gilbert and Rowe (1989) also found restricted gender stereotypes for girls in school readers, core libraries, and award-winning literature.

It has been noted that almost without exception quite extraordinarily limited and unrealistic portrayals of women and girls are made in these books, and that the situation has not altered significantly... despite concern from educators for the desirability of doing so and the release of non-sexist guidelines by a number of publishing houses (1989:4-5).

A list of 250 'great books' recently compiled by the British Millennium Commission to supply British students of the 21st century with a selection of literary classics included only 30 titles written by women. In Queensland, Courier Mail readers and three male academics were asked to submit books they would add to or remove from the Millennial list. Books by Charles Dickens were the most popular addition while books by Jane Austen were most often removed (Courier Mail, Jan. 28:1998). The endorsement of 'classic greats' in literature is an affirmation of the phallocentric culture which supports and recognises these works. Once literature is endorsed as 'classic' or 'great' it becomes what McCarthy (1993) terms 'canonical knowledge': official, dominant and legitimate. It is the 'community of experts' from the dominant mainstream male tradition who endorse and produce this canonical knowledge (Carty, 1992).

The community of experts has been largely responsible for deciding what is recognised as literature, and what becomes sanctioned as the literary canon in educational institutions. Women's contribution to the literary canons has been muted and made invisible in order to establish the primacy and authenticity of the male view of the world (Spender, 1980).

In a hegemonic phallocentric world, woman's discursive space is colonised through male supremacy, in a way which subjugates, dominates and controls. Furthermore, for the male position to be the standard upon which to
define 'female', she is discursively constructed as marginal, as 'other'. The phallocentric production and control of what counts as knowledge and phallocentric construction of gender within knowledge has largely shaped the literacy practices and literature choices within Australian high schools.

Literacy Practices in High School English Classrooms

In many high school English classrooms, language and literacy have been regarded as neutral practices, a belief which has allowed dominant, mainstream, phallocentric culture to be accepted as the norm (Luke, Luke, & Carr; 1994). Literacy practices in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s in Australia were based on a child-centred pedagogy, and focused on the development of the individual and personal expression (Gilbert; 1989). This pedagogy meant English language classrooms focused on individual expression in reading and writing practices under the titles of 'creative writing' and 'whole language'. This type of pedagogy, Gilbert (1989) notes, is limited in its potential to change classroom contexts for girls because it does nothing to challenge sexual stereotypes and discrimination in reading and writing. Sexism in literacy practices is ideologically pardoned through the freedom of personal expression.

In the mid 80s a social theory of language, Systemic-functional linguistics (advocated by Michael Halliday; 1985) evolved. The Systemic-functional model recognised language as a social-semiotic message system embedded in a context of culture. The social language theory identified genres in reading and writing as recognisable forms and conventions of language that could be taught and read. The identification of genres in language challenged the natural/neutral theories of the individualistic pedagogy and offered teachers and students a new way of seeing language and texts in social and cultural contexts. The English Syllabus for Years 1 to 10 (1994) acknowledges the importance of genre by noting, "... the ideologies of a cultural group are represented by knowledge, values and practices, and these representations are expressed through genre" (p.2). The aim of teaching genre through explicit pedagogy is to give students (including marginalised groups) access to genres of power. However, for girls and marginalised groups it illuminates but fails to change the power status quo (Thorburn; 1995). For example, literature can be recognised as belonging to a particular genre, and language can be used to follow a set of discursive conventions, but the canon of literature itself and the language and underlying meanings in texts remain unchallenged within the genre approach. A Statement on English for Australian Schools (1994) as well as adopting a social contextual understanding of language (p.37) encompasses the principles of the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools (1997). These principles have been incorporated into the beliefs, statements, and profiles of the English curriculum in an attempt to address the issue of gender inclusivity.

Gender Reform Policy


A major concern of the document was to address the increasing violence (including bullying), destructive behaviour, racism, sexism, homophobia, negative relationships with authority and peers, suicides, and drug abuse in schools. The policy argues that violence in schools and communities is related to limited understanding of 'appropriate' femininity and masculinity. The National Action Plan recognises that the role of language is crucial to the process of developing gender equity. While language shapes reality, it also limits what ideas and concepts are available in a particular situation.

The National Action Plan acknowledges schools as having an active role in the construction of gender and having a responsibility to ensure that all organisational and management practices

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reflect commitment to gender equity. Although the gender reform policy has made some valuable insights into gender issues, in practice it has not been able to fulfil its agenda. The ensuing problem is that the hierarchy remains intact in this reform policy, hence stereotypes for gendered roles are sustained not changed. The commitment to gender equity through the National Action Plan was largely a response to how narrow versions of masculinity, and obsolete views of men's and women's roles, restrict boys' opportunities in relation to their educational and social development, vocational experiences, and therefore their subsequent life chances. The policy also states "it is clear that boys have needs that are not being met effectively by school" (p.5). The concern over the restriction of boys' opportunities, in a policy which is supposed to be addressing "education for girls", indicates that the hidden agenda comes from the dominant phallicentric culture. It may also be, paradoxically, a backlash to the feminist exploration of gender. The result of this reform policy is that concerns for girls have been pushed to the fringe.

An example of fundamentalist phallicentric backlash to gender reform in literacy practices was demonstrated recently by the children's author, John Marsden. He has written Secret Men's Business exclusively for boys, going so far as to demand male editors and designers and for the book to be bound in a plastic wrapper for boys only. In his comments reported in the Courier Mail (Mar 14, 1998) he said...

"Women have trespassed too much lately into men's business and I wanted to redress that".

Selection of Literature
The selection of literature in Australian high schools has generally reflected the cultural values of 19th and 20th century Britain (Luke, Luke, & Carr; 1994). When making literature choices, English teachers are influenced by culturally and historically determined values (McGee; 1993). The 'cultural heritage model' (Cope & Kalantzis; 1993) in Thorburn (1995:23) is often adopted in high schools and is based on the premise that the best way to enhance literacy is to expose students to the 'greats' of the literary canon. A steady diet of traditional authors like Hardy, Lawrence, James, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Forster, Orwell — writers often chosen for close study in Australian secondary schools — does not do a lot for the construction of a positive contemporary female view of life (Gilbert & Rowe, 1991:14).

These authors as well as typical selections by Queensland high schools including George Bernard Shaw — 'Pygmalion', William Golding — 'Lord of the Flies', Albert B. Facey — 'A Fortunate Life', D. H. Laurence — 'Sons and Lovers', Melville — 'Moby Dick', and Graham Green — 'The Power and the Glory' reinforce the dominant and mainstream phallicentric values, tastes and stereotypes. The tradition in literature and the canon it promotes is evidence that literary history has colluded with dominant patriarchal ideology (Gilbert; 1989). The repercussions of a phallicentric literary canon in high school contexts is that it promotes a dominant male ideology which pervades into other areas of school life. Phallicentric choices in literature condone the domination and oppression of girls as a social group in high schools. If notions of female inferiority are embedded in literary texts, and these texts are validated by the community of experts, then girls become objects of this knowledge. Girls, as objects of such knowledge, become sites for what Foucault describes as 'the exercise of power' (Foucault, in Sheridan; 1980). This power is acted out through physical power and aggression, crude and offensive behaviour, and disparaging comments about girls and their bodies, which have the effect of placing girls and other marginalised...
groups in disempowered positions in society.

Critical Literacy

As part of its plan to address literacy education, the Queensland Education Department (1994) has endorsed a critical literacy approach. Critical literacy is based on an awareness that literacy is socially constructed, ideological, and influenced by power relations which operate in culture, society and institutions. The concept of critical literacy has been developed from a number of strands of work by Freire and Macedo (1987), Gee (1990), Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) and others. Freire and Macedo argue that the construction of literacy is a political practice which can be a tool of oppression allowing one group to dominate another (1987).

Gee (1990) sees literacy as a 'socially contested term', whereby power, ideology and social identity determine what counts as literacy. Gee argues that critical literacy must entail a meta-knowledge of the discourses used to express meaning (1990). Discourses are "... ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (1990:127).

Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) define critical literacy practice as the capacity to interrogate texts and unveil their ideological workings.

Critical literacy practices have been trialed through units of work in a number of high schools in Australia. The following case study is an example of how critical literacy was implemented in a classroom.

A Case Study of Critical Literacy in a High School English Classroom

A unit on the study of the novel "The Chocolate War" by Robert Cormier was produced by grade 11 English teacher Kevin Thorburn. He suggests to teachers that critical literacy "... requires only slight changes to their 'usual practice'". We suggest 'usual' could refer to the primary phallocentric model of education. However if this were the case, then a huge change to normal practice would be required otherwise it risks becoming a token measure.

As part of the critical literacy approach to reading the novel Thorburn recommends the following questions for interrogating the text.

- In what ways does this text have anything to do with your life or the life of your friends? (orientation)
- Are you aware of any groups (in your immediate area) that this would have anything to do with? (relevance, reality check)
- What are the messages or ideas in the text? (discourses, ideology, power)
- Who is writing/composing the text? (subject/object positioning)
- Whose ideas are not being shown? (others)
- Is the text trying to influence (change or reinforce attitudes, opinions, behaviours) you and if so in what ways?
- What words and phrases does the text use which might influence you? (power of language)

Kevin Thorburn notes that in using critical literacy in conjunction with the study of the novel, students from both mainstream and marginalised groups benefited, although he did not detail in what ways they benefited. It would seem the value of critical literacy practice in high school English classrooms is its ability to provide students with an awareness of the power of discourse and the

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construction of gendered subjectivity in language and literature. Critical literacy practices highlight the ideological workings of language which produce, reproduce and maintain arrangements of power which are unequal (Lankshear: 1994). However, critical literacy strategies, including the types of questions that students learn to use to interrogate texts, are limited in their ability to change or offer alternatives to the gender roles and stereotypes. Where genre names a text in social/cultural terms, critical literacy strategies go about unpacking the social positions of those who are producing, reading, and using a text. Critical literacy strategies make readers more active with analysing, interpreting, and unraveling meaning, power and ideology in texts; it does not change the text or offer an alternative. In this sense critical literacy is active but not transformative.

Alternative choices of novels to the traditional literary canon were chosen by a Brisbane High School English Department which advocates critical literacy strategies. An analysis of the texts chosen show that critical literacy does not censor the use of gender stereotypes in the selection of 'alternative' literature. In four out of the five texts used across the grades, stereotypes remained the dominant representation of gender roles. The texts chosen by teachers included:

- Space Demons (by Gillian Rubenstein)
- Lockie Leonard Scum Buster (by Tim Winton)
- So Much to Tell You (by John Marsden)
- The Lake at the End of the World (by Caroline MacDonald)
- Tomorrow When the War Began (by John Marsden)

Our analysis of text extracts indicated that all of the novels except The Lake at the End of the World were written from a phallocentric perspective (See the appendix for our textual analysis). Critical literacy is unable to come up with some alternative gendered texts, because as an approach it is designed to reflect on 'what is' instead of 'what could be' in terms of choices for high school literature.

A Critical look at Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a valuable tool in high school literature study because it helps students to expose and understand the ideological workings of language. It seems, however, that although critical literacy analysis reveals the power in language, it doesn’t actually change the status of that power. A reason for this is that critical literacy operates within a phallocentric paradigm which concedes to being challenged but not actually changed. The phallocentric paradigm places gender groups in opposition to each other, in polarised camps, and limits any debate about them. Attempts to examine gendered subjectivity through a phallocentric critical literacy approach has meant a separate discourse box for women, girls, and marginalised men. The separate discourse box has contained them and labelled them as ‘other’ or ‘different’. There appears to be a void in the critical literacy arena which can not be addressed within the confines of the phallocentric paradigm. We propose a new paradigm and a new approach to literacy.

Phallocentric Paradigm – a CLITICAL literacy approach

A cliterocentric paradigm and a ‘clitical’ literacy approach promotes language and literature which locate girls, women and other marginalised groups in their own space rather than the limited space allowed in the phallocentric paradigm. In terms of the high school English curriculum this would mean a balance of literature including texts which present a female perspective, such as The Lake at the End of the World, with strong female and male characters. Literature should use language which challenges the phallocentric meanings underlying the words themselves. This means gendered characters which act, think, and speak according to the situation and context rather than from privileged or subjugated positions determined by fundamental gender stereotypes. New words and new meanings
from a cliterocentric perspective need to be given space and authority in the mainstream. For this to occur, however, the semantic representations behind words need to be changed to include a cliterocentric perspective, i.e. a view of the world from a female or marginalised perspective. This means the female and the marginalised male get a positive rather than negative discursive space in the debate about gender.

To make language and literature more representative of girls' experiences, in the high school setting, several measures need to be taken. There needs to be a greater inclusion of women's writing in the English curriculum. However, women's writing which perpetuates and replicates traditional gender stereotypes is of no educational value. The inclusion of women authors who use stereotypical gender representations of female and marginalised characters do not promote the discursive space of the cliterocentric paradigm. For example, Gillian Rubinstein's Space Demons would not be chosen in a cliterocentric selection because it places the male character in the authority position and the female in the submissive role. However, Caroline MacDonald's The Lake at the End of the World would be chosen in a cliterocentric selection as it presents both male and female characters having mutual emotions about their situation and working together for a common outcome.

Through the cliterocentric paradigm, privilege of the male/patriarchy is challenged and replaced by equal space for the diversity of genders. Respect and value for difference within and between gender groups can be nurtured, developed and included in the cliterocentric paradigm rather than being threatened, devalued, and excluded in the phallocentric paradigm. The deployment of the cliterocentric paradigm through critical literacy programs will help to dismantle the 'gender war' by promoting negotiation towards universal citizenship.

Conclusion

The proposal for critical literacy in high school English analytical practice is to challenge the use of the phallocentric paradigm as the model for the expression of gender. Gender imagery within English literature reflects a traditional, white, phallocentric perspective. The impact of this literature on high school students is that it locates the male and masculinity in a dominant position. This phallocentric construction of male and masculinity promotes a model which rules and divides the genders and assigns them active and passive roles within a gendered hierarchy. Within this hierarchy the genders are in binary and opposing positions which otherise the female and the marginal male. The discrimination, the victimisation, the subjugation, and the muting of the other is a consequence of the polarisation of gender within the phallocentric paradigm. An effect of being otherised is to be bullied through sexual harassment and limited definitions of masculinities and femininities.

Critical literacy practices and gender reform policies are based on social justice principles interested in exploring gender as a social construct and emancipating the disempowered through illuminating gender inequalities within language, context, and texts. It is difficult to contest aberrant behaviours endorsed by the traditional construction of the male through phallocentric language and discourse. The problem with the critical literacy and gender reform practices and policies is that they are embedded in and confined by the phallocentric paradigm. These practices, constrained in the phallocentric paradigm, become neutralised and tokenistic measures which do not lead to change. They sustain male as privileged and any other as a secondary entity without privilege.

Critical literacy within a cliterocentric paradigm, or critical literacy, uses some of the tools used in critical language analysis. However, critical literacy analysis takes it a step further. It proposes to transform, not replicate, existing locations for gendered characters. The move towards critical literacy promotes the universal right for all genders to their own discursive space. Only in this paradigm can policy reform and literacy practices provide a safe and transformative learning environment in which a new community of experts can emerge.
## APPENDIX

### Textual Analysis

#### Text A

**Space Demons**

*Extract-language (p. 17)*

When they got to the classroom, a transportable on the edge of the oval, Mr Russell flung open the door with vigour, and the girl inside jumped like a startled rabbit.

"Linda!" he said sharply. "What are you doing in here?"

She gave him a guilty smile and looked down at a piece of paper on which she had been writing. "Oh, nothing", she answered.

"You know the rules, Linda. You stay outside until the siren goes."

"Sorry, Mr Russell," she said. She gave him another smile, not so guilty this time, more dazzling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Language associations</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• male authority</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>traditional male status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• female submissiveness</td>
<td>vigour, flung, sharply</td>
<td>overrides female status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rules</td>
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#### Text B

**Lockie Leonard Scum Buster**

*Extract-language (p. 31)*

"You know I've never even had a girlfriend?"

"Really?"

"Fourteen, and I've never had a chick."

"They don't like that, you know."

"What?"

"Being Chicks. And birds. And babes."

"How come?"

"I dunno. Women. Who can understand em?"

"Yeah. Absolutely."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Language associations</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• macho male</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>women are irrational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sexual knowledge and</td>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>and can't be understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prowess of males</td>
<td></td>
<td>by males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• male authority</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>(venus-mars syndrome)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chicks, birds, babes</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>
### Text C

**So Much to Tell You**

I found myself wishing (I’m ashamed to say this) that my father’s aim had been better after all, and that he had got her instead of me, like he’d planned. I tried imagining how she would have screamed and staggered away and how her expensive face would look now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Language associations</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• female weakness - victim</td>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• female against</td>
<td>male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• male control and</td>
<td>planned</td>
<td>female acceptance of abuse from males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• violence</td>
<td>aim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• father as patriarch</td>
<td>got her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• mother dismissed</td>
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### Text D

**The Lake at the End of the World**

We’re nearly there. I’m nervous. I delay the immediacy of the underground confrontation by thinking about, instead, how very much I want to go and look at the sea and the abandoned city and I want to see the mountain towering over the ranges. (male character speaking).

“Do you think Stuart’s got his sight back?” I ask Diana...  
“Perhaps. I don’t know. Hector, we’ve got to keep going”. Diana has an anxious in her voice I haven’t heard before, even when she was hurrying me along during the night she first took me to the lake.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Language associations</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• challenges stereotypes</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Both characters have mutual emotions about situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• balance</td>
<td>nervous</td>
<td>• male accepting female leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>delay</td>
<td>• female demonstrating active leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thinking about</td>
<td>• working together for a common outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>being hurried along (passive)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>instead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you think</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ask</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Julian Toussaint, John Shepherd, Gerry Lollacono for their comments on drafts of this paper. We thank them for their enthusiasm and support.