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Spring 5-1-2015

## Overcoming The Symbolic Annihilation of Females in Classroom Literature

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**OVERCOMING THE SYMBOLIC ANNIHILATION OF FEMALES IN CLASSROOM  
LITERATURE**

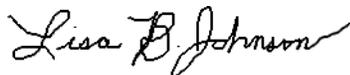
An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication  
of the University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Lisa B. Johnson

May 2015

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Lisa B. Johnson

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa B. Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L" and "J".

05/01/15

Lisa Johnson

Dr. Rigsby

ENGL 491

Overcoming The Symbolic Annihilation of Females in Classroom Literature

**Introduction: How I Came about My Research**

When I think back on my favorite books in upper elementary school, I think of *The Giver*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The BFG*, *Maniac Magee*, and *Number the Stars*. I adored each of these novels. I still do. To this day I can picture exactly where I was when I finished most of them, and I distinctly remember discussions I had with my reading group in Mrs. Schmidt's "Teen Tiny Tuesday Room." I loved our Socratic seminars; I loved writing reflections on them in my reading journal. And, now that I am studying to be a teacher, I love that many of my practicum students are reading the same fascinating novels that I enjoyed as a child.

When I was struggling to devise a clear topic for this independent study, my friend asked me what interested me most. I told him "everything." Which was precisely the problem. "But," I added, "I really love children's literature." As we discussed how I could investigate this topic, I considered my favorite novels as a child. I suddenly realized a major concern—all but one of my favorite novels that I had read in school (*Number the Stars*), had male protagonists. I thought of the books that students in my practicum classes are currently reading—the pattern was the same. At that moment I realized the parallels between the adult literary canon and the unofficially established "classroom canon" in today's schools: male protagonists dominate them.

I am surprised that it took me this long to notice this disparity in classroom literature. When I reminisce on the endless hours I spent cradled in my tree house devouring pages of

adventure, I recall reading novels with both male and female protagonists. But, when I think of my readings for school, I can only recall *three* mandatory novels during my entire seven years of elementary school that had female protagonists. Even more worrisome, when I look back on the novels that my teachers read aloud to the entire class at story time, I cannot remember a single story that did not center on a male figure. Even though all around me I saw males and females as equals, my classroom literature clearly did not reinforce this notion.

To be perfectly honest, I do not think that this detrimentally affected me whatsoever. I never felt that I was “less than” a boy or that I had to conform to particular standards simply because I was a girl. I studied ballet and played soccer; I rocked baby dolls and dueled Pokémon cards; I played in the dirt in cotton dresses. While my parents and neighbors certainly encouraged free play and development without gender-defined constraints, the literature that I read on my own time was undeniably influential. My parents read to me every night from the time I was six-months-old and my father began teaching me to read when I was three. He taught me early on that “books are our friends,” and he never said no to a new “friend” that I wanted to add to my bookshelf. Thus, I never noticed that I was underrepresented in classroom literature because the male-dominant books that I read in class were mere additions to my outside readings.

However, most children do not grow up in an environment that supports a wide range of literature as much as I did. In fact, two thirds of American children living in poverty do not even own a book (“Literacy Issues”). Therefore, the characters that many children encounter are only those that they find in the classroom. When teachers and schools promote literature that primarily represents males, they not only send the message to girls that they are insignificant members of society, they heighten male perceptions that they are *more* significant. Therefore,

although teachers may consider the gender of the protagonists in classroom literature to be somewhat inconsequential, they nevertheless affect how students perceive their role in society.

I initially assumed that gender disparities in classroom literature stemmed from an insufficient supply of quality children's books with female protagonists. To see if this was the case, I counted the number of books with female protagonists that had either won the John Newbery Medal or Newbery Honor Medal. I was astonished by what I found. When examining the representation of male and female protagonists in these books, I learned that not only were the genders of the protagonists of these books equally divided, but that 72% of authors who had won the Newbery Award were female ("Newbery Medal Winners"). Evidently, the world of intermediate children's literature is not male-dominated by any means—neither by the authors who write the novels, nor the characters they represent. There are more than enough novels for teachers to represent girls and boys equally in the classroom. However, if there are enough quality children's books with female protagonists, why are girls so underrepresented in classroom literature?

Research shows that student perceptions of novels with female protagonists may contribute to their unbalanced usage. Since 1978, studies have reported that "[b]oys and, to a lesser extent, girls prefer stories about boys and men," thus suggesting that children see girls and women as less important and interesting (McCabe et al. 200). For the most part, girls will read books about boys and girls, whereas boys resist reading books about girls. Based on my own experiences and observations, I have found this to be true. I teach at a preschool, and I have noticed that, even at their young age, boys are often deterred from stories about girls. In fact, I once had a four-year-old suggest that he sit in time out rather than listen to a book about a girl. In contrast, I have failed to see a girl resist a story simply because it had a boy protagonist. During

this study I have been increasingly interested in the books my practicum students read on their own time. Again, I have found girls reading books about girls and boys, but have not once seen a boy choose to read a book that centers on a female character. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it is likely that teachers accommodate these preferences in their classroom when selecting books for their students.

This solution makes sense—on the surface. If primarily male-dominant books interest all students, why not use them? After all, teachers should include books in their classroom that captivate as many students as possible. The problem is that mitigating the use of female protagonists in classrooms only temporarily assuages minor concerns while perpetuating larger social wrongs. In their study “Gender in the Twentieth Century Children’s Book’s: Patterns in Disparity in Titles and Central Characters,” McCabe et al. argue that underrepresenting females in children’s literature “symbolically annihilates them” by denying their existence in a widespread cultural product (198). The researchers delineate that ignoring or underrepresenting females in literature “suggest[s] to children that [female] characters are less important than their male counterparts” and gives females the impression that they are irrelevant components of society (218). Thus, when teachers use books with male dominant protagonists in their classroom with the intent to engage all readers, they simultaneously reinforce that their female students are less important than their male students.

Ultimately, the symbolic annihilation of female characters in classroom literature detrimentally affects girls *and* boys by splitting the class into the inferior and the entitled. In their book, *Psychology of Gender: Exploring our Differences and Commonalities*, professors of psychology Anne E. Hunter and Carrie Forden explain that when cultural products continually tell girls that they are “inferior and unworthy,” girls experience “internalized oppression” and

begin to believe that they *are* in fact incapable, deserve a lower status, and are powerless to affect change (xii). Such internalized oppression can lead to “self-destructive behaviors,” “difficulty with assertiveness, “deference to boys and men, and the tendency to settle for less in life” (xiii). Hunter and Forden also note that overrepresentation of boys in classroom literature is detrimental by promoting feelings of “male entitlement” (xiv). They explain that disproportionate representations of gender in their favor lead boys to believe that the male experience defines “normal” and that they inherently “deserve their opportunities” more than girls (xiv). Teachers often pride themselves in creating a supportive classroom community with high expectations for all students. However, when they symbolically annihilate girls through their choices in classroom literature, they nullify these expectations. If teachers truly want to promote the equality in their classroom that is necessary for all students to succeed, they must ensure that they represent females and males equally.

Although many teachers accommodate the majority of their students’ interests by resorting to male-dominant literature, it is rather unclear *why* boys dislike female-dominant literature. My hypothesis emerged from my study of the literary canon. Historically, white males have dominated the literary canon. In fact, the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* did not include works by *any* women before 1750 (Guillory 238). This was mostly because prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “by and large only men were taught to write, [and] only men were in social positions which made possible a life of literary production” (238). Therefore, very few women had the opportunity to write before this time. As women have begun to enter this historically male-dominated profession, it is possible that many of them harbor feelings of inferiority and thus “settle” for writing for children rather than adult audiences. As I previously mentioned, 72% of authors who have won Newbery awards are women. Thus, if women authors

project feelings of inferiority into their characters, perhaps male audiences are less likely to relate with them.

Regardless of whether or not female authors attempt to create strong female characters that thwart gender ideologies, if women authors perceive themselves as inferior, it is likely that their feelings will infiltrate their work. This can transpire in two ways. The first is a woman writer who accepts the patriarchal ideals of her society is likely to produce a protagonist who also embodies her understandings. However, a writer's conscious or intended effect is not the only consideration. Psychoanalytic theory alerts us to the divulgence of an author's unconscious in his or her text. In literary critic Barbara Johnson's essay, "Writing," she explains French philosopher, Jacques Derrida's theory of the unconscious in writing. Johnson delineates how Derrida sees "echoes, digressions, discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities of a text" as places in which a writer's unconscious may materialize, noting that when an author writes, he or she "writes more than (or less than, or other than)" he or she thinks (46). Just like a Freudian slip of the tongue, an author's unconscious conceptions manifests in her work. Thus, if women authors have internalized feelings of inferiority, their attempt to create a strong female character may be sabotaged by their unconscious feelings. This could create either a weak female character, or an unrealistic character who subtly repudiates the author's conspicuous intent.

### **The Study**

To begin, I emailed a random sample of forty-six fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers across the United States asking which books with female protagonists they used in their classrooms because they felt that both girls *and* boys enjoyed them. My intent in doing this was to determine which female-dominant novels all students enjoy so that I could use them as a

baseline for the other novels I would read for my study. Three teachers reported that their class enjoyed reading *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, and one teacher said that he had heard from many other teachers that their class enjoyed the novel and was planning to read it with his class for the first time this year. Four teachers reported that they either read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell to their class aloud or used it for small group discussions each year because all students seemed to appreciate it. Although these overlaps may appear slight, it is important to note that they were the *only* novels that overlapped at all. Furthermore, most teachers only listed one or two novels that represented females, which further supported my concern that females are underrepresented in the classroom.

Therefore, I chose *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Esperanza Rising* as the baseline to which I would compare my other readings. I focused on two main aspects of comparison: the way the protagonist either embodied or thwarted socially constructed gender stereotypes and degree of influence of the patriarchy on the protagonist and other characters in the novel. In conjunction with my early research, my other readings included five other novels that had either won the John Newbery Medal or a Newbery Honor Medal. The novels' publication dates spanned from 1958 to 2011, so I had a wide time span to study. I also aimed for a variety of race and ethnicities in the characters, location and time periods, and unique stylistic features when possible so I could analyze the role of gender in an array of settings. I chose: *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1953) by Elizabeth George Speare, *One Crazy Summer* (2010) by Rita Williams-Garcia, *Inside Out and Back Again* (2011) by Thanhha Lai, *The Summer of the Swans* (1970) by Betsy Byars, and *When You Reach Me* (2009) by Rebecca Stead.

## The Effects of Gender on Text Enjoyment

To understand how I analyzed gender stereotypes and patriarchy in these texts I must provide some background information on how students' internalizations of gender roles impact the way they relate to novels. Despite increased opportunities for males and females, gender stereotypes continue to persist in our society. According to Hunter and Forden's description of gender schema theory, "when a society sees gender as important," children automatically "construct schemas of what males and females are like" (xi). Because of this, by the time that children are in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, it is more than probable that they have acquired a firm conception of gender ideology.

When students read a novel, their schematic constructs of gender affect their relation to its characters. In her book, *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson, professor of English, delineates the traditional gender roles that students may perceive. She explains that "traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive, [while] cast[ing] women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (85). Therefore, a fifth grade boy who has internalized that to be male he must be "strong," "powerful" and "emotionally stoic" (Tyson 87) is likely to reject a novel with a female protagonist who embodies stereotypical "emotional" "weak, nurturing, and submissive" female traits (85, 95). Normalization and celebration of stereotypical male attributes explains why female readers are more likely to engage in male dominant texts than males are to engage in female oriented texts. However, when novels fuse traditionally divided characteristics to create wholly human characters rather than characters whose sex predetermines their traits, *all* students are more likely to find them relatable.

Because patriarchal influences play a potent role in characterizing traditional gender roles and negative female stereotypes, I also considered that patriarchal elements have the potential to

impede students' ability to relate to the novel. According to Tyson, the patriarchy essentially "promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men" (85). Thus, even if a strong female character resists stereotypical behavior, male readers may be unable to relate to her victimization by other males.

## **Examination of Patriarchal Influences and Protagonists' Gender Embodiments**

### The Positive Effects of a Truncated Patriarchy

Patriarchy is evident in both novels that I examined as a baseline for my other readings, yet is not central to the stories. This is because in these novels, circumstances that the protagonists face either entirely isolate them from the patriarchy or other social influences heavily override them. In *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Karana is isolated from her formerly patriarchal society while in *Esperanza Rising* wealth and class issues dislodge patriarchal influences. Therefore, the development of the characters focuses not so much on their embodiment of stereotypical female attributes and their contention with oppressive forces, but rather on their development of strengths that appeal to all students.

*Island of The Blue Dolphins* is the story of twelve-year-old Karana's isolation from her tribe that once operated under strict patriarchal assumptions. At the start of the novel, the women and men in the tribe have highly divided gender roles. This is most evident when Aleut invaders kill the majority of the tribe's men and Chief Kimiki orders the "women [to] take the place of men and face the dangers which abound beyond the village" (O'Dell 25). Although he admonishes that "without the help of all, all must perish" (25), the men of the tribe oppose the integration of gender roles and feel that "women [have] taken the tasks that rightfully were

theirs” (26). The chief’s order is so controversial that he decides to reestablish traditional gender roles: “men [must] hunt and the women harvest” (26).

While it is indubitable that Karana is born into a patriarchal society, it is not long until she is free from its influence. Once the more powerful male figures of her tribe flee to a new island, only a feeble and incompetent symbol of patriarchal ideology survives through Karana’s little brother, Ramo. And, it is not long until even *this* proponent of patriarchal ideals expires. Ramo represents the great irony of the patriarchy—it is a power that assumes inherent worth, yet is entirely arbitrary. Ramo exhibits stereotypically female weak and irrational characteristics, but because he has “seen the rites of manhood given in [his] tribe” he embraces male entitlement (42). Although he is nothing more than “a little boy with thin arms and legs like sticks,” who is too small to carry a fishing canoe, Ramo names himself “Chief Tanyositlopai” and commands that “[a]ll [his] wishes must be obeyed” (42). It is only a matter of hours before Ramo’s pride gets the best of him. The first night that he and Karana stay on the island, Ramo waits until his sister is asleep to prove his strength by retrieving the heavy canoes. When Karana searches for him the following morning, she finds him “lying on his back, [with] a deep wound in his throat”—he has been mauled to death by the island’s wild dogs (45). Along with Ramo’s demise, dies the last iota of the patriarchy on the island. Karana mourns the loss of her brother, but is free from all facets of gender constraints.

Because Ramo’s death occurs early in the novel, the majority of Karana’s story is void of patriarchal influences. This enables Karana to overcome her own previously conceived gender assumptions and discover her natural identity. Initially, Karana faces difficulty in embracing roles that were traditionally male, not because she finds herself incapable, but because of the moral dilemmas they impart. For example, because there are no longer males on the island to

hunt for food, Karana must forge her own weapons to hunt game, which causes her to worry about the consequences:

Would the four winds blow in from the four directions of the world and smother me as I made the weapons? Or would the earth tremble, as many said, and bury me beneath its falling rocks? Or, as others said, would the sea rise over the island in a terrible flood?

Would the weapons break in my hands at the moment when my life was in danger, which is what my father had said? (52).

Despite her concerns, Karana *does* forge her own weapons. And, of course, nothing detrimental comes from her decision. After Karana learns that constructing weapons will not cause natural forces to “smother” (52) her, she freely and competently engages in tasks that were once forbidden to women. Karana realizes that to survive she *must* embrace “man’s work” (85). And, she proves to be quite competent in doing so. She attacks deadly sea elephants (85), spears wild dogs and domesticates their alpha male (90), and constructs a sturdy shelter for herself and guards it with gargantuan whalebone (68). Without patriarchal constructs, Karana discovers her immense capabilities.

Essentially, Karana is everything *but* weak and overemotional. She is clever, swift, decisive, agile, and brave. She meets all of her challenges with optimism and strength and successfully embraces her humanity. Although Karana comes from a patriarchal society, its former influence has no effect on her choices throughout the majority of the novel. This, I believe is what makes the novel so relatable to all audiences. Without patriarchal forces directing her actions, Karana does not have to conform to behaviors typically male or typically female. Rather, she faces her challenges as a human being. Therefore, boys reading the novel do not

perceive Karana as something that they are not, but rather a character who overcomes hurdles the same as any human being would.

Like *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, patriarchy in *Esperanza Rising* is apparent, but not overpowering. This is because race and class influence social interactions more than anything else. *Esperanza Rising* is the story of a young girl who grows up in Mexico immersed in a life of luxury. Because of her high position in society, she holds power over many individuals despite her gender. Esperanza grows up ordering her plentiful servants to cater to her every need. She does not suffer from oppression or limitations, and her father teaches her that the land on which they live is not his, but theirs (Ryan 1). An only child, Esperanza takes on the typical roles of a family's eldest son. She proves to be competent at duties typically performed by boys. For example, at the ceremonial grape harvest, Esperanza cuts the first grapes of the harvest—a task traditionally assigned to a family's eldest son. The knife fits “snugly in [Esperanza's] palm,” (4) illustrating that this performance comes naturally to Esperanza despite her gender; she easily cuts the grapes with “a quick swipe” (5). Although Ryan alludes to male and female roles throughout the text, she does not emphasize Esperanza's role as a *girl* per say, but rather as person in a position of power.

Because racial and economic class structures are so heavily embedded in the plot of this novel, Esperanza's challenges are primarily related to these rather than gender ideology. When the tragic death of her father suddenly uproots Esperanza's lavish lifestyle, she and her mother flee to the San Joaquin Valley in California for work at a grape farm. In her newfound home, the biggest struggle that Esperanza encounters is not patriarchal oppression, but rather learning to love herself regardless of the judgment of others. In her new society, others view her as “dirty” and “uneducated” despite her regal and learned upbringing (217). Her tumultuous transformation

from luxury and respect to poverty and discrimination leads Esperanza to proclaim: “I have lost everything. Every single thing and all the things that I was meant to be. [...] my life is like the zigzag in the blanket on Mama’s bed” (224). It takes time, but Esperanza eventually unearths her true identity that was once masked by “satin dresses” (5) and distorted by “stained apron[s]” (217). Esperanza’s struggles with self-worth stem from her severe degradation in class structure, not oppressive patriarchal forces. Her biggest challenge is discovering who she is despite her circumstances, which is something all children can appreciate.

While race and class diminish the perceptibility of patriarchal influences in this novel, Esperanza does actively combat gender constructs as well. As Esperanza adjusts to her life in the San Joaquin Valley, she proves that traditionally feminine tasks such as caring for children (110), washing clothes (115), and even sweeping (116) are not innate, but rather, must be learned. Before Isabel, an eight-year-old girl with whom she lives, teaches her how to do these chores, Esperanza does not “know how to change a diaper” (113), attempts to wash clothes by gently “dipping [them] in and out of the water” (114), and when using a broom, it swings “wildly” and “awkward[ly]” in her arms” (116). In this sense, Esperanza resists gender constructs that assume that traditionally female roles are biologically rather than socially constructed.

While Esperanza defies gender roles by demonstrating how traditionally female tasks are not innate, but must be learned, she also resists standards that say that she is incapable of traditionally male tasks. Just as Esperanza demonstrates her competence in traditionally male roles of wealth and prestige, she proves herself equally competent at male roles of a lower status. When her mother falls ill, Esperanza adopts the role of the protector and the provider in her family and decides to “work in the fields or in the sheds” (178). Miguel, her former servant with whom she and her mother now live, advises against Esperanza’s proposition, since “only men

[work] in the fields” (166). Regardless, Esperanza asserts herself as “*La patrona* for the family” (178), the patron, and proves competent at earning money to serve their needs. As she takes on the role that her father once upheld, Esperanza helps pay for her family’s food and shelter, her mother’s hospital bills, and even manages to save enough to bring her grandmother, Abuelita, to California to live with them.

However, traditionally male roles do not come any more naturally to Esperanza than traditionally female roles. Before tackling these tasks, Esperanza fails at first—many times. At times she finds herself unable “to find the place in her heart where her life [is] anchored” (92) and soaks her dirty pillow in a “nightly ritual of silent tears” (176). Even so, Esperanza approaches all challenges in her new life with the understanding that she “can learn” (115). Her learning process is slow and rocky, but she *does* learn and she *does* come out on top.

Because Esperanza accomplishes both traditionally male and female tasks, students do not see *Esperanza Rising* as a novel about a young girl’s journey into womanhood, but rather as a story of a kid overcoming life’s challenges. Despite presence of patriarchy in this novel, the internal trials and emotional struggles that Esperanza faces are essentially *human*.

Karana and Esperanza are strong protagonists that engage in both gender roles of their society. However, much of this has to do with the distance of that the novelists place on the patriarchy through isolation and increased emphasis on race and class. The power of the patriarchy manifests only to a certain degree in these novels, and it either surfaces as a subtle backdrop that powers override or female characters overcome it entirely. Because my research shows that *Esperanza Rising* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* interest both male and female audiences, I looked for similar representations of gender in the five other novels that I read. My goal was to separate novels with protagonists that fluidly embraced both gender roles like

Esperanza and Karana, and had minimal patriarchal influences just as their settings endowed. I determined that the novels that I found to have similar representations of gender as *Esperanza Rising* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* would be the novels that I would promote for classroom use.

*One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia represents gender very similarly to my two baseline novels. Like in *Esperanza Rising*, patriarchal influences exist, but are masked. Males do not outwardly oppress females. Rather, they exude through individuals' assumptions of gender stereotypes. *One Crazy Summer* is the story of three African American girls' trip to Oakland California to spend time with their mother who left them seven years earlier when her husband refused to allow her to name their third child. The story is told through the eyes of eleven-year-old Delphine, who is strong, intelligent, resilient, and moves easily from one gender role to another.

Because the girls in the novel are away from their father and grandmother and soon learn that their mother is by no means a nurturing figure, Delphine learns to embrace both maternal and paternal roles by looking after her sisters. Delphine cooks for her sisters, stands up for them, and protects them from dangers. She is strong and stoic when asserting her and her sisters' abstinence from a dangerous Black Panther rally (Williams-Garcia 129), yet her doting on the family prompts their mother to mention that "[i]t wouldn't kill [her] to be selfish" (110). Delphine's weaving in and out of gender roles is sure to enhance her relatability to all children. Her gender does not appear to confine her in any way. Nothing scares Delphine. She is confident in herself and will stand up to anyone—boy, girl, man, woman, white, black—anyone. She is extremely bright, an excellent student, and at eleven-years-old is far more responsible than I could ever dream of being. Because Delphine subverts stereotypically weak female traits while

simultaneously embracing traditionally male *and* female roles, she does not appear to audiences as a strong girl, but rather a strong *person*.

As I previously stated, patriarchal influences in this novel are limited and extremely subtle. Only once in the entire novel did I find explicit male oppression, and another male immediately overthrew it. This was when Delphine's acquaintance, Eunice, questions her friend Hirohito's allowing her to ride on his go-kart, saying, "you let a girl on your go-kart? Your precious go-kart?" (203). However, Hirohito does not see anything wrong with Eunice's accusation and lets Delphine ride in his cart anyway. This small comment indeed relays *some* patriarchal notions, but the characters' apathy to the remark indicate that its pressures are not binding.

Instead, gender stereotypes manifest very subtly through characters' expectations for one another. The most prominent example of this is Delphine's initial disdain for her mother, Cecile, a poet and a Black Panther advocate. Cecile is the antithesis of the maternal figure. Reuniting with her children after seven years, Cecile does nothing more than tell the stewardess "these [...] are mine" (19). She does not hug her daughters; she does not ask them how they are. She walks so quickly through the airport that her youngest has to run the whole way to keep up with her. While Cecile's actions subvert assumptions that caregiving is an inherently female instinct, Delphine's feelings toward her mother for her actions demonstrate an internalization of socially constructed gender roles. Because her mother's parenting style is rather unconventional, Delphine fails to even see Cecile as her mother, but rather as a "statement of fact" when she says:

Mommy gets up to give you a glass of water in the middle of the night. Mom invites your

friends inside when it's raining. Mama burns your ears with the hot comb to make your hair look pretty for class picture day. Ma is sore and worn out from wringing your wet clothes and hanging them to dry; Ma needs peace and quiet at the end of the day.

We don't have one of those. We have a statement of fact. (14).

Although Delphine certainly does not conform to stereotypes, her expectations for her mother to be submissive and nurturing indicate that she has embraced some patriarchal ideals. Here we see that patriarchal forces *do* exist in this novel, but only very subtly. Other than Eunice's passing comment, males do not appear to be direct enforcers of these stereotypes. Despite Delphine's initial judgment, Cecile's actions indicate that she has a choice to conform to or subvert maternal stereotypes.

Cecile's lack of conformity to traditionally maternal stereotypes allows readers to delve into themes of acceptance. While Cecile's parenting style is a bit idiosyncratic, her children learn to love her for whom she is despite her differences. By the end of the novel Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern learn that just because Cecile is an atypical mother does not mean that she is a bad mother. Cecile's parenting style creates strong, talented, and giving daughters. Rather than unconditional love, Cecile's girls must *earn* her love by cultivating talents and showing love to her. Cecile does not accept her children into her life until she sees and appreciates the value of their worth. For example, Cecile does not truly love her youngest, Fern, until Fern recites a poem she wrote at a Black Panther rally and Cecile sees her daughter as a unique and talented individual rather than simply someone with whom she is blood related (199). Although Delphine initially criticizes her mother's approach to parenting, she learns of its power just before she boards the plane at the end of the novel and realizes that she has earned her mother's love. Delphine describes this moment as a "strange, wonderful feeling. To discover eyes upon you

when you expected no one to notice you at all” (214). Ultimately, the girls learn that they gain far more in return when they embrace their mother’s divergence from a traditionally maternal role rather than resist it.

While the influence of the patriarchy is limited or subdued in these three novels, one novel that I read was entirely void of it all together. *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead creates an environment that does not confine individuals by gender whatsoever. In this gripping mystery about ten-year-old Miranda’s efforts to save her best friend’s life, it does not appear that gender affects her actions. In Stead’s novel there is no patriarchy for female characters to overcome. Neither girls nor boys are confined to categories telling them what they can and cannot, or should and should not, do. Whether or not Stead makes a special effort to break down these constructs, she certainly deconstructs them in a way that is believable to the reader. The fluidity of gender roles in the novel appear natural as men and women and boys and girls weave in and out of stereotypes that might typically confine them.

Miranda’s home life certainly exemplifies a break down in gender constructs as Miranda’s mother embraces both maternal and paternal roles and experiences an equal relationship with her boyfriend, Richard. For most of her life, Miranda’s mother has been single and thus embodies both the role of the mother *and* the father. She is so competent at both roles that Miranda even admits that “because [she] never had a father [she] [does not] want one now” (32). Miranda’s contentment with having a single mother illustrates that her mother is fully capable of fulfilling both parental roles. Richard, Miranda’s mother’s boyfriend, is by no means an enforcer of the patriarchy. Miranda describes Richard as anything *but* “strict or awful” (4). He is supportive of Miranda and her mother and it is clear that they are each other’s best friend. Rather than endorsing male entitlement, superiority or dominance, when Miranda’s mother to

facetiously refers to him as “Mr. Perfect,” Richard always “taps his right knee,” which is “shorter than his left” to remind her how *he* certainly does not think he is perfect (4).

Just like the relationship between Miranda’s mother and Richard, the children in the story operate on equal planes regardless of gender differences. Boys do not only associate with boys, and girls do not only associate with girls—they all intermix. Not only are Miranda and Sal best friends despite their being opposite sexes, neither of them assumes stereotypical behavior within their relationship. Sal is male, yet Stead does not define him as the protector of their relationship and Miranda is certainly not a submissive damsel in distress. The two friends simply look after one another. For example, while gender ideology alleges that males “are not supposed to cry” (Tyson 87), when Sal gets punched, “tears [drop] down his face” (Stead 23). And, contrary to the traditional gender idea that females are emotionally weak, Miranda “*almost* crie[s],” at the sight of Sal’s distress, but instead adopts the role of a stoic protector, claiming, “It was my job to get him home” ([emphasis added] 23).

The characters in the novel also subvert gender-typified occupations. Although it was an uncommon profession for women in the 1970s, Miranda’s mother is a paralegal who is studying to become a fully licensed “criminal defense lawyer” (9). Furthermore, Miranda’s friend from school, Annemarie, has two parents, but it is her *father* who stays at home cooking gourmet “tiny sausages” (38) and “powdered-sugar dough balls” (66) for Annemarie and her friends. When Annemarie gets a mustard stain on her favorite sweater, she tells her friends, “my dad will get it out” (77). Also, although teaching is a profession that is traditionally dominated by women, many of the teachers at Miranda’s school are male. Her teacher, Mr. Tompkin is caring and compassionate and is “always trying to get [Miranda] to read something new” (78).

Because this novel is void of patriarchal influences, students can more easily relate to its characters. Without the obstruction of the patriarchy, students may focus more intently on its captivating plot. Miranda does not need to overcome looming patriarchal influences, but rather faces obstacles just as anyone her age could face, boy or girl. Because Stead presents all characters through a fluidity of gender roles, boys and girls have countless characters with whom they can relate. No one is “othered;” no one is limited by his or her gender. Everyone is a *person* facing the issues of the plot just as any *person* would face them.

### Creating Resistant Readers

My conclusion that the ideal novels for all students to enjoy present gender-fluid protagonists and a subtle or nonexistent patriarchy was uprooted when I first read Speare’s *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and Lai’s *Inside Out and Back Again*. These novels presented me with a new question: how do male audiences relate to a novel that places a gender-fluid female protagonist in an intensely patriarchal society? Both of these novels are well written, have gripping plots, and the protagonists move easily from one gender role to another. Yet, unlike the other novels where patriarchal influences were either limited or subdued, the patriarchy in these novels is an omnipresent force that females in the novels must combat. Although I had already determined that a repressed patriarchy was necessary for text enjoyment by all genders, these novels were *so* good—the protagonists were inspiring, the writing style was engaging, the plots were page-turning. I could not deprive boys of such fantastic literary experiences simply because of a strong patriarchy. Although I reminded myself that I *am* a female reader, I wondered if it were possible for boys to enjoy these texts and relate to their gender-fluid characters despite heavy patriarchal representations.

However, after reading a novel with otherwise enjoyable characters who scorned negative behaviors associated with my own race, I learned of the dissociating effects of being the antagonist of another group's story. This made me realize that regardless of the characteristics of the protagonist, when the patriarchy is too omnipresent, males naturally become the story's antagonist. A negative illustration of male influences from a female perspective is likely to cause great dissociation between males and their identities. For, in order to enjoy the texts, they must detach themselves from the characters.

The novel that enabled me to make this connection is *One Crazy Summer*. Delphine is an African American girl living amidst racial tensions in the Civil Rights movement. She counts every person of her own race she sees throughout the day and becomes a member of The Black Panther Party, a black extremist organization that advocates the use of violence to overthrow the U.S. government. I, a privileged white millennial, found it somewhat difficult to relate to Delphine at first. This was not because my life experiences were different from Delphine's but rather because my race was one of the prime antagonists of the story. When the girls' grandmother, Big Ma, helps her granddaughters board the airplane, she seeks a "grown, brown face to look after [them]" in fear that if they sit next to a white person they will "be mistreated in some way" (6). This theme of "us against them" is perpetuated throughout the story. Not only was I inherently everything that these characters were not, their remarks continuously reminded me that I was the "other" of their story. I experienced great cognitive dissonance; to identify with Delphine, I had to identify against myself. After experiencing the psychological effects of being the "other" of another's story, I was even more attuned to how the oppressive patriarchal influences in *Inside Out and Back Again* and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* could affect the enjoyment of male readers.

*Inside Out and Back Again* is the story of ten-year-old Hà's flight from Saigon to the United States amidst the Vietnam War and her adaptation to American culture. Hà comes from a society with strong patriarchal implications. With her father missing in action, Hà's brothers have the authority to make the majority of the family decisions while her mother prepares food and "design[s] and cut[s] / baby clothes" for a living (Lai 14). It is clear that patriarchally induced standards for females inhibit Hà from being her natural self as she yearns to "do what boys do / and let the sun darken [her] skin, / and scars grid [her] knees" (30), but feels guilty for even thinking such thoughts. At ten-years-old, rather than climbing trees and playing sports, Hà must learn to tend to her garden and "embroider circular stitches" (2). While Hà feels remorseful for her desire to subvert these standards, she does not understand how "other girls" submit to society's unreasonable and inhuman expectations (74). She assumes they "must be made of bamboo, / bending whichever way / they are told" (74). Although Hà's natural desires demonstrate an aversion to gender-defined roles, her feelings of confinement and subordinacy to males illustrate that patriarchal influences in the text are oppressive and pervasive.

Despite these limitations, however, Hà proves herself capable of tackling traditionally male tasks and subverting female stereotypes whenever possible. When her family prepares for "Tết, / the first day / of the lunar calendar" (1), Hà wants to bless their house by being the first one to stand on the tile floor of their family room in morning. But, her mother "insist[s] [that] / one of [her] brothers / must rise first / [in the] morning / to bless [their] house / because only male feet / can bring luck" (2). At this news, an "old, angry knot" "expand[s] in [Hà's] throat" (2). And, although her culture's patriarchal ideals prohibit her from blessing her house, Hà "wake[s] before dawn / and tap[s] [her] big toe / to the tile floor / first" (3). While Hà contravenes typically male roles, she subverts notions that females are weak and demure when

she combats a bully at her school and leaves him “writh[ing] on the pavement” (225). She also unravels beliefs that females are intellectually inferior to males through her love of literature (39) and her high proficiency in math (157). Although the patriarchy is highly evident in this novel, Hà is by no means a submissive individual who confines to female stereotypes.

Despite patriarchal influences, Hà is a strong, resilient, and inspirational character who faces and overcomes problems when she comes to America that are separate from her gender. Any immigrant, any new student, boy or girl, could face the same hardships as Hà. Although Hà is extremely bright, her difficulty with the English language leads her to understand “what dumb / feels like” (157). She goes from reading “Nhật Linh” to Dick and Jane books (130). Her classmates call her “*pancake face*” (196) and “*Boo-Da Girl*” (207) and she often finds herself hiding in the bathroom at lunchtime (180). However, just like the females in the other novels I have discussed, Hà overcomes her trials. While at first she combats the bullies in her life by reciprocating their hostility, she ultimately learns to rise above them and find peace in herself regardless of their prejudice towards her. At the end of the novel, Hà proclaims that she has learned “to fly-kick / not to kick anyone so much as / to fly” (260). While there is certainly a heavy degree of patriarchal oppression in this novel, all children are capable of relating to Hà’s struggles and triumphs.

Yet, despite all of this novel’s positive attributes, male influences are still some of the prime antagonists of this novel. This made me worry that the experiences that male readers would have when attempting to relate to this character would be similar to the blockades I encountered when attempting to relate to Delphine in *One Crazy Summer*. Judith Fetterley, author of *The Resisting Reader: a Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, presents a fascinating delineation of the powerlessness that female readers experience when reading male-dominant

literature. Her explanation of the reader becoming the “other” of the text can apply to how boys might view an overtly feminist text:

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be *not female*. (Fetterley xiii)

Although Fetterly’s explanation pertains to females, we can see how a novel like *Inside Out and Back Again* can present boys with a “powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self” (xiii). When a novel wholly embraces the perspective of a female, and males are nothing more than underdeveloped antagonists to her story, they have no one with whom they can identify. They cannot relate to the males in the story because the female perspective either underdevelops or villainizes them. They cannot relate to the females who males victimize unless they identify against themselves, which perpetuates feelings of disempowerment. Therefore, it is safe to assume that although Hà subverts patriarchal limitations, it is difficult for boys to relate to her story because in order to appreciate many of her struggles they must dissociate from a crucial part of their identity.

Likewise, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* forces male readers to identify against themselves by simultaneously depicting males as oppressive antagonists and foolish individuals whom Kit must reform. Although the men in this novel influence all aspects of the society in which the novel takes place, Speare provides them with little human characteristics with which male readers can identify. Kit, a vivacious sixteen-year-old from Barbados is the heroine of the

novel. She embraces traditionally male and female gender roles and uproots patriarchal ideals. Although she is a strong figure who does not let female stereotypes inhibit her behavior, Kit faces constant overt oppression from the males in her society.

Patriarchal influences pervade every aspect of Wethersfield. Males operate the churches, which construct the rules of society. While they are encouraged to marry, women only have as much power as their husbands provide them. When Kit first arrives at her aunt, uncle, and cousins' house, she immediately notices the coercive power with which men operate in the colony. "[W]armth and happiness" radiate through Kit's reunion with her Aunt Rachel and cousins Judith and Mercy (30). The cousins help Kit unpack her clothing and play dress-up in her lavish apparel while Rachel prepares "fresh bread" and "new butter" for them to enjoy (34). This blissful reunion extinguishes the moment Kit's Uncle Matthew arrives. When Matthew enters "a chill sw[eeps] across the room," his oppressive power smothering all joy (43). He demands that the women "be quiet," "[d]o as [he] say[s] and put away all "friperry" (43). While Kit is astonished by her uncle's behavior, her Aunt and cousins are ashamed for neglecting their household duties. Aunt Rachel hangs her head low in her husband's presence, admitting, "I guess we forgot ourselves" (43). Just like all the male figures in Wethersfield, Uncle Matthew asserts how his women shall behave. He orders that they be "modestly clothed," and that each "attend Meeting like a God-fearing woman" (51). Because all of Wethersfield supports male superiority, it is no wonder that Matthew subjugates the women in his family with such force. Most of the colony's males are considered "learned scholar[s]" while most women are kept illiterate (19); males endorse women's inferiority on commenting on their "weakness" and inherent "affliction" (66); only young boys sing in the choir at church (56). This force not only suppresses females in the colony, it constructs a wall between males and females, thus creating a binary between *us* and

*them*. Because the novel takes on a female perspective, however, the *us* are the women while the *them* are their male oppressors.

Despite the patriarchy's staggering strength in Wethersfield, Kit manages to overthrow it and redefine the colony's assumptions on gender. Often, Kit does not realize when she counters social structures established by the patriarchy. Before disembarking the ship to Wethersfield, Kit manages to defy gender stereotypes to such a degree that many individuals on board suspect that she is a witch simply because her conduct is not typical for women in their society. Kit astonishes the men on the ship when she engages in a conversation about literature since many of them do not think that women *can* read. When Kit professes her love for "history, and poetry, and plays [...] by Dryden and Shakespeare and Otway" (25) the men cannot fathom that her "grandfather allowed a girl to read such things" let alone allowed her read at all (25). Kit also defies others' assumptions of her gender's abilities when she "plunge[s] headlong over the side of the boat" to retrieve a young girl's doll (8). Instead of applauding her heroic deed, passengers stare back at her with "[s]hock and horror and unmistakable anger" and "suspicion" (9). Passengers accuse her of being "daft" and even a chilling "cloud of disapproval" settles over the girl whose doll she retrieved (9). While everyone else is sure that a woman would never be capable of swimming, Kit, who grew up in Barbados does not think there is anything absurd at all about her skill.

While Kit defies gender stereotypes unintentionally, she also calculates measures to defeat male entitlement and assumptions of female inferiority. Kit's life in Barbados was far less inhibited by the patriarchy. Slaves, rather than women, cared for children and English men and women often had tutors (19). Because of her upbringing, Kit does think that her sex confines her

capabilities and is far more attuned to male oppression than the women who have grown immune to their subjugation.

The most prominent way that Kit helps redefine gender stereotypes is by educating Prudence Cruff, the young girl whose doll she retrieved from the water. Because she is a girl, Prudence has been told her entire life that she is “too stupid” to go to school despite her belief that she “could learn as good as” the children in the schoolhouse (113). To protect Prudence from being caned, Kit teaches Prudence to read in the meadows of Blackbird Pond where no one will find her. Prudence proves to be a gifted reader; she “drink[s] in the precious letters” of her silver hornbook so speedily that Kit must find her a primer after just three weeks (115). When Kit is tried for witchery later in the novel, Prudence stupefies the courtroom with her ability to read—they presume that her accomplishment is a “trick” and accuse Kit of “bewitch[ing]” Prudence (221). However, after lengthy questioning, the Judge announces that “[t]here seems to be no evidence of witchcraft” on Kit’s behalf (222). At this news, Prudence’s father proclaims that his daughter is “smart as a whip” and professes a newfound philosophy on gender when he says, “If I’d had a son, I’d of seen to it he learned his letters. Well, this is a new country over here, and who says it may not be just as needful for a woman to read as a man?” (221). By teaching Prudence how to read, Kit proves that gender does not define an individual’s intellectual capabilities, not just to readers, but to the citizens of Wethersfield.

However, while Kit’s accomplishment is certainly triumphant, her triumph lies in educating allegedly foolish males on the capabilities of women. Men antagonize and oppress women throughout the entirety of the story; they preside over their every action with assertion, dominance, and superiority. Yet in the courtroom scene their power proves to be entirely arbitrary and self-constructed. In order to empower the women of Wethersfield, Kit must

undermine male authority. Clearly, Kit's interactions with males in the novel are not like those in novels with fluid representations of gender like in *When You Reach Me*. The entire novel separates the characters and aims to sway the readers into a battle between *us* and *them*. *They* are tyrannical and controlling; *we* are not. *They* assume we are unintelligent; *we* know they are wrong. In this novel, males are either antagonistic and oppressive forces that Kit must battle or ignorant fools who she must educate. It is no wonder when I asked my friend who read the novel with me in Elementary school for his opinion on the story that he had no recollection of reading the novel at all. The novel is *so* feminist that he had no one with whom he could identify. He could not relate to the victimized women of the story, nor could he relate to the oppressive men. Just like in *Inside Out and Back Again*, when males read *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, they must dissociate themselves from the experience that the literature engenders.

If these novels produce such adverse effects on males, what should we do with them? One option would be not to use them in classroom instruction at all. However, the problem with excluding novels that illustrate oppression is that oppression *does* persist in our society. To deprive students of such literature is to deprive our country of critical thinkers and social activists. Students have the right to undertake literature that makes them uncomfortable, and they have a right to devise an avenue to change that discomfort. When students experience the discomfort I felt while reading *One Crazy Summer*, teachers can help them identify the motivation for their discomfort. They can help them look at characters from a multitude of ways other than from the protagonist's perspective. They can encourage rewrites and role-play for what *should* happen and how characters *should* treat one another. By incorporating literature of discomfort in the classroom, teachers can help students to become resisting rather than assenting readers. They can teach students to examine a novel not necessarily through its intended way, but

through a multitude of angles. Uncomfortable literature is powerful literature. It empowers readers to consider the novel beyond the plot and to play an active role in the construction of the story. It teaches readers to be resistant to the obvious and to examine any situation from all angles.

### What Does Not Work

With my conclusion that resistant reading can overcome the dissociation of identity in male readers, I was able to determine that all of the novels I read were worthy of classroom use. All except for one—Betsy Byars' *The Summer of the Swans*. Byars' novel is the only novel among all the novels I read that had strong patriarchal influences *and* a protagonist with stereotypically weak female characteristics. Rather than combating patriarchal constructs, Sara Godfrey either passively complains about them or conforms to them. Although Byars does not always present males as antagonists, she often underdevelops them, leaving no one with whom males can relate. While the novels I have formerly discussed present females whose triumphs are essentially human, much of the novel discusses the concerns that mostly pertain to a middle school girl—clothes, shoes, school dances, and boys. Because boys do not have any strong male characters with whom they can relate and Sara's challenges are more limited to her gender's stereotypes. I do not think that this is a novel that I would use for class instruction with the intent to appeal to all audiences.

After Sara's mentally handicapped brother, Charlie, runs away from home, Sara learns that family is far more important than cliques, petty crushes, and fitting in. However, the majority of the novel *does* hinge on these negative stereotypically female concerns that center on weakness, insecurity, and a desire for approval. In just the first chapter of the novel, Sara

demonstrates weakness and emotional insecurities when she complains of having “the biggest feet in [her] school” (Byars 2), begs for attention from her dog by wailing, “Boysie [...] I’m really crying this time. Boysie doesn’t love me” (4), and whines, “this is the worst summer ever,” (6). Byar’s overemotional portrayal of Sara percolates throughout the novel. She describes Sara as wanting to “start screaming and kicking” and “jump up and tear down the curtains and rip up the sheets and hammer holes in the walls” for no apparent reason other than her lack of popularity (38). Sara expresses weakness and subordinacy when she explains to her sister, “I’m not anything. I’m not cute, and I’m not pretty, and I’m not a good dancer, and I’m not smart, and I’m not popular. I’m not anything” (39). Sara’s emotional insecurities epitomize negative stereotypical female characteristics. Many of the concerns that ignite Sara’s emotions are over matters that most boys may find to be difficult to relate, such as cutting her hair to look like a “model” (53), wearing “eye makeup” (20) and longing to find an attractive boyfriend who will call her “Little One” (37). Although all humans can certainly relate to emotional frustration, Byar’s illustrates Sara’s emotional weakness a prime component her personality.

Byars certainly fails to create a strong female protagonist and she negatively depicts males as well. Other than Charlie, Byars provides readers with very little insight into the minds of male characters. Therefore, our view of males in the story mostly derives from Sara’s perception of them—which is predominantly negative. Sara presents conflicting views on males. She professes that she “hate[s] boys” (38) yet also yearns for love and attention from a boyfriend (37). She accuses boys of making fun of her brother Charlie at school (13), and blames her classmate, Joe Melby, for stealing Charlie’s watch (79). Because Byars fails to develop male characters independent of Sara’s perceptions of them, our judgments are mostly limited to her perspective. When Joe Melby explains that he did not steal Charlie’s watch, but rather “gave the

watch *back* to him” (79), Sara does not believe Joe. And, unless resisting the intended grain of the novel, nor do we. Likewise, when Joe offers to help look for Charlie “the sight of him [makes] [Sara] sick” (78). Thus, we assume his act of kindness must have ulterior motives.

We also only glean a negative understanding of Sara’s father through Sara’s perspective. Sara describes him as a “gray sober man who [...] never start[s] a conversation on his own” and explains “a strange feeling when she [thinks] of her father [...] the way she [feels] about people she [doesn’t] know well” (71). There is an obvious reason for Sara’s emotional distance from her father—he has physically distanced himself from her. After Sara and her siblings’ mother passed away six years earlier, their father abandoned his children and left them in the care of their Aunt Willie (11). These actions have definite patriarchal implications—rather than caring for his own children, he passes the job of the caregiver to a woman. Clearly, the depiction of Sara’s father, as with most males in this story, is not particularly positive.

The representation of males in *The Summer of the Swans* presents male readers with the same dissociation that they are bound to face in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *Inside Out and Back Again*. However, while these other two novels have strong, positive, and inspirational protagonists who easily move from one gender role to another, Byars confines Sara only to negative stereotypical female traits. Thus, as males see the female protagonist embody the traits with which they do not wish to identify, they are more likely to be deterred from the novel.

While reading this novel, I also realized another component of it that has the potential to inhibit male audiences from enjoying it—discussions of romance from the female perspective. While Sara often professes an extreme dislike for boys, she also engages in a plethora of discussions with her older sister and best friend about dating and how they can make boys “turn

and look at them” in school (39). Many of these insipid conversations resemble the following discussion between Sara and her sister Wanda:

“Don’t you like him?” [...]

“I said he was all right.”

“Well, what don’t you like?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like him.”

“I know, but I can tell. What don’t you like?” (37).

While conversations such as this consume much of the novel, we never see a boy’s side of these discussions of dating—they all come from Sara, her sister, and her friends. As I was reading this text, I could not fathom how a boy would be able to relate to these conversations any more than I would be able to relate to a novel that prominently discussed a boy’s thoughts and conversations about dating girls. Therefore, I determined that even though conversations involving the pursuit of males from the female perspective have the potential to flatter male audiences, they are not topics with which they can relate, and dissociate them even further from the text.

Although *The Summer of the Swans* is the only novel I would not recommend for class instruction, I cannot say that it is a terrible novel. It won a Newbery, after all. This novel has the capacity to teach children what truly matters in life if they, like Sara, have lost sight of it. Once Sara loses her brother, the petty concerns that consume her for the majority of the novel begin to dissolve. However, Byar’s representation of Sara throughout the majority of the novel promotes negative female stereotypes; her limited development of male characters leaves boys no one with whom they may identify; and the topics of the novel are not ones with which most boys can easily identify. Therefore, although some students may enjoy this novel on their own time, it is certainly not one that I would use to relate to all audiences.

### **The Effects of “Patriarchal Women” on the Construction of their Characters**

In Lois Tyson’s article “Feminist Criticism,” she describes herself as a recovering “patriarchal woman because [she] was socially programmed [...] *not* to see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles” (86). According to Tyson, most women are “patriarchal” in the sense that even if they recognize the influence of the patriarchy in their lives, it takes them effort to resist its influence (86). As I addressed in my introduction, I was curious whether “patriarchal women” chose to write for children because they felt that they were incapable of thriving in a male-dominated literary world. I considered whether such “patriarchal women” produced “patriarchal characters” who embodied female stereotypes, and if this deleteriously effected boys’ reception to literature with female protagonists.

To assess this conjecture, I compiled a chart for each novel I read to record the patriarchal influences in the text. I listed all of the characters in the novel, identified whether they were male or female, whether or not they either experienced or supported patriarchal influences, and whether or not they ultimately subverted those influences. After collecting my data for each novel, I comprised biographical research on its author to determine whether patriarchal influences correlated to the data on my chart. Although I doubted that much of my research would reveal deep professions of patriarchally induced feelings of inferiority, I considered the experiences of the authors’ lives as a representation of their feelings of power or inferiority.

For example, I learned that Elizabeth George Speare, author of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, not only earned a Masters degree in English from Boston University in the nineteen thirties (“Elizabeth George Speare”), but also wrote for adults. Speare wrote two one-act plays before winning her first award in 1957 with the publication of “Calico Captive,” the story of a young woman in 1794 who was carried away to Canada after an Indian raid (“Elizabeth George

Speare”). While she was busy raising her two children, she wrote for *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Women’s Day*, and *Parents*. Speare had a passion for writing from the time she was eight and taught High School English before having her children (“Elizabeth George Speare”). She won numerous awards for her children’s novels and in her 1961 New York Times Book Review said, “I enjoy sharing with young people my own ever-fresh astonishment at finding that men and women and boys and girls who lived through the great events of the past were exactly like ourselves, and that they faced every day the same choices, large and small, which daily confront us,” (qtd. in Sullivan). After conducting research on Speare’s life, I discerned that Speare wrote for children not because she felt that she could not make it in the adult literary realm, but rather because she had the desire to inspire young minds.

I found this to be true in all of the research that I conducted on the authors. While the authors’ level of academic achievement varied from author to author (although all had at least a bachelor’s degree), the authors claimed to have a passion for writing for children. Furthermore, all authors had also written for adult audiences in one area or another, which proves that they were entirely capable, and knew they were capable, of writing for adults. Furthermore, all authors showed interest in inspiring children outside of directly writing novels. Many were teachers at some point or had conducted children’s creative writing courses. Thus, my research showed that in fact, *none* of the authors appeared to have had any motivation to write for children other than that it was their preferred audience. Clearly, this had a positive effect on the characters—or did it? It is hard to tell because all of the protagonists in the novels I read were strong, multidimensional, stereotype subverting females. All except for one—Sara in *The Summer of The Swans*.

What surprised me about this was that even Betsy Byars, the author of this novel, had strong stereotype subverting characteristics; yet, she still produced a weak character. Frankly, when I conducted biographical research on Byars, I could not believe that she had written the novel. It appeared as though patriarchal influences had not manipulated Byars at all. Like the other authors, she had written magazine articles for adult audiences (“Betsy Byars”) but Byars was the only author I researched who had initially disliked the idea of writing because she felt that it was too “tame” and “boring” of a profession (“Autobiography”). When she went to college, she initially sought to major in math or science with the intent to apply those skills to become a zoologist. It was not until she took a creative writing class in college that she learned how fascinating writing can be (“Autobiography”). Although this evidence supports that, in general, women do not choose to write for children because of feelings of inferiority, Byars’ novel indicates that there is no correlation between authors’ passion to write for children and the degree to which the patriarchy and gender stereotypes manifest in their work.

### **My Conclusions**

I began my study with three simple questions: *Why are girls underrepresented in classroom literature? What characteristics of novels with female protagonists engage all audiences? Do women writers’ feelings of inferiority contribute to weak character formation?* As I answered these questions, more questions arose: *How do protagonists’ embodiment or negation of gender stereotypes influence text enjoyment? How does the level of patriarchal influences impact relatability? Should we include novels that have the potential to induce dissociation in males?*

After solving these conundrums, I have reached the conclusion that most novels with female protagonists are suitable for classroom use. The primary criteria is that the protagonist is a strong, inspirational character who embraces qualities and roles that are neither traditionally male, nor traditionally female, but rather encompass the essential qualities of what it means to be human. The challenges that the characters overcome must be ones with which either all genders can relate, or which will help guide them through the trials they are sure to encounter in their life. Trials such as Karana's loneliness and isolation, Esperanza's loss of identity, Kit's prejudice and judgment from others, Hà's struggle to hold on to cultural values in a new environment, Delphine's sense of abandonment, and Miranda's search for truth are certainly not only beholden to females. Neither are the triumphs that these characters experience when they rise above their challenges. The love for herself that Karana gleans, the cultural pride that bolsters Kit and Hà's resilience, the perseverance and optimism that ultimately empowers Esperanza, the acceptance for the differences of others that replenishes love in Delphine's heart for her mother, and the understanding of the endless possibilities of the world that surround Miranda—these are not female triumphs. These are not female discoveries. These trials, tragedies, joys, accomplishments, hurdles, and hopes are *human*.

And is not that what we want for our students? To present them with human challenges, human struggles and human joys from all possible angles? Even if it is difficult for them to relate to at first. Even if it makes them squirm. Even if it makes them want to change every aspect of the novel that dissociates them from themselves. Even if it begins to illuminate the social wrongs in their own society. Even if it makes them determined to change the injustices around them. Even if it makes them consider more than a plotline. Even if it makes them *think*.

We are not meant to merely passively enjoy literature. Literature is a playground of experiences. It invites us to try on the lives of others. It invites us to understand our role in the world. While literature that depicts perfectly equal social balances can enhance enjoyment in some ways, *only* presenting readers with novels that embrace such an environment shelters them from important aspects of society that they must face. Literature opens our eyes to other perspectives, and teachers must teach students to look at a text from all angles, to find how they can relate to characters that may appear different from them, and to learn that while novels may persuade readers to look at the text in a specific way, they can resist them and rise above them.

My findings about the authors of these novels indicate that female writers do not write for children due to feelings of inferiority. The vast majority of my research indicated that the characteristics of the female protagonists do not so much exemplify the female experience, but rather, the *human* experience. Therefore, it is likely that boys do not enjoy literature with female protagonists simply because they are not used to them. It is likely that they have already, at their young age, developed assumptions that women are weak, subordinate, and inferior individuals whose stories are less interesting than theirs. It is likely that they have already begun to develop a sense of male entitlement and are not used to literature that illuminates the adverse effects of the characteristics that they have begun to embody.

If this is indeed the case, an equal representation of males and females in the classroom is even more crucial than I had initially thought. Representing boys and girls equally in classroom literature not only tells girls that they are vital members of our society; it dissolves feelings of superiority from boys—which ultimately has the potential to dismantle patriarchal influences in its entirety. This idea may appear a bit far-reaching, but if children learn early on that gender does not establish social clout, then individuals will have no ground on which they can either

assert their power or submit to others. If boys enter the classroom harboring negative feelings toward literature with female protagonists because the environment in which they have grown up has “othered” females, it is crucial that they read these texts to break down pre-established constructs and understand their similarities. To represent girls and boys equally in classroom literature is a small, but profound way to strengthen and unite society. Teaching literature that embodies the inspirational experiences of boys *and* girls inspires girls to live to be the vital components of society that they are and teaches boys that a girl’s experience is not the “other” experience.

It is a human experience.

## READING LIST

1. **When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead**

**Publication Date:** 2009

**Setting:** New York City, 1979

**Synopsis:**

After her best friend gets punched and subsequently refuses to talk to her, Miranda, a sixth-grade latchkey kid begins to receive mysterious notes. The anonymous writer of these notes proclaims that he is coming to save her friend's life and his own, and in order to do so, she must write him a letter. As she continues to receive mysterious notes Miranda realizes that the person sending them knows far more about her life than anyone should.

**Major Themes:**

Friendship, truth, time, literature, society and class, family, identity, forgiveness and compassion, possibilities.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Marcus says that common sense inhibits our ability to see truth. How does common sense get in the way of Miranda's thinking? Has common sense ever inhibited your ability to see truth? How so?
- Who do you think ultimately kills Marcus? Is it really the truck driver? How would the story be different if Marcus had not punched Sal in the beginning of the novel?
- What do you think Marcus means when he says that time is not linear?

2. **Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell**

**Publication Date:** 1960

**Setting:** 1830's -50s, Island of the Blue Dolphins—Imaginary island off the coast of California.

**Synopsis:**

Karana has lived on the Island of the Blue Dolphins with her family and tribe her entire life. However, when a group of Russian hunters come to the island to hunt for otter, conflict arises over the resources of the island. When Karana's father, Chief Chowig, stands up for the rights of his tribe, the Aleutians murder him along with forty other men. The tribe soon decides to leave the island for new resources and to start a new life. On the day they embark, Karana realizes that her brother Ramo is missing. Instead of boarding the boat with the rest of her tribe, Karana attempts to find Ramo, and the boat leaves without them. When Ramo's ego ultimately costs him his life when wild dogs attack him, Karana becomes the only individual left on the island. Once alone, Karana must adhere to roles that were once divided between men and women. While Karana learns to hunt for survival, she also learns the importance of compassion and forgiveness—initially intending to use her weapons to avenge the dog who killed her brother, Karana gains a meaningful friendship when she forgives him, and later, when she forgives the girl whose father killed her father.

**Major Themes:**

Forgiveness and “the other,” memory and the past, language and communication, tradition and customs, independence, trust, nature, isolation, self-reliance, and friendship.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Why do you think that Karana decides not to kill Rontu?
- What changes do you notice in Karana after she decides to break the laws of her tribe and make weapons?
- Karana constantly faces challenges on the island that she cannot control, but do you think that the way that Karana reacts to these challenges affects her feelings of happiness and

emotional security on the island? What do you think are some decisions that Karana makes that make her life more difficult on the island? What do you think are some decisions that Karana makes that make her life easier?

3. **One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia**

**Publication Date:** 2010

**Setting:** Oakland, California, 1968

**Synopsis:**

When Pa sends eleven-year-old Delphine and her two younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern on a plane to Oakland, California to visit their mother who left them seven years ago, it does not take long for the girls to realize why their grandmother, Big Ma, was so opposed to their father's idea. The girls' mother, Cecile (or Nzila as she likes to call herself) is the epitome of crazy. Cecile lives in a neon green stucco house, dresses like a secret agent, is a member of The Black Panther Party, and spends all day locked in the kitchen but tells her girls to wait in line for food at the homeless shelter or get Chinese take out in dangerous parts of the city. But, maybe Cecile is not as crazy as she appears. Maybe she is just...different.

**Major Themes:**

Acceptance perseverance, self-reliance, forgiveness, responsibility, memory and the past, and truth.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Does Delphine play a traditional sister role in her family? How or how not?
- Delphine believes her mother is crazy. Why does she think that? Would you describe Cecile as "crazy?" If not, what other word(s) would you use to describe her?

- How does Delphine feel on her first night with her mother in Oakland? If you were in her position, how would you feel?
- Why do you think Cecile calls Fern “Little Girl” and refuses to call her by her real name? What are the roles of names in this novel?
- Although Delphine dislikes her mother, do you see any likeable qualities in her? Do you find any reason to be sympathetic to her? How could you look at this story from Cecile’s perspective?

4. **Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz-Ryan:**

**Publication Date:** 2000

**Setting:** Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1924-1930; The San Joaquin Valley, California, 1930-1931

**Synopsis:**

*Esperanza Rising* is based off the author’s story of her grandmother. An only child and heir to a wealthy landowner, Esperanza grows up in Aguascalientes in a life of luxury complete with silk dresses, porcelain dolls, and servants to cater to her every need. However, when bandits capture and kill Esperanza’s father and her evil step-uncle, Tío Louis, burns down her home and blackmails her mother into marriage for her money, Esperanza’s life turns upside down. Rather than succumbing to Tío Louis’ blackmail, Esperanza and her mother flee with to California with several of their servants to find work. Now a newly impoverished immigrant, Esperanza struggles with the English language, racial prejudice, shabby living conditions, torn clothes, and harsh labor for low wages. Although Esperanza often feels that she is at the end of her rope, she never lets go of her hope.

**Major Themes:**

Hope, perseverance, the home, society and class, poverty, prejudice, the American dream, family, self-reliance, memory and the past, letting go, nature, and acceptance.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Which moments in the story do you think Esperanza exhibits the most change? Why?
- Do you think that this experience was good for Esperanza or do you think that she would have been better off living her life in Mexico?
- Which do you think that Esperanza values more: character or prestige? Is this consistent throughout the novel? Do you see areas in which this changes?
- Why does Esperanza say that she cannot be with Miguel? Are they due to barriers in her society or her own barriers?
- What do you think that the “heartbeat” of the earth represents? Do you think that Esperanza can actually hear it or is it something that she imagines? Why do you think that she can hear it at certain parts of the novel, but not others?

5. **The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elizabeth George Speare**

**Publication Date:** 1958

**Setting:** Wethersfield Connecticut, 1687

**Synopsis:**

Sixteen-year-old Kit Tyler has lived with her grandfather her entire life while immersing herself in rich literature, being pampered by slaves, and swimming in the clear waters of the tropical island of Barbados. However, after the passing of her grandfather, Kit is suddenly orphaned and travels by herself to Wethersfield Connecticut to stay with the only remaining

family she knows. Kit is excited to meet her aunt, uncle, and cousins, but soon realizes that her lavish apparel and aristocratic roots do not fit in with the stark Puritan colony. While Kit attempts to fit in by changing her clothing and teaching at a Dame school, she remains an outsider—until she meets Hannah Tupper, a single Quaker who lives by Blackbird Pond. While Hannah helps Kit be herself, Kit must also keep her friendship a secret. The colony of Wethersfield believes Hannah is a witch, and with Kit’s many idiosyncrasies, the colony may accuse her of witchcraft as well.

**Major Themes:** Identity, home, society and class, religion, education, marriage, judgment, misconceptions, family.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Prudence is initially afraid of Hannah Tupper, but after Kit introduces the two, Prudence finds her to be very kind. Kit explains to Prudence, “People are afraid of things they don’t understand” (118). How can Kit’s comment relate to other aspects of the novel?
- Why do you think it is so comforting to Kit to go to the meadows? What do they symbolize?
- How does Kit’s background affect her interactions with the people of Wethersfield?
- Why is it so significant that Prudence proves that she is able to read in front of the courtroom? Do you think that Kit’s teachings will impact the way that colonists perceive women?

6. **Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai**

**Publication Date:** 2011

**Setting:** Saigon, Vietnam; Alabama, United States, 1975

**Synopsis:**

For her entire life, ten-year-old Hà has known nothing but her home in Saigon. Her friends, her loving family, and her very own papaya tree are all ingrained in her daily life. However, when war strikes her country, Hà and her family flee to America and must learn to adapt to its language and culture. For the first time in her life, Hà meets cowboys, eats fried chicken and canned corn, and attends Southern Baptist Christian services. She also experiences difficulty with the English language, cultural prejudice, and bullies. In each of Hà's diary-formatted poems that comprise this novel, we learn of her struggles with acculturation, how she holds on to what is most important to her and lets go of what she cannot.

**Major Themes:**

Identity, warfare, family, acculturation, tradition, prejudice, perseverance, forgiveness and compassion, hope.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What do you think is the biggest struggle that Hà faces when she comes to America?  
What frustrates her the most?
- What are the main differences between Vietnamese and American culture?
- Why do you think Hà gets so upset when Ms. Scott has her class clap for her when she says the ABCs?
- At the end of the novel, Hà says that she has learned how to “fly-kick, not to kick anyone so much as to fly” (260). What does she mean by this?
- If you were in Hà's position, what would you want your classmates to know about you?

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