

Popular Culture and the Reading Teacher: A Case for Feminist Pedagogy

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Reading teachers concerned with gender equity have struggled to find ways in which to critically engage with students' popular culture. Traditionally, feminist reading teachers have seen popular texts as mechanisms for the reproduction of dysfunctional gender relations. However, this perspective is often met with resistance by young readers. In this paper, we argue that texts, such as Archie comics, that have traditionally been seen as mechanisms for the reproduction of patriarchy are more complex than they first appear. Through the critical analysis of an Archie story, Fairytale Land Revisited, we offer an example of how educators concerned with gender equity might use feminist post-structural theory to encourage students to engage critically and productively with popular texts.

Introduction

In the past thirty years, educators concerned with gender equity have struggled to find ways in which to open up critical discussions about gender relations with their students and to create spaces for social change. Initiating such discussions and creating such spaces has proven to be a significant challenge for educators from elementary school to post-secondary school. These struggles can be seen particularly in feminist educators' attempts to engage with students' popular culture in language arts curricula.

Traditionally language arts teachers concerned with gender equity have tended to see popular texts as mechanisms for the reproduction of dysfunctional gender relations. Like Taylor (1993), many feminist educators have seen popular texts as implicated in the reproduction of patriarchy through its extended use of ideologies such as the "ideology of romance" or the idea that heterosexual romantic love is essential to femininity. The work of Firestone (1972), Rowlands (1990), Sarsby (1983), Taylor (1993) and others have helped to reveal how popular texts can be seen as tools "to de-activate women's struggle against patriarchy" (Rowlands, 1990, p.11). From this perspective, the role of a feminist

literacy teacher has often been to reveal how a particular text works to construct femininity/gender relations along patriarchal lines. Within this kind of a framework, feminist reading teachers have often felt a responsibility in working with their students to reveal how ideologies of patriarchy, such as the ideology of romance, are embedded in popular texts and how they work as a “pivot of women’s oppression”(Firestone, 1972).

However, not surprisingly, this approach to popular culture has often been met with resistance by pre-teen and adolescent readers. Few young readers appear to embrace this kind of critique of popular culture or of romantic love. Instead, as noted by Kelly (1997), this kind of approach, although critical, often puts students in the position of having to choose between “politics and pleasure” (p.68), leading many students to reject critical analysis and frequently alienating the very students that we most hope to engage. How then might a teacher concerned with gender equity engage with students’ popular culture critically? What other options are there for feminist reading teachers who hope to initiate critical discussion and debate about gender issues in popular culture and create social change?

One possible solution springs from recent theories of literacy education. Kelly (1997) and Morgan (1998) among others (e.g., Hall, 1992; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) have argued that a shift from a traditional media literacy critique of popular culture to a cultural studies engagement with it is essential if we hope to encourage students to think critically about popular texts. These writers have taken the position that in constructing popular culture as a simple mechanism for the reproduction of regressive values, a traditional media literacy approach ends up constructing students as passive dupes of the media industry. They suggest a cultural studies approach to popular culture may be more fruitful. From a cultural studies approach, texts are seen as complex and often contradictory cultural productions, while students are seen as active meaning makers capable of resistant readings. Given the similarities between a media literacy critique of popular culture and a traditional feminist perspective of it, as well as the similarities between a cultural studies approach and feminist post-structural approach, a similar argument can be made for the need to shift from a traditional feminist critique of popular culture to a feminist post-structural engagement with it.

However, most elementary, middle school and secondary school reading teachers appear to have had little experience with either cultural studies or feminist post-structural theory. In this paper we explore what a feminist post-structural reading of a popular text might look like and offer examples of how educators concerned with gender equity might use feminist post-structural theory to encourage pre-teen students’ critical engagement with popular culture. Through a close reading of an *Archie* comic we argue that texts that have traditionally been seen as fairly straightforward mechanisms for the reproduction of patriarchy may be far more complex than they first appear. In particular, we argue that the story in question not only reproduces dominant ideas of gender

and sexuality but also raises profound questions about these ideas. This alternate reading is intended to help contribute to the ongoing struggle for literacy classrooms that engage in critical discussion of gender issues. We begin by describing how we became interested in conducting a feminist post-structural reading of an *Archie* comic and then outline some of the features of this approach. Finally, we offer a feminist post-structural reading of an *Archie* story to illustrate how this theoretical approach could be used to help open up critical discussion and debate.

The origins of our interest: Archie comics, surveys and interviews

This paper developed out of a larger research project initiated by Norton to explore issues of gender, language learning, popular culture and reading (Norton, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden 2004). *Archie* comics were chosen for this project because they appear to have had enduring popularity with students outside of school, yet are seldom, if ever, used within official reading curricula. In addition, these comics were uniquely placed for a study of issues of gender, language learning, popular culture and reading as they have been championed as a useful tool for reluctant readers and second language learners (Krashen, 1993), and yet have also been criticized for their sexist ideas about gender (Glasberg, 1992). In this way, these comics were uniquely placed for a study on issues of gender, language learning, popular culture and reading.

For those unfamiliar with the *Archie* series, the stories in *Archie* comics focus primarily on the relationships of a group of middle and upper middle class white teenagers living in the fictitious American community known as Riverdale. A central theme in *Archie* comics is the rivalry between two feminine characters, Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge, for the attentions and affections of the masculine lead character, Archie Andrews. In any given *Archie* magazine, there are up to a dozen stories, many of which seem to focus on this rivalry. Betty and Veronica are depicted as model thin, leggy and busty and are drawn dressed in fashionable clothing. In contrast, Archie and his masculine cohorts are not drawn with the same attention to their physical forms or attire. The masculine characters in the comics range from selfish, bad boy Reggie, the millionaire's son, to affable Jughead and dimwitted Moose. Archie himself does not have a strong characterization, although one of his most defining characteristics is that he is easily distracted by the female form.

After selecting *Archie* comics as a research tool, Norton created a survey for students in grades five through seven. In creating the survey, Norton found a particular *Archie* story, entitled *Fairytale Land Revisited*, which seemed to lend itself to questions about gender relations. A colour photocopy of this story was included with the survey and students were asked to read the comic and answer some specific questions about it in order to elicit their constructions of gender relations. The survey was administered to 55 grade five, six and seven students. After the surveys were collected, 10 girls and 10 boys were chosen for individual interviews in order to allow them to expand on their written answers. These

interviews were then transcribed in preparation for further coding and analysis. It was at this stage that Moffatt became actively involved in the research project. During our analysis, a number of the students' comments about the story struck us as particularly intriguing and these comments compelled us to return to the comic for a closer reading.

In the next section we outline the plot of *Fairytale Land Revisited* in order to contribute to the reader's understanding of our confusion at a few the students' comments about the story. We then review two of the students' comments that initiated our in-depth reading of *Fairytale Land Revisited*.

Fairytale Land Revisited

The story included in the survey, *Fairytale Land Revisited* (Fairytale Land Revisited, October 1996), focuses on a fantasy adventure in which Betty takes a walk through "Fairytale Land", meeting and interacting with an assortment of fairytale characters. The comic begins with Betty addressing the reader directly, asserting that fairytales often contain negative feminine role models. In the exchanges that follow, Betty is presented as an independent and modern girl who has modern solutions to the characters' problems. For example, on her walk through "Fairytale Land", Betty meets Little Bo Peep and Miss Muffett. When Bo Peep tells her, in tears, that she has lost her sheep, Betty retorts "Crying your fool head off isn't going to find them, girl! You need action! Go out and look for those lost sheep!" When Miss Muffett cowers in the presence of a spider, Betty assists her with a handy can of bug spray.

In the final vignette of the comic, Betty takes on the role of Little Red Riding Hood. As Betty sets out to visit her grandmother, Betty's mother cautions Betty that she might get cold and offers her a red cape to wear. However, Betty refuses this cape saying, "Mother! I am not an infant!" Thus Betty asserts that like the other feminine characters in the comic, she can look after herself.

This final vignette continues much like the traditional Red Riding Hood tale. Betty meets a wolf on her way to her grandmothers' cottage and then encounters him again when she gets there. In keeping with the traditional story, when Betty arrives at her grandmother's cottage she finds the wolf has dressed himself in her grandmother's clothes and that he is hiding in her grandmother's bed. The climax of this story comes when Archie, dressed as a woodsman, hears cries for help coming from the cottage. When Archie investigates these cries, he finds it is not Betty, but the wolf who has cried out. Betty has apparently flipped the wolf out of the bed and is proceeding to trounce him. At this point, Archie inquires whether Betty needs any help. In response to his inquiry, Betty tells him clearly that she does not. With her hands planted firmly on her hips she responds "Certainly not! Does it look like I need it?"

However, just as Betty refuses Archie's help, Veronica, Betty's rival, enters the narrative. In contrast to Betty's modest attire of pants, sneakers and a sweat-shirt, Veronica is drawn wearing a mini dress, knee-high, high-heeled, red boots and a short red cape. In other words, Veronica arrives dressed as a sexy version

of Red Riding Hood. As Betty finishes refusing Archie's help, Veronica says that *she* needs help from Archie as "there are a lot of nasty wolves about." A musical note in Veronica's speech bubble implies that Veronica has delivered her entreaty to Archie in a sing-song voice. In other words, that she is not really scared, but that she has used this request as a ploy to gain Archie's attentions. At Veronica's entreaty, Archie replies "I'd be glad to help you Veronica!" Archie and Veronica then turn from Betty and recede into the distance, hand in hand with hearts and butterflies floating around them. As they do so, Veronica exclaims "Thank you for carrying my basket you great big handsome woodsman!"

In the final frame of the story, Betty appears to question her earlier assertions about the virtues of looking after oneself. Betty addresses the reader directly and says "Poor Veronica! Gulp! Doesn't she know those fairytale characters are very outdated?" The word "Gulp!" in the middle of Betty's address to the reader can be taken to signify some misgiving on Betty's part. This word is used consistently in the *Archie* series when characters have discomfort about something they have said or done, or when they anticipate a negative consequence for their actions.

Anna and Sophie: Caution, students constructing gender relations

The two students who caused us to return to *Fairytale Land Revisited* with more focus were Anna, a grade seven student, and Sophie, a grade six student. In response to a survey question about what advice she would offer Betty, Anna wrote that Betty should "think about fairytales before she does something" and that she should "BE CAREFUL." In reading this advice, both researchers were initially confused. We considered briefly that Anna had not understood the comic and that her responses were too idiosyncratic to be useful in our efforts to understand these students' constructions of gender relations. However, when Anna's cautions were echoed by Sophie, who advised that Betty should "be careful wherever she goes" we began to wonder if these girls were actually telling us something important about the way they understood gender relations in the world. Although both researchers had read *Fairytale Land Revisited* prior to beginning analysis of the students' surveys and interviews, a further comment from Sophie forced us to return to the story for a closer reading.

In response to the survey question concerning how Betty might feel at the end of the comic, Sophie also wrote that she thought Betty felt "a little weird about what had happened at her granny's." This response plainly begged the question: What *had* happened at Betty's granny's? In the traditional story, it would make sense for Red Riding Hood to feel scared or frightened by her encounter with the wolf, but "weird" seemed an odd feeling to ascribe to Betty in this instance. In returning to the text of the comic we began to understand why Sophie might have imagined Betty felt "weird" and why Anna and Sophie may have offered Betty the advice they did. When we returned to the scene between Betty and the wolf, we found that the traditional exchange had been changed significantly by the authors of the comic. As the following excerpt of dialogue

reveals, the authors of *Fairytale Land Revisited* have constructed the wolf's interest in Betty in highly sexualized terms. The dialogue between Betty and the wolf reads as follows:

Betty: What big eyes you have!

Wolf: All the better to feast them on chicks like you!

Betty: What big lips you have!

Wolf: The better to press them against yours sugarpie!

In reading this exchange we came to understand why Sophie suggested that Betty might feel "weird" about what had happened at her grandmother's cottage and why both Anna and Sophie might recommend that Betty be careful "wherever she goes." In this exchange it appears that the wolf is sexualizing Betty in a way that none of the previous characters have and that he is mixing that sexualization with aggression. Anna and Sophie as pre-teen girls may well empathize with Betty's position, as they are likely beginning to understand that one of the great divides between pre-adolescent girlhood and adolescent womanhood is that as an adolescent one is more likely to be read in the world as a sexualized being. Anna and Sophie may well be aware that with the onset of adolescent womanhood they may be forced to negotiate unwanted sexual advances.

What does a feminist post-structural approach look like?

Following this return to the text, both researchers began to wonder what a close reading of *Fairytale Land Revisited* might reveal about the ways in which popular texts like this one work to reproduce sexist ideas of gender relations. Both researchers could also imagine how a media literacy or traditional feminist approach might help to expose the regressive ideas that run throughout such a comic. However, in reflecting on criticisms of these approaches made by writers such as Kelly (1997) and Morgan (1998), we began to wonder what a feminist post-structural reading of this comic might look like, or how this text might work to both reproduce and challenge dominant ideas of gender at the same time. Recognizing a lack of alternative readings of pre-teen popular culture we turned to the work of feminist post-structural scholars to help us examine how an educator might approach this text with fresh insights.

Feminist post-structural scholars such as Christian-Smith (1993), Davies (1993), Luke (1996), Poovey (1988), Tompkins (1985), Walkerdine (1985), and Weedon (1997) have examined how texts as diverse as popular fiction, state records of parliamentary debates, medical lectures and advice columns can be read "as powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself" (Tompkins, 1985, p. xi). From these theorists' perspectives, literary works are "not works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms" (Tompkins, 1985, p. xi). Instead, literary texts can be seen as cultural productions that actively participate in the reproduction and interrogation of the social order they are produced in (Poovey, 1988). These writers have helped outline a literary theory in which

texts are not simply the mechanisms for the reproduction of dominant ideas of gender but are also vehicles for questioning such ideas.

Following feminist post-structural scholarship, and our own interests in issues of gender relations and literacy education, our re-reading of *Fairytale Land Revisited* included the following central questions: (i) How does this text reproduce dominant ideas of gender relations? (ii) How does this text question dominant ideas of gender relations? (iii) What kinds of problems and/or solutions does this text hold out to its readers? In addition, as we are familiar with current literature that suggests sexual harassment, sexual violence, and homophobia are highly significant in students' lives (Carmody, 2003; Jezl, 1996; Kimmel, 2000; Larkin, 1997; Popaleni, 1991), we found ourselves asking: (iv) How does this text address issues of masculine/feminine sexual desire and sexuality?

A feminist post-structural reading of *Fairytale Land Revisited*

In our examination of *Fairytale Land Revisited*, we were surprised at the abundance of information about gender relations and sexuality embedded in the story. Regardless of the fact that *Archie* comics are generally viewed as light entertainment for pre-teen readers, issues of gender and sexuality are present throughout *Fairytale Land Revisited* from the very first frames of the comic to the last. In the first frames of the comic Betty meets a group of girls who are crying because "Georgie Porgie kissed us and then ran away." In the last frame of the comic, as noted earlier, Archie and Veronica are shown walking away together hand in hand with hearts and butterflies floating around them. In other words, both the first and last frames contain feminine and masculine characters and allude to some kind of sexual or romantic interaction. However, what students may learn from this comic is not entirely clear. Approaching the text from a feminist post-structural perspective allowed us to see that while many of these scenes appear to reinforce dominant ideas of gender relations, many of them appear to question these ideas at the same time. For the purposes of this paper we will focus particularly on the sequence of frames that represent the "Little Red Riding Hood" story in the comic, as issues of gender relations and sexuality appear to come to the fore most prominently in these frames.

As noted by Zipes (1983), the traditional story of Little Red Riding Hood has often been interpreted as a cautionary tale about the dangers of adult sexuality. *Fairytale Land Revisited*, as a modern re-telling of the story, makes this sexual subtext all the more explicit. Issues of gender and sexuality can be seen particularly in the exchanges between Betty and the wolf where the wolf, as a masculine character, is consistently depicted as a kind of sexual predator and Betty, as a feminine character, is depicted as cautious in her interactions with him. The construction of the wolf as a sexual predator begins with his introduction to the story. In the first frame where the wolf is introduced, he is depicted as highly masculinized: he is drawn wearing a suit and a tie and is driving a sports car. On meeting Betty in the woods, the wolf offers her a lift. Betty refuses this offer. However, the wolf's offer and Betty's refusal would likely bring to the reader's

mind either memories of stories of what can happen to girls who get into cars with strange men or of cautions about talking to strangers. As evidenced in our students' responses, many readers would intuit from this exchange that the wolf has a sexual interest in Betty and possibly violent intentions towards her.

The sexual nature of the wolf's interest in Betty, and his characterization as a sexual predator, is particularly underscored in his exchange with Betty at her grandmother's cottage. As noted earlier, when Betty enters her grandmother's cottage, she finds the wolf has arrived before her. It is at this stage that we find the dialogue between Betty and the wolf, which appears to have elicited Anna and Sophie's advice that Betty should "be careful wherever she goes. The expression on Betty's face in these frames appears to be one of shock and horror. the wolf appears sinister and aggressive. In raising the spectre of stories of abduction, as well as possible assault, these scenes can be read as upholding dominant ideas of masculine and feminine sexual desire that sees masculine desire as predatory and aggressive and feminine desire as passive and cautious.

From a traditional feminist perspective it might be suggested that in reading these scenes, students will learn that boys and men are innately sexually aggressive and that girls and women are innately passive or cautious in their sexual relations. However, from a feminist post-structural perspective these scenes may also raise significant questions about such ideas. Using insights from psychoanalytic literary theory, feminist post-structural theory draws our attention to the way the consistent repetition of particular ideas often serves to cast such ideas into doubt. Thus from this perspective, while the consistent repetition of these images of masculine sexual aggression and feminine passivity may reinforce dominant ideas of gender and sexuality, they may also serve to raise questions about whether this contrast between masculine and feminine desire is universal, natural or inevitable. In other words, from a feminist post-structural perspective, the repeated projections of images of sexually aggressive masculinity and cautious femininity in *Fairytale Land Revisited* forces the reader to consider whether girls and boys really have similar or different sexual desires and whether these desires are similar or different at all times and in all places. In this way, the content of *Fairytale Land Revisited* may both work to reify and to interrogate dominant ideas of gender.

A similar moment of contradiction in which dominant ideas of gender relations appear to be both upheld and cast into doubt can be seen in the final frames of the comic when Veronica is introduced to the story. In Walkerdine's (1985) exploration of girls' comics, she argues that heterosexuality is often proffered as a solution or a way out of the "misery of femininity." As we read over *Fairytale Land Revisited* we felt that Veronica and Archie's pairing off in the final frames of the story could easily be read as an example of heterosexuality being offered as a solution to a problem embedded in the text. But, it took a careful re-reading of the story to map out what this problem might be. In thinking about the scenes between Betty and the wolf, we began to feel that the text was constructing heterosexuality as a solution to a persistent problem in girls' and women's lives,

one that might well make us miserable. In particular, we were struck by the frame that immediately follows the fairly sinister exchange between Betty and the wolf at Betty's grandmother's cottage. In this frame the reader is presented with a picture of the outside of the cottage. Calls for help are emanating from a window. Thus the reader is left for a moment to imagine that the wolf is attacking Betty. As the wolf's interest in Betty has been depicted as particularly sexual in nature, we can assume that he is attempting to sexually assault her.

In reading this comic carefully we began to see that the "misery of femininity" that Walkerdine (1985) recognizes may not be connected to any Oedipal or Electra complex, as she seems to suggest, but may actually hinge on the fact that women and girls continue to live in a world in which they are not safe either in their own homes or in the "woods." In this light, the problem that *Fairytale Land Revisited* appears to present to its readers is that women and girls are vulnerable to sexual attack. The solution it appears to offer is that, like Veronica, girls and women should to use their 'physical assets' to secure the attentions and thus the protection of a man via a romantic liaison. As the reader will recall, when Veronica enters the story, she is drawn wearing a mini dress and knee-high, high-heeled, red boots. Thus in contrast to Betty's more modest attire, Veronica is presented as taking on the attributes of adult women who use hyper-femininity in order to capture masculine sexual attention. In this way, *Fairytale Land Revisited* appears to offer heterosexuality and hyper-femininity as a practical solution to the problem of women and girls' vulnerability in the world.

This valorization of heterosexuality and hyper-femininity can be seen as a moment when the text again affirms dominant or patriarchal ideas of gender relations. However, from a feminist post-structural perspective, it is worth noting that the wolf propositions Betty both outside "in the woods" and inside a "home." In this way the text also suggests that even the supposed security of a home, or a romantic liaison with a man, may not be enough to protect women from unwanted sexual advances. Similarly, the image of Veronica walking away with Archie at the end of the comic, now supposedly "safe," both suggests heterosexuality is a reasonable solution to women's vulnerability and yet also raises questions about what happens to women like Betty who do not have the protection of a male partner. From a feminist post-structural perspective, this image of Betty standing alone as Veronica and Archie walk away might also raise questions about whether the fate of unattached women is just. It should be noted that throughout the *Archie* series, Betty is consistently constructed as the character who most deserves the reader's sympathies. She is kind, thoughtful, hardworking and modest. By placing Betty in this position of being unattached and thus vulnerable, *Fairytale Land Revisited* reminds the reader that women's vulnerability has more to do with their place in the world as women, than it has to do with personal character flaws or conduct. That Veronica appears to resort to the symbols of hyper-femininity to secure a romantic connection to a masculine character helps raise questions about the extent to which girls and women must present 'stylized selves' in order to gain masculine approval.

On a similar note, Veronica's sing-song entreaty to Archie that she needs protection not only presents an image of a feminine character attempting to manipulate a masculine character, and makes light of women's vulnerability, but also raises questions about whether women are as safe in the world as men and if not, then why they are not. This allusion to women's need for protection raises further questions about why women are attracted to/form romantic alliances with men in the first place. In effect, by alluding to issues of safety within the contexts of a story about heterosexual romantic alliances, *Fairytale Land Revisited* opens up the possibility that women's attraction to men has more to do with what they offer in our culture than with any "natural" sexual orientation. In other words, *Fairytale Land Revisited* essentially suggests that heterosexual relations are not based on innate feminine desires but are built around the very practical need to find safety in a world where women who do not have strong alliances with men are often more vulnerable to attack than are women who do have such alliances. In sum, in the light of a feminist post-structural reading of *Fairytale Land Revisited*, it appears that this text works to construct gender relations along patriarchal lines, while it simultaneously unravels this construction.

So what does this mean for literacy teachers concerned with gender equity? From our perspective, it means that even a text that appears to be a simple mechanism for the reproduction of dominant ideas of gender relations may contain radical possibilities for investigating these very same relations, particularly if it is read using feminist post-structural theory. If an educator is interested in addressing issues of gender equity in popular culture, s/he could choose a traditional feminist approach and work to critique texts like *Archie* for the ways it reproduces dominant ideas of gender, or s/he could use the tools of feminist post-structuralism to invite students to see both the regressive and radical potential in such a text. We anticipate that the latter approach may be more warmly received than the former. In attempting to encourage critical discussion of gender issues and sexuality in popular culture, a teacher might use the same kinds of questions that we did in our exploration of this text. S/he might ask: How does this text reproduce dominant ideas of gender? How does this text work to challenge dominant ideas of gender? What problems does this text present? What solutions does it hold out? Finally, What kinds of questions does this text raise about gender relations/masculinity/ femininity/desire/sexuality?

Conclusion

While literacy teachers concerned with gender equity have struggled to find ways to encourage students' critical engagement with popular culture, feminist post-structural theory may be a useful tool in this regard. In conducting this close reading of an *Archie* comic, we have come to believe popular texts that have previously been considered to be simple mechanisms for the reproduction of dysfunctional gender relations may also simultaneously raise questions about dominant ideas of gender. In particular, this reading suggests feminist post-structural theory may help teachers and students alike to see texts and readers in

more complex ways. Our reading represents a preliminary attempt to illustrate how feminist post-structural theory might be used on a popular text. It is our hope that feminist post-structural theory may encourage more students to engage critically with popular culture. What is needed now are more elementary, middle school and secondary school language arts teachers who are willing to experiment with this theory in their classrooms and to share their experiences of success and failure. Feminist post-structural theory may hold great promise, but it needs to be embraced by practising teachers and teacher educators if its radical possibilities are to be fully realized.

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