The Story So Far: gender, literacy and social regulation

By Pam Gilbert, School of Education, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia

Abstract:

This article examines ways in which language practices in the classroom — particularly those involved with the reading and writing of stories — are gendered literacy practices. It argues that stones are closely identified with structuring the meanings by which a culture lives, and that popular and familiar stories rely upon dominant versions of femininity and masculinity to be understood or 'read'. The article suggests that story genres are 'gendered' in the way in which they organize sequences of events, in the discursive fields from which they draw, and in the character-trailing paradigms they prefer. The claim is made that when children write stories they enter into a form of social regulation implicit in the cultural conventions of popular narrative forms. Story-writing is seen to be a social, ideological activity which often masquerades as personal expression. The article argues that the gendered nature of classroom literacy practices will be more obviously recognized if classroom language approaches are framed from within critical discourse theory and theories of subjectivity; and if the constraints posed by generic conventions and the cultural devaluation of many 'feminine' genres, are more deliberately confronted and addressed in the classroom.

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Telling fairy stories, even telling good fairy stories very well...simply
doesn't count. The positions of real power and influence in our society
necessitate command of genres for which boys' educational experience provides
an appropriate preparation and girls' doesn't... girls' genre competence at
primary school is not merely irrelevant but positively
disabling. (Poynton, 1985; p. 36)
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For many feminist educators, warning bells have been sounding faintly for a number of years now about what might be the significance of differences exhibited by female and male students to classroom writing, and about the clear differences that also seem to have emerged in terms of classroom and leisure reading preferences. Girls have been strongly identified both as writers and as readers of 'stories': girls like to write stories, they like to read stories, and they also seem to like to buy stories (and have stories bought for them). The popularity and success of commercial fiction for girls has been well-documented (see Christian-Smith, 1990), as has the similar popularity and success of romance fiction for adult women (see Radway, 1984).

Certainly stories — in all of their many forms — have occupied a significant position of privilege in many language classrooms. Story reading is commonly regarded as a cornerstone of reading programs, and story writing a focal point of writing programs. We spend a lot of time in classrooms talking about stories: talking about how to read them, how to write them, and how important stories are as meaning-makers in our culture. But while support and encouragement for the power of storying in the classroom has been a dominant feature of language education pedagogy in the last decade, there has been an interesting silence within this pedagogy about what all these narratives are about — about what we really do when we read and write stories.

What meanings do stories make? Who gets to tell stories? How do stories function in our culture? In other words, how do people do things with narrative? And there is also an interesting silence about the gendered nature of narrative practice, or of any language practice, despite mounting argument that literacy learning is inevitably culturally and historically specific, and therefore inevitably gendered (Gilbert, 1989a).

In this paper I want to look at the potential of story-writing and story-reading as challenging and stimulating language activities for children, but I also want to suggest that — like all other language games we play — storying is a social practice and that it is inevitably a gendered practice. Stories have a functional role in our culture: we live a good deal of our lives on the power of various stories, and it is through stories that we position ourselves in relation to others, and are ourselves positioned by the stories of our culture. However it is only when language processes like story-telling are read in this way, that we are able to recognize how they play a major role in regulating social meanings in the classroom, and how such social meanings might be differently constructed with different sorts of stories and different ways of reading. I see this to be a key issue for feminist pedagogical practice: the language classroom can be a powerful site for telling stories about story-telling, and a powerful site for constructing new stories, with new tellers.

The Story So Far: narrative, gender and the language classroom

Narrative writing has often been the province — although not the exclusive province — of the language and literature classroom, although just how valuable the whole subject of language and literature might be for young women has been an issue of some concern to educators over the past 20 years or so (see Gilbert, 1989b). In the 1970s and 1980s it became apparent that much was wrong with curriculum content (Sheridan, 1983), classroom interaction patterns (Spender & Sarah, 1980), and teacher expectations of students (Clarricoates, 1978), if girls were to be able to operate as effectively as we would like in classrooms. Stanworth's British study (1984) of how damaging many of these factors were has been picked up in North America, Australia and New Zealand, and today affirmative policies for the education of young women have been advanced and legislated for in most English speaking countries. Many countries have also directly addressed the potential difficulties of literature and literacy oriented classrooms in this regard (Sheridan, 1983; Gilbert, 1989b).

Clearly the role that written language practices can and do play in constructing and maintaining educational gender inequalities has been noted for some time, but attention has predominantly focused within this field on the printed materials authorized for classroom use. Time and again it has been noted that almost without exception limited and unrealistic portrayals of women and girls are made in these books, and that the situation has not altered significantly in the last 10 years. On the whole it could certainly be strongly argued that children receive a reasonably steady diet of gender stereotyping through classroom literature.

However, the significance of an imbalanced reading program is not an easy matter to define or to deal with. As Walkerdine (1984) has convincingly argued, the substitution of counter-sexist stories for sexist stories will not necessarily solve problems of gender inequality, and Davies' (1989) work with the responses of preschool children to counter-sexist stories provides

discussion of why this might be so. Her work demonstrates effectively the impact of gendered histories upon reading. The ways in which people read — the uses they make of reading — are much more complex than simple substitution or censorship would perhaps suggest.

But it is these ways in which people read — the different ways in which people make textual meaning as a result of their social histories — that has often eluded educational researchers. While educators have long accepted that there is a definite connection between reading and writing, reading research has so frequently been associated with cognitive styles of research, that the cultural factors affecting reading and writing at school tend to have been rather too easily bypassed. The social context of literacy and learning has only recently become a significant area of educational research, and with it has come an interest in classroom literacy practices (see, for instance, Luke & Baker, 1991) and the social processes of reading and writing and talking (see, for instance, Kress 1985). Now, for instance, researchers ask questions such as: what comes to count as reading in primary and secondary school classrooms? (Freebody & Luke, 1990) or, what comes to count as a personal response in a literature lesson? (Gilbert, 1987); or, what comes to count as acceptable answers in classroom discussion? (Baker & Davies, 1989).

In addition, the processes of reading and writing are seen to be more than singular processes. Reading is accepted as much more than a simple matter of graphophonic decoding. Nor can it best be understood as a personal, idiosyncratic activity. Instead reading has been recognized as a social practice: to learn to read is to learn sets of language practices which allow us to make social sense of the vastly different forms of printed materials we daily encounter. Reading, too, is obviously not always and inevitably the same: the cultural sites, or 'frames' vary, and so do the 'readings'. In fact it is hard to talk about reading in the singular. We make different readings, dependent upon the different positions we take up in relation to the text in question, and undoubtedly our gendered histories play a significant role in defining what positions we can take up in relation to various texts.

Similarly writing is not a singular activity — nor necessarily a personal one. Language is a social meaning system, and every time we write we use the available social signifying system we all share. Not to use it requires a conscious act of resistance to the conventions and norms of language practices. And yet so often this is missed. As the ebb and flow of our day-to-day existence, language often passes as a neutral message system: as an almost transparent medium through which we communicate.

It is still common to hear reference today to the natural and individual ways in which children learn to read and to write, to the creative and expressive ways in which children make sense of their worlds. Some of the rhetoric and beliefs of the 'personal growth-centered' language pedagogy popularized in the 1960s are still with us in many ways in the 1990s, and such a pedagogy has important implications for issues of gender, mainly because it assumes a stable concept of subjectivity, a stable 'self or individual unconnected with the discourses/language of culture. It cannot deal with issues of subjectivity: with questions of how 'subjects' — girls, boys, women, men, lovers, friends, wives, husbands — are constructed through discourse. And it cannot deal with the way in which subjectivities shift and change. Poststructuralist work on subjectivity makes it difficult now to accept such a concept of a stable subject or self who has no

discursive history, and who is not positioned differently, at different times, within different sets of discourses (Weedon, 1987).

If language practices — reading, writing, talking, listening — are seen to be predominantly cognitive, predominantly individualistic, predominantly natural, then it is difficult to accept and acknowledge that it is also through language practices that we learn how to take up positions in our culture as women and men, wives and husbands, lovers and friends: that we learn how to function socially in our world. We need a social framework for understanding language, and particularly for understanding the role that language practices might play in the social construction of gender.

Discourse Theory and Post-structuralism

One such social and cultural language framework can be provided by certain forms of discourse analysis: methods of language analysis which attempt to answer critical questions about why language conventions prevail, and to see such conventions as the product of relations of power and struggles for power (Fairclough, 1989). Discourse analysis of this type (an interpretative rather than descriptive model) is particularly helpful when considering questions of power, because it allows us to look at how socio-linguistic conventions have a dual relation to power, in this case power which operates not only to construct concepts say, of masculinity and femininity, but also to privilege one form over another. As Fairclough says, language conventions on the one hand "incorporate differences of power", and on the other hand "arise out of — and give rise to — particular relations of power" (1989, pp. 1-2). Both of these are important when considering how language practices are 'gendered', because they allow us to look at 'difference' within language conventions as well as the conditions of possibility of such difference.

For example such an approach to language study might look at romance novels (as popularized in the Harlequin or Mills and Boon series), or contemporary popular film genres (as with Fatal Attraction or Pretty Woman) and ask not only how differences of power between men and women are incorporated within the conventions of the novels and film genres, but also ask where such conventions come from, and what larger power relationships they reflect and construct. In other words, what discourses do such textual forms belong to, and what gender power relationships do such discourses depend upon and maintain?

Certain story forms are more closely aligned to particular discourses than others. The contemporary romance novel, for instance, is obviously a conventional language form which draws many of its major conventions from contemporary versions of romance ideology. Consequently if we look at the power relationships developed within the novels, we can relate such power relationships to the discursive roots of the form. Obviously a romance novel whose roots are in feminist discourses will develop gender relationships — and power balance — differently. It would be likely, for instance, that a story discursively tied to feminism would have a different approach to female sexuality and female independence than would a story discursively tied to conventional romance. Conventional romantic ideology, relying as it does upon phallus-dominated heterosexuality and female dependence (Snitow, 1984), obviously makes certain sets of narrative conventions possible, and certain sets impossible. What counts as a satisfactory resolution to an initial problem depends upon the framework it is linked to. For

instance many feminists would see heterosexual love, marriage and child-bearing as only one set of options open to women, and would want to question and alter traditional patterns of male dominated heterosexual relationships. By comparison, romance ideology actively promotes these options and these relationships, and romance stories are constructed around these sets of narrative possibilities.

However the way in which narratives are 'read' or received depends upon a number of other important conditions, and this is where post-structuralist theories of textuality are helpful in exploring questions of reading and meaning-making. Post-structuralism as a field of textual inquiry exposes the openness and infinite plurality of texts as fields of signification, and challenges the notion that texts can be sites of predetermined, stable meanings. But it also offers explanations of how it has become possible for us to 'read' and recognize stable meanings and textual unity. For instance, the recognition of certain narrative conventions in stories is dependent upon the discursive orientation of the reader: readers take up reading positions in relation to texts which allow them to produce conventional cultural meanings. But the range of reading positions readers can take up — the different ways in which they can make meaning from texts — is of course a result of their different discursive histories. Recognition of feminist ideology within a narrative genre, may not, for instance, be available to a reader who is not positioned within feminist ideology. Feminist literary aesthetics and cultural analysis have explored this paradox, by detailing the mixed initial reception some women's literature has received (Levy, 1985), and the alternative readings that can be made of contemporary popular film and media texts (Smith, 1989).

While readers may be able to recognize particular narrative conventions in a text, they may also choose to resist and critique such conventions if their access to other discursive knowledge and other reading positions challenges the dominant ideology of the text they read. In other words it is possible to be a resistant reader to what has come to pass as the socially conventional 'reading' of a story (to read 'differently'), if you have access to discourses which challenge the orthodoxy and status of the text in question. It is less possible to be a resistant reader if you see nothing to challenge in the dominant reading position offered: if you can not denaturalize the apparent naturalness and opacity of the language; or if you can not conceive of other ways to construct a plausible narrative sequence of events; or if you are unable to reconstruct what counts as a narrative 'event' differently.

Telling Stories

In a theoretical analysis of narrative fiction, Cohan & Shires (1988) suggest that our culture depends upon numerous types of narrative: novels, short stories, films, television shows, myths, anecdotes, songs, music videos, comics, paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies, and news accounts. They have become our culture's stories: part of the social practices we live by; part of the social fabric of our lives. Stories, claim Cohan & Shires, are closely identified with structuring the meanings by which a culture lives.

But the important point to remember here is that these stories are only tellings: they exist because they are told at particular times by particular tellers, and because they can be read or retold by particular readers. Not all 'stories' will be told; not all 'stories' will be read. Consequently

storytellings help both to structure and to regulate cultural meanings by telling some stories rather than others; by organizing a story's events in certain ways; by choosing areas of experience that seem 'worthy' of a story. As a result, stories help both to structure and to regulate dominant and acceptable versions of parenting and marriage; dominant and acceptable versions of childhood and adolescence, and, of course, dominant and acceptable versions of femininity and masculinity. Through them we learn how to talk, how to act, how to look: we learn what is acceptable and what is not. And it is the stories of our culture — the stories told by Neighbors, Fatal Attraction, MTV, Sixty Minutes, Mills and Boon, The Woman's Day, Time Magazine — that regulate these meanings.

It is this regulative function of narratives that deserves much closer attention in language and literature classrooms. Stories function in our culture as powerful — often invisible — forms of social control. By sequencing narrative events in an apparently logical/natural/common-sense order, stories provide 'readings' (sense-makings) of our lived cultural experiences. As visual, auditory, iconic or written texts, stories then become cultural artifacts, contributing to the valorization and dominance of certain cultural experiences. If, as educators, we bypass the ways in which narratives operate in this way, we sell our students short in terms of social understanding, and in terms of providing them with ways of constructing other stories, with other social meanings. In other words, classrooms should be concerned not only with how stories work — both in the construction and regulation of specific social meanings — but with how they might be made to work differently.

Gendered Stories: reading narratives

A focus on 'narrative' construction — on storying in our culture — would seem, then, to be a potentially powerful way of unlocking, with students, something of the way in which language patterns contribute to the cultural construction of gender. An initial starting point might well be to focus on various narrative genres: various sets of recognizable narrative conventions which project for the reader "a horizon of expectation and intelligibility based on conventions learned from prior knowledge" (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 77).

Unquestionably illusions of 'naturalness' and opacity in language are assisted by generic patterns: conventional ways of talking and writing which communicatively competent members of a society learn and share. And because genres are recognizable social language conventions, genres themselves provide a reasonable index to cultural values and assumptions — particularly gendered values and assumptions — held within a society at a particular time. As recognition of this, Johnson (1986-87) argues that narrative genres — stories — can be among the most powerful and ubiquitous of social categories or subjective forms in their constructions of stereotypical femininity and masculinity. Most popular story genres, for instance, can only be understood as a plausible sequence of events if readers begin with particular cultural expectations of gender. Indeed most popular story genres are, as Cohan & Shires suggest, gendered.

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The modern romance genre can be more properly termed a 'feminine narrative'.
For it structures the meaning of gender difference through a narrative
representation of female subjectivity in much the same way that masculine
narratives such as the thriller and western structure the meaning of
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gender difference through narrative representations of male subjectivity.
Though their structures differ, both feminine and masculine narrative genres
rationalize the normative values of heterosexual relations — in the household
(for the female) and in the workplace (for the male). In the case of
feminine narrative, the story places gender in a field of signification so
that, at the level of events and actors, representations of sexual difference
acquire meaning by reinforcing the values of love and marriage, of emotional
vulnerability and domesticity, and by making them appear natural, inevitable,
and desirable as culturally legible signs of 'femininity'. In the case of
masculine narrative, the story structure promotes the values of competition,
physical power, and authority as irrefutable signs of 'masculinity'. (Cohan
& Shires, 1988, pp. 79-80)
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Choices about story progression, about the organization of events in a narrative, about the functions of actors, indicate decisions made about gendered subjects. Because narrative form relies upon progressive transformations (one event is transformed into another), the set of transformations that is conventionally possible within particular narrative genres provides a social indicator of what are acceptable actions for both groups. These transformations are organized in two ways-on both horizontal and vertical axes.

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A story... syntagmatically places events in a sequence to organize signifying
relations of addition and combination, thereby operating like metonymy in a
linguistic structure. Moreover, events in a story do not 'simply happen' in a
syntagmatic chain but are structured paradigmatically as well. A story
paradigmatically replaces one event with another to organize signifying
relations of selection and substitution, thereby operating like metaphor in a
linguistic structure. For purposes of analysis, then, a story can be
segmented into events, and events can be distinguished from each other (and
so identified as signifiers) according to the way in which the story sets
them in a structure of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. (Cohan &
Shires, 1988, p. 54).
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For instance, in the set of novels published recently in Australia as Dolly Fiction, a new teen romance series, the story of the narratives follows one of three sets of paradigmatic transformations (see Gilbert & Taylor, 1991). The young woman protagonist may, perhaps, not look 'right': she has not yet learnt how to inscribe her body appropriately to be recognized as feminine and therefore ready for romance. Consequently she will need a friend who has certain skills and experience in this regard; she will need money to achieve her goals; and she will need to meet a young man who will make the transformation seem worth the trouble. Events can then be placed syntagmatically next to each other within the narrative as a logical and 'natural' sequencing order.

Alternatively, a female protagonist in Dolly Fiction may be disinterested in boys and this disinterest has to be changed. The organization of events in this version will then indicate how the disinterested heroine is to be transformed. Or thirdly, a Dolly Fiction heroine may not yet have understood what are regarded as appropriate sets of behaviours for young 'feminine' women. Consequently the sequence of events will feature lessons in modesty, passivity and unselfishness, and in how to support boys rather than challenge them. What counts as a transformation in Dolly Fiction can thus only be understood from within a particular set of discourses which construct femininity in stereotypical ways. But what is important here is that

while the structure of the narrative can be read in this gendered way, it takes a gendered reading practice to make such a sequence of incidents seem meaningful and possible.

The conventions of various genres are recognized by readers who have learnt how to read certain language conventions and then interpret them in particular (social) ways. The stability of these conventions, however — the unity attributed to a particular text — relies largely upon the willingness of readers both uncritically to accept the narrative practice employed, and uncritically to miss the gaps and silences in the texts by accepting the transformations offered as legitimate. For instance, it is possible to take up an apparently dominant reading position offered in a romance novel and to accept the narrative transformations proposed in the text, if a reader is already positioned within discourses that make such a cultural semiotic plausible and indeed attractive. For many young women, who are already positioned within reading formations that similarly construct femininity and romance, the practice of the narrative is hard to identify: it connects so seemingly 'naturally' with many other cultural practices in their lives. It connects with MTV clips, popular movies, magazines, news stories, fairy tales — and is often demonstrated as 'natural' practice in the stories that girls write at school.

Gendered Storying: writing narrative

Girls have traditionally been linked with writing (and traditionally been regarded as good at writing), and a recent report on national writing testing in the United Kingdom (White, 1986) confirms that these assumptions have a certain validity. White's work refers to intensive testing of children from England, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1979, in relation to girls' and boys' attitudes to writing and to their different abilities with school writing tasks. From that work she makes the claim that "in each of the surveys conducted, on all of the analytic criteria used, girls have been found to achieve higher mean scores than boys" (p. 563). Similar results have been documented in Australian reports on students' success in Subject English (English Teachers Association of Western Australia, 1991).

But it is men who are generally regarded as being the writers of philosophy, psychology, science, history, poetry and drama. Control of the more powerful discourses lies with men; the lower status written forms — the service industry of writing such as secretarial work, family letter-writing, diary entries, genealogical records, story-writing — are the ones dominated by women workers. Despite the professed weighting society gives to literacy skills, being good at school writing — particularly story-writing — apparently counts for little in the job market, and does not offer women speaking positions of authority in the more powerful public discourses. Rather obviously, writing competence does not lead directly to career prospects — neither careers in commercial writing-related fields like publishing or advertising, nor careers in professions like law or academia.

On the contrary, story-writing at school may contribute in quite significant ways to the entrenchment of stereotypical gender positions in classrooms. For instance, significant research evidence exists at every level of institutionalized learning to indicate students' clear acceptance of the need to take up stereotypical gendered subject positions in writing. Noticeable differences in preferred writing topics, in character construction, and in generic choice, can be read from the written work of female and male students (see Gilbert & Taylor, 1991 for an overview of this

research). But the significance of this has not often been explored. Davies' work with preschoolers (1983) provides a clear account of the process at work in the pre-school, but such studies are, on the whole, still rare. For the most part, what children actually write about (the speaking positions they take up and the subjects they so construct), seems not to be of key concern to many teachers. Indeed, as one English educator argues (Medway, 1987), language classrooms are often 'contentless' arenas: neither teachers nor researchers usually notice, for example, what the subject matter of children's writing is.

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while there is no shortage of schemes for categorizing writing by rhetorical
function, form and genre, I have found almost nothing which deals with what
the writing is about... (Medway, 1987, pp. 11-12)
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Medway argues that writing for its own sake has become so important at school that the subject matter of the writing classroom seems not to matter.

If this is so, it partly accounts for why so little attention has been given to the excessively stereotypical nature of much children's story-telling, and why so little pedagogical concern has been directed towards discursively placing the texts children construct. And yet Steedman's (1982) analysis of a story constructed by three 8-year-old working-class girls — The Tidy House — indicates the possibilities offered by such 'different' readings. The girls' story, claims Steedman, can be seen to be about "romantic love, marriage and sexual relations"; "the desire of mothers for children and their resentment of them"; and "the means by which those children are brought up to inhabit a social world" (p. 1). Readings like these by Steedman are thus able to demonstrate something of the way in which a group of 8-year-old girls struggles to reconcile the inevitable tensions and ambiguities of pre-teen femininity and class identity by trying out the various subject positions offered through narrative. The readings make it easier to understand what Steedman calls "the huge mythologies of love and sex that inform our culture", as well as the way in which "working-class girls become working-class women" (p. 12).

Moss's (1989) readings of adolescent girls' stories raise similar possibilities, by exploring the space available to girls within popular fiction forms for the exploration of gendered identity. Moss's argument is that the sets of cultural knowledge that children use in their writing "are not homogeneous but diverse and full of contradictions". As a result, the meanings that can be established "are multiple not unitary and are temporarily achieved, not permanently fixed" (p. 121). Moss reads the girls' stories for evidence of struggle: struggle to deal with dominant versions of masculinity and femininity, and struggle to find space within the conventions of popular fiction to write differently and more powerfully.

Work I completed (Gilbert, 1988a) with the writing of 10 year-old girls demonstrates the same struggle to write outside the constraints of genre and gender. My claim there was that such readings of young women's texts would be particularly helpful in classrooms imbued with the heady discourse of student authorship and its emphasis on the publication of children's writing. Stereotypical children's texts — often more violently and blatantly stereotyped than commercially produced texts — are frequently authorized as classroom reading material (see discussion of this pedagogy in Gilbert, 1989a). They are 'published' and put on display in classrooms so that children can read each other's work, and yet provision to discuss such texts —

in terms of what the stereotypes indicate about the adoption of gendered subject positions —
seems seldom to have been made.

And such discussion is not always easy. The reality of much classroom life — a reality partially
constructed by and continually reinforced by many textual practices, including the production,
selection and use of classroom reading materials — is that the failure to identify with a
stereotypical gendered subjectivity can often lead to humiliation and mockery from other
students and from teachers. The authorized world of the classroom is a world largely of
stereotypes. Children's texts authorized for classroom use, and classroom reading positions
authorized through popular reading pedagogy, offer few opportunities to challenge the
stereotypes or introduce young women to different discourses. In addition, the conventions of
many of the common written genres endorsed for classroom use rely upon gender stereotypes:
they do not posit reading and writing positions of authority for young women.

The Story as Social Regulation

Like reading, writing cannot be seen as a natural and personal response of the self, but as a
learned social discursive practice of a gendered subject. Writing is about taking up a particular
speaking position in a discourse, and of then bringing certain subject positions into existence.
But how many speaking positions of authority are available to young teenage women? From
what discourses can they speak with power? And what versions of feminine subjectivity are able
to be — or are encouraged to be — constructed in classrooms? What possibilities for resistance
do young women have to stereotypical images of femininity, and how might resistance be
supported and strengthened through the introduction of young women to alternative subject
positions in alternative discourses? And what implications does this have for classrooms, in
terms of the ways in which we would talk about readings and the construction of gendered
identities through such readings?

Given the seemingly 'natural' and almost invisible patterning of gender relationships through
texts — particularly story texts — teachers are left with the difficult decision of how best to
work with texts in the language classroom: how to reconsider the relationship between genre,
gender and social regulation. And there are two issues that clearly need to be confronted.

Gendered Genres — conventional control

One of the purposes of this paper has been to denaturalize aspects of language practice and
indicate how gendered are many of our linguistic conventions. And we should not underestimate
the difficulty of writing outside of these conventions, which have become so much a part of
(conventional) social practice. An example of the level of difficulty can perhaps be read from an
apparent paradox in the new Australian Dolly Fiction teen romance series. The series editor for
this new venture prepared a guiding statement for prospective authors. In the statement the editor
made clear her expectations and plans for the series.

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We are looking for stories which are lively, well-written, realistically
plotted, and which, ideally, deal with the kinds of issues that contemporary
Australian teenage girls face. The stories must be credible, must avoid
stereotypical characterizations and creaky plot devices, and should bear in
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mind the responsibilities we have in writing for such an impressionable
audience, yet steer well clear of the moralistic preaching that is so common
in the American teenage fiction. Dolly Fiction style is idiomatic and
contemporary ...
The stories are romances, but we believe we can examine other issues within
the genre and still have books which are a good read, while having something
worthwhile to say as well. We're talking positive role models here! Wimpy
Mills and Boon type heroines swooning before dark, arrogant and inscrutable
males are the last thing we're looking for. Our books can be funny
— some of the best ones are — and they don't have to end happily or with a
kiss etc., although some form of positive resolution from the heroine is
always preferable. It's just that she doesn't always have to end up with the
guy. We want to show girls interested in and pursuing things other
than boys — some of the time anyway (Byrne, 1989).

However, the series editor's requests are not easily read from the Dolly Fiction titles (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Gilbert, 1992). The dominant organization of events is completely linked with romance, and the only "other issues" to be discussed occur as very minor aspects of the texts. Characterization conforms tightly to generic constraints. Girls are constructed from within a predictable cluster of traits: they are almost uniformly disinterested in school, scatty and helpless in the face of a boy's interest in them, and preoccupied with clothes, make-up and boy-watching. If they are not trailed in this way at the beginning of the story, the sequence of events moves to transform them appropriately. The series unrelentingly portrays stereotypical images of femininity both in its story sequence, and in the social reading practice that is needed to produce it as an intelligible fiction. It would seem that despite the aims of this series, the generic conventions of the romance were too difficult to escape. It may well have been virtually impossible for writers of this series to construct the stories that Byrne claims to want within the possible — and recognizable — generic conventions of the formula teen romance novel. And it would certainly be difficult for readers to construct the texts differently given the strong commercial promotion of the texts as 'romance', both through the promotional texts spun around them, and the visual semiotics of their design.

Writing and reading practices that go beyond generic stereotypes are not easily achieved. Generic patterns are too familiar, comfortable, recognizable. They connect so easily with the cultural mores of our lives that they come to pass as almost natural and invisible orderings of the world. It is certainly difficult to write beyond generic patterns — as women's aesthetics has come to know and struggle with in recent times, and as many schoolgirls' texts demonstrate (Gilbert, 1988a). The difficulty that all students have in constructing text patterns that are unfamiliar is real and constraining. It is hard to write in patterns you have not read before.

And it is also difficult to read texts that cannot readily be placed within a generic frame. If we cannot place the text we often cannot read it: we cannot make meaning from the infinite plurality that is the potential of any text. Consequently, dominant readings (conventional readings) of student texts often prevail, and subversive — counter-readings — are sometimes lost. Student texts, grappling with control of narrative conventions, provide interesting evidence of the struggle to construct versions of lived experience within the generic conventions on offer, but only if they are read against the grain: against the familiarity that they might at first appear to offer.

Generic Devaluation — regulating the social order

A second area that needs to be considered relates to the status certain genres carry. The 'feminine' genres that were referred to earlier in this paper often tend to be devalued in both an artistic and a more populist sense. Romance fiction is devalued as a literary genre, because it is formulaic, ritualistic and closed. Romance fiction is also devalued as a cultural field because it focuses on a set of 'women's' preoccupations — love, emotions, the family, relationships, and the romantic inscription of the body. While the masculine inscription of the body as in westerns, thrillers, war stories, becomes a serious story to respect and admire, the feminine inscription of the body becomes a silly story to laugh at and deride. On a more general scale, while male stories of war, of death, of individual alienation and the search for identity become the stories of universal value, female stories of love, birth, families and nurturing become marginalized 'women's' stories. The typical 'feminine' genres like television soap operas and romance fiction are less valued in our culture than are crime shows and thrillers (typical 'masculine' genres). The term 'soap opera', for instance, is even commonly used as a term of derision.

Consequently aspects of the cultural practices that children learn, involve the valuation of particular cultural genres. For instance, the Australian author, Barbara Hanrahan, in her semi-autobiographical novel Kewpie Doll, relates the female protagonist's unease with language, and her realization that the dominant social language forms are masculinist.

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Bobby Henderson talks to the taxi driver as if they are friends. How can he
be a man so easily? He knows the right language, they are men together,
blistered lips smiling —
Yeah, they say and Too bad, mate. I've stopped being me, I am a person
pretending, every word I say is wrong, (in Gilbert, 1988b, p. 73)
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The dilemma for young women is that they must face the reality of a world where women's knowledge, interests and pleasures are derided and considered second rate, and where access to power resides instead in adopting masculinist knowledge, interests and pleasures. Take, for instance, the gendered genres of 'romance' and 'science fiction'. While both are populist and formulaic, romance novels — and romance novelists — are generally regarded with public scorn and derision. Is it possible for language teachers to disregard this cultural devaluation when they read a romance story written by young women students? Is it not more 'natural' to expect that a science fiction story or a spy thriller story will be more interesting, more challenging, more 'significant'? And what impact does this have upon the assessment of school texts?

The cultural devaluation of many of the genres associated with women — and ironically the genres which are often the most familiar and most comfortable for young women — must impact upon school reading practices, and must affect choices young women will make. Some young women have discursive choices: they can reject the more stereotypical feminine genres and opt for the more powerful — usually more masculinist — forms. Others do not have such choices. The range of subject positions available to them — through the reading formation most know and work within — is far narrower and usually more devalued.

The double bind for young women in language classrooms is that by writing in popular generic forms they often enter into the gendered social regulation such genres rely upon. In addition, to

write in those genres is also to write in a culturally devalued way, because the genre's discursive orientation also signifies difference — and inferiority — to masculinist forms. Undoubtedly many young women learn to read and write as 'men' — they learn to apply masculinist (dominant) reading frames, and to adopt masculinist generic forms. However many of their texts can be read as the site of an uneasy adoption of such values, and a seeking for other ways to construct their experiences of being women (see Gilbert, 1988a). Other stories for young women, which might allow them to take up positions of more authority and positivity in their writing and their reading, need to be brought into language classrooms.

The Stories Still To Be Told ...

Young women who do have access to other stories and other discourses are able to take up a number of reading and writing positions and to be more capable of textual resistance or critical literacy. Many women, for instance, have learnt how to read 'differently' — in this case, against the grain, or against the dominant reading position in the text — as a result of their access to feminist discourses. But access to such discourses is not a simple or 'natural' matter for young women, and teachers need to be aware of the difficulties associated with introducing alternative (even feminist) texts to young women, unless they have the necessary gendered history which will allow them to read the texts in positive and affirming ways. As Walkerdine warns, "For some girls they might provide the vehicle for an alternative vision, while for others they might, by stressing the one as alternative to the other, feed or fuel a resistance to the feminist alternative" (1984,p. 183). Davies' work (1989) with pre-schoolers, indicating their inability to read feminist fairy tales from feminist positions, is a salutory reminder of the way in which students' discursive histories are of key significance in encouraging them to read 'resistantly' or against the grain. While classrooms need other stories, they also need approaches to literacy which promote questioning of language practices as practices of social regulation, and which provide tools to help in the unraveling of discursive power networks.

Literacy practices are inevitably gendered practices — and indeed racist and classist practices — and language classrooms are therefore inevitably involved in the discursive construction of gender, race and class. This paper has argued that the apparent innocence of classroom storying needs a more critical framing: that it is not defensible to treat texts as separate from their cultural production; that it is not possible to consider writing and reading as un-gendered activities. Texts and language practices can be unraveled in terms of their gendered meanings and signification, and contemporary theoretical approaches to discourse theory, to narratology and to subjectivity, offer powerful ways of approaching such a task. Such approaches also offer new ways of thinking about language 'genres', about the teaching of writing, and about what it means to learn to read. While some of this work has already begun (see, for instance, classroom texts developed by Mellor, 1987 and Moon, 1990), much is still to do. There are many more stories to write and much more storying to be done.

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Correspondence: Pam Gilbert, School of Education, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, QLD 4810, Australia.