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This Is Just to Say

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Social Spaces

Family Secrets, and Today's Students

Rebecca Belcher

The conclusion of William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" seldom fails to evoke astonishment among students when they realize that Miss Emily had actually been sleeping with a dead man for years. Likewise, the Bible salesman in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" shocks student readers with his trickery. Such literary works draw students' attention to the theme of secrecy that interferes with normal behavioral patterns in relationships. Not only is this theme of secrecy one that appears regularly in literary selections, but it is also recognized as one of the seminal traits of disruptive family systems that sociologists see all of the time in their exploration of today's American society.

The adult with the power in the family coerces other family members to remain silent about any issues or problems that the family might face. Often these families appear "picture perfect," according to John and Linda Friel, because the dysfunction they "experienced was so subtle (covert) that [they] couldn't even begin to put a finger on what it was that happened" (4-5). The seriousness of this kind of subtle abuse is explained by Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus as "the most hidden, most insidious, least researched, and perhaps . . . most damaging" (qtd. in Deats 224).

According to modern family psychology expert John Bradshaw, at least three-fourths of American families



Zora Neale Hurston (pages 3-4)

qualify for the title of disruptive or dysfunctional family (21).

If these sociologists and family counseling experts are to be believed,

then every day American educators are looking at classrooms whose rows are filled with children affected by such dysfunction. Often these children become the disruptive elements in the classroom or in society at large. Teachers can, and should, of course, refer such students to proper school authorities such as social workers and nurses, but most referrals result in only a few hourly sessions outside the classroom, with the remainder of the students' time being spent in the classroom. Something that teachers can do within the classroom is to use literature as a tool to educate students about family dysfunction. Students can identify with characters whose fictional lives mirror their own social spaces.

Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lender, in their study *The Aching Hearth: Family Violence in Life and Literature*, argue that "our literary heritage may provide one of the most valuable resources in our culture for comprehending the underlying causes of family violence as well as other human actions, both normal and aberrant" (7). American literature, when viewed through the lenses of some of the modern critical theories, in addition to aiding sociologists in understanding the causes of dysfunctional attitudes, may provide hope for the future of our society by helping students in the classroom to discover mechanisms

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for recovery at work in the fictional characters of good literature.

One of the richest areas for exploring the dysfunctional systems in American family life is literature of the post-Civil War South, which yields many examples of dysfunction, especially the idea of keeping family secrets, a practice that many of today's high school students know only too well. Teachers can use such nineteenth century literature, which revealed the system of secrets and silences imposed on everyone but the white male. The hierarchical form of patriarchy lasted longer in the South than elsewhere, probably because of its former rigid social hierarchy in which the rich white man had more power than the poor white man, who, in turn, had more power than the black male slave. Society viewed almost all women and children, both white and black, as powerless individuals. After the Civil War the only shift in the power structure was that the term "black male slave" changed to "black man."

In late nineteenth century literature, the southern white male was able to command silence by preserving the mythological "woman on the pedestal." Southern society "officially worshipped womanhood" as a way of diverting "attention from problems of slavery and racism," says Louise Westling (3, 8). Guion Griffis Johnson, writing of the ante-bellum South, says that Victorian characteristics (docile, quiet, submissive,

Silence was an act of collusion.

pious behavior) were typical before 1837; Johnson illustrates this point, citing the male president of the University of North Carolina who in 1810 had praised a woman for "maidenly delicacy" when she refused to read a particular book she believed contained an impure thought (140). Likewise, Anne Goodwyn Jones includes denial of self, silent suffering, sexual purity, piety, deference to external authority, and contentment in staying in the home as characteristics of the southern woman (4). These traditionally female characteristics entrenched southern men in their patriarchal structure because those men, according to Johnson, "wanted their women kept in cages, peripheral, submissive, inert" (20). This attitude surfaced in both white and black men who played at being men of leisure and kept their women emotionally bound (Rubin 27-28).

Moreover, southern women viewed these mandates as socially acceptable doctrine. From the time of the southern colonies, according to Julia Cherry Spruill, obedience was a key word to describe the attitude of the southern wife. She reports that one wife thought she should "read often the matrimonial service and not overlook the word OBEY," and that she should be "submissive from Choice and obedient from Inclination" (113). Similarly, Jones quotes George Fitzhugh who stated in 1854 that women had one

right—to protection—and that obligated them to obey (8). Especially in one major area of life, women were ordered to remain silent: male infidelity. Ladies' morality books, according to Marjorie Stratford Mendenhall, "advised the wife to conceal from everyone her knowledge of her husband's infidelities" and reported that the man would chide his wife for prying into secrets that would cause pain (121-22).

Perhaps the greatest problem associated with the silence imposed upon the southern woman by the southern white male in the post-war era was the fact that silence was an act of collusion. Such collusion can be seen in Langston Hughes' poem "Silhouette," where he echoes the social code imposed upon the "southern gentlelady" (2230). In the poem, the woman must not react negatively to the lynching of a black man. The woman, by keeping silent, was bound into submission; she not only non-verbally accepted the horrific act, but she also became the agent of such repression. "Silence ultimately reinforces the patriarchy," says Gina Michelle Collins in her study of feminism and the southern tradition, because women internalize the hierarchical structure (77) and thus collude with society in furthering the social structure of abusive power. Such collusion did not end in the home; it spilled over into the literary efforts of southern women. The backdrop of this sociological theory shows how literary works can be studied for a better understanding of the oppressive conditions that contribute to unhealthy relations and the breakdown of family structure.

Early twentieth century southern writer Ellen Glasgow in *The Sheltered Life* demonstrates the harm that comes to an individual when secrecy is demanded. George Birdsong, a trusted and close family friend, tells the ten-year-old Jenny Blair that they should keep secret the fact that they have been at the house of his colored mistress Memoria. Jenny, of course, not realizing the significance of this white man's visit to the colored neighborhood, agrees eagerly to keep the secret because she believes that "she [will] have a part in that mysterious world where grownup persons hide the things they do not wish children to know" (51). By the end of the story, Jenny finds herself embroiled in a passionate love affair with George and admits that her obsession with him began when he rescued her at Memoria's. Apparently, she has no conscious sense of George's sexual indiscretion, nor is she consciously aware that her own actions bring about George's death as her frustrated and angry wife kills him. Her collusion and the bond of secrecy undermine her own sense of responsibility. Similar stories that frame irresponsible behaviors and consequences provide a springboard for examining the adverse effects of secrecy in responsible relationships; questions based on the theme of responsibility can generate interesting reader-response assignments for students that connect

literature to sociological environment.

Katherine Anne Porter shows a different aspect of the harmfulness of secrecy in her story "The Grave." The narrator and main character, Miranda, exemplifies how repression deprives her consciousness of her female identity. She recalls a childhood incident when she and her brother Peter had discovered a dead mother rabbit with its unborn babies. Her brother had told her not to recount this experience: "Now you listen to me, and don't ever forget. Don't you ever tell a living soul that you saw this" (55). Miranda had obeyed him blindly, never reflecting upon the femaleness she shared with the mother rabbit. When she does recall the incident, she still does not reflect upon the secrecy forced upon her, but rather upon the strength of her brother. According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, "The story ends, apparently with the renewed repression of the memory of female body" as she admires the controlling voice of her brother (267). The childhood loyalty to her brother still would not allow Miranda to own the scope of her female sexuality. Using a story such as "The Grave" in the classroom can show students connections between family secrets and psychological repression of sexual identity. Character analysis of Miranda provides an excellent opportunity to express and analyze the theme of psychological repression in the larger context of today's society.

The endings of both Glasgow's and Porter's books can be disappointing to a feminist who would like to see a female character break out of a repressive patriarchal power structure which binds the woman to secrecy and subservient role. Jenny and Miranda were unable to envision a world in which women could act freely instead of reacting submissively to the men around them; nonetheless, because of their internal orientation and their psychological limitations, they can provide enlightenment for today's students who live in a dysfunctional world and who need to recognize the damage resulting from behaviors of avoidance and denial.

She escapes both the prevailing constraints of patriarchy and matriarchy and transcends the traditional southern woman gentility.

In contrast, there are many pieces of twentieth century feminist literature that aptly portray characters who are not afraid to break social codes. In linguistic theory, this

openness, according to Jacques Lacan, can be attributed to shifts in language. He addresses the notion of a shifting of meanings in the language system as an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier (1296). Because the meaning can always be moving or changing, it can have a meaning separate from an existing ideological system; thus a piece of literature can explore social spaces in ways other than that of the existing paradigm. Patriarchy, family secrets, and repression of identity can be challenged when literature allows readers to make sociological and psychological discoveries.

One southern writer whose work allows for such challenge to existing paradigms is Eudora Welty who takes a unique stance in creating the main female character Laurel McKelva Hand in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Nowhere is Laurel told to keep a secret, yet she has kept secrets from herself for years, adhering to a code of repression. Only after her father's death is Laurel willing to examine her feelings concerning the death of her mother and her husband. Her inner voice says that she had "gone on living with the old perfection undisturbed and undisturbing," by locking away the memories of the past (154). On one particular cold, dark, stormy night, however, Laurel opens her memory to the firelight and warmth of her old nursery and, thereby, to all her past life. She thinks, "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams" (179). Thus, Welty's female character is able to recognize the secrecy of her past, which has bound her and is able to move beyond it to a new life. "She comes to wear the past lightly," according to Ruth D. Weston, "to accept humanness gracefully, to redefine heroism as something more flexible and unpretentious than tradition had taught" (75). As a twentieth century writer, Welty was able to access a new freedom which allows her character to break the chain of repression and male dominion. In doing so, she escapes both the prevailing constraints of patriarchy and matriarchy and transcends the traditional southern woman gentility (Weston 77, 87). Such a character can be a sign of hope for students who may recognize their own dysfunctional families in Welty's descriptions.

Another southern writer who empowers her character to break the chain of male dominion is Zora Neale Hurston, who published *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937. The main character of the novel, Janie, is kept silent first by her grandmother, then by her first husband, and then by her second husband Jody. In response to a request that Janie should speak, Jody says, "[M]ah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat." (40-1). At this point, Janie appears to be as firmly entrenched in the patriarchal order as the female characters of Glasgow or Porter, but by the mid-point of the novel, Janie openly confronts Jody about his

impotence. At Jody's death, the narrator relates that Janie "sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world" (84). She then embarks on a love affair with Tea Cake, a man who fulfills her romantic daydreams but whom she must kill in self-defense. Not only does Janie find her voice, but she also finds her ability to live her life as she wishes. After Janie kills Tea Cake, she is able to return to her hometown and maintain her individuality, no longer surrendering to the community's pressures in defining her own identity.

"As she [Zora Neale Hurston] did in her own life," says Nellie McKay, "she permitted her heroine the independence to make decisions, achieve voice, and speak her life as an individual distinct from her community (57). Hurston's works show that the black female, doubly disenfranchised by being both black and woman, had less to lose either by ignoring or by resisting the prevailing society. As a voice of the southern renaissance, Hurston was able to reject the hierarchical control and develop a voice distinct from her male counterparts. While Richard Wright and Langston Hughes portray the repressed condition of the black male, Hurston celebrates the independence of the black female. A woman like Hurston felt the freedom of "sliding" meanings under a "floating" signifier. The floating aspect of the meaning of her stories gives voice to viewpoints that were previously ignored in literature. Such a woman could bring hope to students in today's English classroom as students engage in activities designed to develop their own voices through literary discussion and creative writing assignments.

With the passage of time, freedom to access the feminine consciousness became easier for southern women writers. A prime example is the work of Alice Walker, who was born in 1945, in Eatonton, Georgia. She published the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* in 1982. The book begins with the voice of Celie's father who commands her to conceal his incest and sexual abuse towards her, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). Her life, according to Collins, has the "outward appearance of docility" (82) but suffers from internal repression. She lives with a brutal man, who beats her and who is concerned with what people say. She is even beaten by her stepson, who later says, "A woman can't get a man if peoples talk" (208). But she finally finds her voice in order to tell her story to Shug, her lover, and to Nettie, her sister, and to God, her first listener.

Authors such as Walker and, therefore, characters like her Celie "realize that silence does not, ultimately ensure even their own survival," so their voices get stronger as they suffer abuse, says critic Sallie L. Kitch (77). An even stronger sign that the modern southern woman writer has advanced into the realm of Lacan's

"sliding signified" and "floating signifier" through changing connotations and meanings of words in new social contexts appears in the conclusion of *The Color Purple* in 1982.

In Hurston's work, Hite says that "female voices have the power to dismantle hierarchical oppositions

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that ultimately oppress everyone and to create a new order" in which conventional theories about male and female vanish (266). Conventional theories about race also vanish when African Americans such as Walker and Hurston write of women who defied the codes of silence that were imposed not just by white men, but also by black men.

Walker, Hurston, and Welty can be studied as three authors who, by resisting the abusive patriarchal order of secrecy and repression, have been able to model the value of societal change. According to Raymond Williams, the power of the ruling ideology, such as a patriarchal order is subject to change; therefore, "[m]any of the active values of 'literature' have then to be seen, not as tied to the concept . . . but as elements of a continuing and changing practice which already substantially, and now at the level of theoretical redefinition, is moving beyond its old forms" (1575). Selected works of literature, such as Walker's, Hurston's, and Welty's give readers an opportunity to work within a plausible system of social spaces that break out of abusive power relations. Their works can help students to understand the causes of dysfunctional homes and to discover ways of creating new orders that aim to confront and eradicate racial and gender hierarchies.

What seems to be true in the progression of southern voices in literature throughout the twentieth century is that the abusive aspect of the hierarchical order has given way to a more egalitarian culture. The language of female writers has become both more direct and definitive in describing changes within the culture and more urgent in calling for reform of social structures to better accommodate all races and both genders. Such pieces of literature, then, are indeed appropriate vehicles for promoting sociological health in our students. Teachers need to search for appropriate literary selections that will bring understanding and encouragement to today's students who are often caught in disruptive family systems of secrecy and repression.

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Zora Neale Hurston's picture is a reproduction of a 1935 photograph appearing in *Wrapped in Rainbows*, a Lisa Drew Book, 2004.