Teachers for the Knowledge Society

Quo Vadis, Domina Bona?

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Abstract

The role models delivered by Romanian literature to their young readers (high school students preparing for graduation exam) are wanting in the aspect of gender. Unless one develops a methodology of teaching that can deal with this shortcoming of the so-called classical national literature, curriculum is bound to reinforce the prevailing gender stereotypes. When queried about gender, teachers think first of grammatical gender, then of literary genre, and thirdly of sociological gender. Textbooks ignore this aspect. Gender awareness can be attained through teacher education and by systematically including gender among the “values and attitudes” in teaching guidelines.

Keywords: gender stereotypes; literature; highschool curriculum; gender awareness; values and attitudes.

1. Introduction

The Forum on Education 2010 [1] was the latest convention on matters of education held in Romania. It aimed to provide a common framework for debate, appropriate to those involved in Romanian education, and to generate practical solutions for the modernization of the educational system. It also aimed to provide an overview of the real needs and problems of the educational market. It was well organized, with a clear agenda, and excellent international participation [2].

Remarkably, throughout the three days of the conference there was not one mention of gender issues in education. The workshops [3] would have no doubt benefitted from discussions of this aspect, which is relevant to all the respective fields. When one of us (I. N.) brought up this shortcoming, one of the moderators wondered aloud how would grammatical gender, or the gender of literary characters be relevant to the discussion. He appeared to be utterly ignorant of gender as a concept of educational sociology. Later I also pointed out this lacuna to the organizers. After a brief silence, I was asked to elaborate. Once I managed to get the notion of gender across, I was invited to make a more comprehensive proposal, in order to incorporate it into the agenda of next year’s meeting.

In the light of this incident, it may sound as an understatement that gender studies in Romania are a new field. A number of recent scholarly papers discuss gender issues in the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology.

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There are, however, very few contributions to gender issues in the scholarly literature in the field of education, and even less awareness of them among practicing teachers. It will take a brief moment to list the seven studies published over the span of the past decade: Miroiu and Weber, 2000, Vlăsceanu, 2002, Ștefănescu and Miroiu, 2001, Ștefănescu, 2003, Bălan, 2003, Jigău, 2004, Petrovai and Bursuc, 2004. These works focus on gender perspective in education in a broad sense, but none takes a specific interest in a given discipline. Their respective conclusions all reveal the supremacy of male genderedness, and the fact that schools in Romania are promoting a broad array of gender stereotypes.

2. Gender and Fiction Literature

As practicing teachers of Romanian language and literature (both in middle and high school), our task is obvious: we should attempt to fill the gap in my field by looking at ways in which gender, and the issues it generates appear in literature, and by considering ways to deal with this in the classroom.

The students, not unlike people in general, see themselves as males or females by associating with the cultural definitions of maleness and femaleness (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002). Alongside direct agents of socialization (e.g. the immediate family) fiction literature proves to be an effective agent of socialization, not unlike mass media, friends, etc. (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002). The literary texts, through their characters and in other ways, offer positive and negative models, and also, ample opportunity to assimilate and hone gender-clichés and models for discrimination and stereotypes. This potential is all the more subversive as it does not appear packaged as overt sexist propaganda and often comes surrounded by the aura that the reputation of the author lends it.

Literature is a powerful agent of socialization. Fiction literature continues to inform and to form throughout adolescence: it has the potential to reinforce stereotypes, just as it can also aid the formation of a healthy gender identity in pupils. This is not so much a matter of the quantity of the literature studied, as of its quality. More precisely, it depends less on the qualities of the text being studied than on how they are being studied.

We found ourselves facing a problem which has been hardly discussed, much less solved: how to teach the Romanian classics along with a reasoned view of their shortcomings from a sociological point of view, without thereby lessening their lasting literary impact - without, in other words, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The texts that form the Romanian high school curriculum are not “dangerous” in themselves, but they become so when the didactic process fails to deconstruct their implicit values and attitudes. To take but one obvious aspect: there is a highly diverse cast of feminine characters in Romanian literature, but the authors’ perspective, as it comes across in their work, more often than not promotes traditional social values, dominated by males. The unwary teacher, in the process of teaching any one such literary work, becomes an unwitting tool in promoting an image of women that constitutes a poor model for the students in their effort to build a healthy Weltanschauung.

This might sound arcane at first to the English language reader of this paper, but let us remember that national literature has more weight in my country (and on the continent in general). Winston Churchill’s A History of the English-Speaking Peoples has not one mention of Shakespeare, while Romanian history would be inconceivable without Mihai Eminescu, as would be Hungarian history without Alexander Petőfi, or German history without Johann W. Goethe. In the USA a first rate physicist might admit with a shrug that he hasn’t read Moby Dick nor would he care to read it in the future, and one might be surprised by an unassuming accountant casually reciting from Leaves of Grass. This is not the case in Eastern Europe. For an unbiased account of how, for instance, the average Russian is steeped in Pushkin, see Douglas Hofstadter’s preface to his translation of Eugene Onegin (Pushkin, 1999). During his first visit to St. Peters burg, Hofstadter, brimming with Pushkin’s verse, was prompted by something to recite a few lines from the famous novel in verse, dubbed the encyclopedia of Russian life. His guide, a young woman, continued the stanza, to the author’s astonishment. Hofstadter then tested other Russians who, without being litterateurs, all turned out to know substantial chunks of Pushkin. In Romania, the situation is somewhat different, in that, it seems more lip service is paid to the veneration of the classics and they are not always read thoroughly. However, just the fact that one ought to pretend to care for them is an important cultural thread which increases their influence. As a result, what is being read throughout high school and college, is liable to leave indelible marks. This is due also to a certain mindset which is not within the scope of this paper to discuss, and which perhaps relates to certain trends established throughout the nearly five decades of communist rule.
The problem of various “politically incorrect” attitudes being championed in the literature of yesteryear is a familiar one, and when encountered, they are often excised on the grounds that they are a product of the limited vision of former eras. Thus the politically incorrect Third Witch in Macbeth, who includes “Liver of blaspheming Jew,/ Gall of goat, and slips of yew” in her vile recipe was peremptorily censored in a Royal Shakespeare Company staging (Casson, 1979). There are other instances hovering between the funny and the ludicrous: the Mount Diablo, California, school district has been asked to stop using Hansel and Gretel because it sheds a negative light on witches (Ludington Daily News, 1992).

Such censorship would result in the complete disappearance of Romanian literature. Macbeth might have lost a fingernail, but Vitoria Lipan, the protagonist of a noted novel by Mihail Sadoveanu, would no longer exist.

How then should we proceed? Surely, the answer lies in deconstructing the text, rather than mutilating it. So far, the didactics of literature has not developed a technique for methodically deconstructing gender stereotypes, which might allow one to read and enjoy the texts and at the same time address these issues without reinforcing them.

A principle of modern didactics (Pamfil, 2003) propounds the shifting of focus from the product (the literary work) to the process (the act of its reading) and promoting the dialog of the student with the text, so that he/she is encouraged to interrogate it and to offer personal alternatives. In other words, one ought to make explicit the misogynistic “values and attitudes” with which classical Romanian fiction literature teems.

The works of fiction literature studied throughout high school, presented ex cathedra as monuments of national literature, can easily be mistaken for an authoritative expression of some eternal truths, as their respective authors no doubt had meant them. It is therefore all the more important that such works be studied in order to deconstruct the clichés and male chauvinism that the convey. If one does not wish to create or reinforce gender stereotypes, one ought to provide a gender-oriented reading. Thus the literary works that make up the curriculum demand a permanent exercise of critical thinking. In its absence, the students run the risk of taking such views as statements of fact, because of their respect for authority. This is still an important factor in Romanian schools. Students are often told, or it is implied, that things are as the teacher says just because he/she says so.

Since fiction and nonfiction literature are oftentimes the carriers of such gender-laden messages, the teaching of literature is thus potentially directly linked to the attitudes, behaviors, rights and responsibilities tied to each gender and enforced by society. While we are supposed to teach, according to guidelines, about “values and attitudes”, teachers routinely sidestep the discussion of the “values” such texts promote and content themselves with remaining confined to the artistic aspects.

There is a need to devise activities that will shed a well-balanced light on the texts, that will reveal the limitations and the stereotypes that are promoted, and fend off the danger of such views being assimilated as incontrovertible truth. These activities should be aimed towards identifying the stereotypes and discussing their consequences. There should be debates as to the pros and cons of statements such as “in truth, women and men are created equal”. This should be followed by a focus on the various aspects of the interaction (social, cognitive, individual) and upon the attitudes implicit in the positions of those who held for or against such statements. The harmful nature of maintaining the position promoted by the text should be articulated and, the clichés and biases, etc. identified.

Most noteworthy authors in Romanian literature and all those included in the middle and high school curricula are males, laden not merely with masculine, but for the most part sexist, patriarchal attitudes, which fill their works.

At this stage in their development, high school students are mostly reading with a view to identifying with or dissociating from the characters in the book and are in search of role models, in literature and elsewhere. If the teacher only focuses on the study of the text without encouraging the students’ ongoing dialog with it, he/she is running the risk of reinforcing the prevailing gender bias and discrimination. One ought not to shield the student from these problems. Similarly, it is unwise to try to exorcise Shakespeare’s anti-Semitic witch’s brew. Rather, one should teach about how such biases came into being and about how the authors, be they however great, are bound to be marked and marred by the époque in which they lived. It is therefore imperative to develop a methodology, rather than to attempt to casually coach the students through the authors.

Being gender-conscious in the discipline of literature entails a multitude of considerations that all need to be dealt with. There are male and female authors (and the curriculum ignores the latter). There are male and female characters, with specific functions within each text. They are presented in certain ways by their respective authors, who often make comments that are not always relevant from the artistic vantage point, but are for that reason no less
effective from the educational one. There are female and male readers, male and (in an overwhelming majority) female teachers and male and female (few and far between) critics. My current work proposes to focus on these aspects only as they relate to teaching.

The above pages summarize our conclusions derived from a preliminary study of eleven high school textbooks. We have been assisted in this effort by master’s students in the Program for Gender and Minorities of National School for Political and Administrative Sciences (SNSPA). In addition we polled 114 high school and middle school teachers and 87 high school students.

As a pilot project designed to test educational methods to serve our purpose on March 8, celebrating International Women’s Day, we organized an interdisciplinary project titled “Women’s Rights” with the participation of 11th grade students.

By way of introduction we watched movies related to gender issues. Next, we proceeded to perform a series of activities of which we shall describe below one sample.

Before the movie we posted a flip chart listing the names of several countries and a list of years in which universal suffrage was achieved and asked the students to link each country with the year it has achieved universal suffrage. As hypothesized, all students failed to pair the country name with the correct year. Following this, we handed out a table containing the names of the countries and the correct year when they attained universal suffrage.

We then proceeded to watch Iron Jawed Angels, an American movie about the struggle for women’s rights during the Wilson Administration.

Following the movie, we organized a structured debate concerning women’s right to vote, introduced with lines sampled from the movie itself. E.g., we asked the students: What did Alice Paul mean by “A vote is a fire escape”?

Do you agree with the following statement: “Governments are responsible both for what they do and for what they don't do”?

3. Conclusion

All this was an apparently long and convoluted introduction to the dramatic masterpiece A Lost Letter (O scrisoare pierdută) by I. L. Caragiale. The main female character of the play, Zoe, although heavily involved in the plot built around the events preceding the provincial elections, will, in the end be barred from voting. During the earlier reading none of the students has noticed this detail.

At the end of our work described above our view is that, while the curriculum ought to be tampered with, the ancillaries (textbooks, etc.) improved, it is the refining of the methods that should receive the most attention and effort; and this means that the people involved in education ought to be educated.

In 2003, Ștefănescu wrote about the topic of gender in Romanian education. She produced a thorough analysis of the textbooks and the curricula, and correlated them with the statistics published in The Gender Barometer (Miroiu & Weber, 2000). Today, seven years later, one can no longer claim gender-blindness when one chooses to look the other way, as happened at the convention described at the beginning of this essay. In earlier days, thinking of gender issues solely as an aspect of grammar might have come across as amusing, today it is a misdemeanor, and tomorrow it may be a felony.

NOTES

[1] Bucharest, May 12-14. It was made possible by three organizations: the Educativa Group, The League of Romanian Students Abroad and The Dinu Patriciu Foundation.

[2] Richard Baraniuk - Rice University, Founder - Connexions, Dr. William Bainbridge - Dayton University, President SchoolMatch, Jukka Kangaslaiti, Education Expert - Finnish education system, Robert van Kan, iE&D Solutions - Dutch Education System.

[3] There were seven workshops: Professional Counseling in School Structure, Alternatives in Human Resource Management in the Educational System, Equal Opportunity in Education, The Relationship of Higher Education and the Job Market, Alternative Education, Informal Education, Originality and Innovation in Classroom Teaching.
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