

## Critical Imagination: serious play with narrative and gender

JILL GOLDEN, *Flinders University of South Australia*

**ABSTRACT:** Narrative is one of the primary ways of human knowing, both of the physical and social worlds and of the self. Feminist post-structuralist theory can give teachers insights into the ongoing processes by which children construct feminine and masculine gender identities through narrative. It can provide a framework within which they might begin to make a wider range of narrative positionings available to both girls and boys. The cognitive, ethical and imaginative implications of this process for classroom practice can be taken up in the work of critical imagination. Three strategies are suggested for teachers: the deconstruction of lived and told storylines; the development of a reflective ethical practice congruent with post-structuralist understandings of the self and the world; and the writing/telling/adapting of multitudes of stories that interrupt binary thinking.

### Introduction

Because schools have been assigned a significant part of the task of preparing children for adult life, they are often sites of conflict, tension and negotiation of meanings for the individuals who inhabit them. Some teachers have begun to use their knowledge of post-structuralist theory in their classrooms, understanding that it can provide:

a set of analytic tools that makes it possible to examine teaching-as-usual and its constitutive effects ... it opens up the opportunity, in thinking quite differently about what we do, to develop a new set of practices that disrupt old authorities and certainties, that rid us of stereotypical thinking and open up the possibility of creating something new. (Davies, 1994, p. 82)

Post-structuralist theory can provide teachers with an alternative to the discourse of liberal humanism which underlies both the intellectual assumptions and everyday practices of most classrooms. It can offer new metaphors for the self, a way to understand contradiction and change, and a perspective from which to make choices in relation to students. Teachers whose particular focus is on narrative (teachers of literacy, for example, and English teachers) have seen the deconstruction of texts with students as a

valuable tool (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Gore, 1992; Mellor & Patterson, 1993, 1994; Davies, 1994; Morgan, 1994). It is to these teachers that I particularly address this paper.

Deconstruction can show the wide range of positionings that any story makes available, the complexity of positionings within lived and told storylines, and the impossibility of enforcing or controlling the meanings that individual children make. It can show the constitutive force of binary thinking in the construction of selves, and especially the constitutive effects of the male/female dualism. But an intellectual and rational access to post-structuralist theory through the deconstruction of texts is not likely (on its own) to change the understandings that children have of the *ways of being* available to them, or that they experience as desirable. Intellectual access needs to be accompanied by at least two other strategies. One is the formulation of an ethical or values system which is explicitly congruent with post-structuralist understandings of the human being, rather than with liberal humanist understandings. Another is the imaginative *reconstruction* of narrative, to try to expand through story what is experienced as desirable and available by both girls and boys. These three processes—intellectual, ethical, imaginative—together form what I call *critical imagination*.

In the first part of this paper I want to examine the theoretical bases of critical imagination, in particular the ways that the pleasures of imaginative writing might be tapped and ethical issues handled without a slippage back into liberal humanist assumptions. To this end, Barthes's ideas about *pleasure* and *bliss* in language are brought to a discussion of the lived and told stories of children's lives. Then, given 'the nearly deafening and silencing complexities' (Probyn, 1993, p. 149) of some post-structural propositions about subjectivity and identity, I discuss at a more practical level what critical imagination might make possible in classrooms.

### **Deconstruction, Imagination and Values**

Deconstruction of texts can make visible what is usually not visible. It can challenge liberal humanist ideas about the self, and can show how that same 'self' is at least in part an effect of discourse, which in dominant Western thought is organised through language in hierarchical pairs of opposites. However, people positioned negatively by race or class or gender in the dominant discourse often take up this negative position as their own. They actively construct identities that reaffirm the validity of the very discourse that oppresses them. Without the imagined possibility of a different way of being, oppressed people will often identify with the dictates of the oppressor:

For it is women who socialize little girls into acceptance of a restricted future, women who used to bind the feet, women who hold down the daughter for a clitoridectomy, and who in more familiar and genteel ways, fit their daughters for self-abasement. (Steedman, 1986, p.87)

Walkerdine (1984), Steedman (1986) and bell hooks (1990), in their very different circumstances, each asserts the importance to them of the stories that took them away from the pain of their lived experiences as children; and of 'the absolute necessity of being able to place oneself elsewhere' (Probyn, 1993, p. 147). For bell hooks, imagination was not a luxury but a lifeline. In very concrete ways, 'To imagine ... was a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that we cannot imagine will never come into being' (quoted in Probyn, 1993, p. 147). To become aware of our shifting positionings across the dualisms of the culture in relation to different people is simultaneously a

cognitive act and an imaginative act—an act which brings not only intellect but also feelings and values into play:

Based in the limitations of our everyday lives, using our imaginations is crucial to being able to empathise---to participate in the feelings and ideas of others. (Probyn, 1993, p. 148)

Imagination, the mental ability to produce images of what's not present or has not been experienced, is of course one of the qualities highly valued by versions of liberal humanism, in particular romantic humanism, so it is a word that needs to be used with caution. Egan & Nadaner, liberal humanist educators, see imagination as 'the heart of any truly educational experience':

it is not something split off from 'the basics' of disciplined thought or rational enquiry, but is the quality that can give them life and meaning; it is not something belonging properly to the arts, but is central to all areas of the curriculum; it is not something to ornament our recreational hours, but is the hard pragmatic centre of all effective human thinking. (Egan & Nadaner, 1988, p. ix)

Within liberal humanism, imagination has a range of meanings. Its historical uses and some educational implications are traced by Sutton-Smith (1988), who suggests that imagination is culturally relative, and is multiple in its relationship to multiple intelligences.

From the perspective of post-structuralist theory, imagination can be seen not as an essentialist attribute of an individual but as an effect of discourse, an accumulation of moments of being positioned and taking up positions in the interplay of meaning. Imaginative positioning makes possible an empathy with the experiences and feelings of others. This is not the imposition of the meanings of one's own experiences on to others, but a realisation of a different set of possibilities. Imagination can be understood as a way of negotiating desire and contradiction, language and metaphor, the sensory and the social worlds. It can be put to work as a critical stance, not to reproduce liberal humanist thought but to shift it so that other ways of understanding self and experience become more easily possible. As Probyn (1993) suggests, to think about and use imagination in this way is a complex undertaking, which ultimately cannot be separated from the intellectual work of deconstruction. Participation in a classroom world of abundant story (consciously shaped by the teacher) offers an ideal setting for work with imagination.

Equally conscious in the classroom world would be an ethical dimension congruent with post-structuralist understandings of the person. 'To be positioned and to take up a position (even if this involves sitting on the fence) is a question of ethics' (Diprose, 1991, p. 65). When feminist post-structuralist understandings of identity, power, agency and knowledge are brought to a scrutiny of the values-in-action of a classroom (or school), teachers can reconsider the ethical framework within which they act. There are likely to be multiple and sometimes conflicting ethical positions to be taken up in relation to ideas about justice, for example, or responsibility, or difference, whether in story-texts or in classroom happenings. There is a great deal of work to be done in this area, outside the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that, in contrast with those who view post-modernism as morally bankrupt, Gergen suggests that:

it is possible to locate within the postmodern outlook a way of proceeding that has enormous potential for humankind—provided one is open to this view of

potential. There are no foundations of value to be located here, no progressive program. But there are possibilities opened that may, within a given perspective, both enrich and sustain human life. (Gergen, 1991, p. 231)

Gergen points out the possibilities for tolerance of diversity and difference opened up by post-modern theory:

Convictions that people do (or do not) possess an unconscious mind, soul, intrinsic worth, inherent rationality, sincerity, personality traits, and so on, turn strange. These are, after all, *ways of talking*, not reflections of the actual nature of persons. (Gergen, 1991, p. 247; my italics)

Openness to a multiplicity of cultural forms; a sense of self which emphasises relatedness to wider human communities; new ways of understanding and resolving conflict—these are some of the ethical directions that Gergen sees as implicit in post-structuralist theory. The similarities and differences between these values, and the values of versions of liberal humanism found in a particular school or classroom, remain to be explored.

Another glimpse of the different ethical possibilities that emerge when Western intellectual hegemony is shifted, is given by Sutton in relation to Aboriginal explanations for the origin of the multiplicity of Aboriginal languages:

The ancestors moved about and spoke different languages, and this is how people still do or should live today ... It is important, not accidental or trivial, that we speak different languages ... The heroic ancestors knew that cultural differences made for social balance, in a world where cultural sameness alone could not prevent deadly conflict. Otherness can level, as well as block, relations between people. (Sutton, 1994, p. 10)

The idea of difference and multiplicity as necessary for social stability, rather than a source of instability and conflict, seems an immensely desirable cultural construct in the modern world.

### **Pleasure and Bliss**

Much of both the explicit and the hidden curriculum in schools is concerned with children learning what the dominant discourse presents as necessary knowledge for a competent person in Western society: literacy, mathematics, appropriate social behaviour towards others, for example—and always, how to be properly feminine or masculine at a given age. For a child to know her or himself as competent in the terms of these discursive practices—in terms of their positionings in the narratives of the culture—is to experience pleasure. Barthes describes the text of pleasure as 'the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it ... linked to a comfortable practice of reading' (Barthes, 1975, p. 14).

Barthes is referring here to written texts. The same pleasure is visible in many ways in children's oral storytellings, when they accomplish and recognise themselves as successfully female or male. This kind of pleasure of recognition is sometimes signalled by laughter: from a position of knowing the proper category boundaries for correct behaviour, the child's recognition of the *transgressing* of boundaries is a source of humour. This humour is based on knowing the ways things *are* and *should be*; it helps to produce a self that is competent in the ways of the dominant discourse. Humour can also be used to police the boundaries of these proper categories of behaviour: to put down, or tease,

or mock anyone who transgresses. This makes it a very effective weapon to ensure conformity.

But humour is a two-edged sword. A perception of the ridiculous can also undercut certainty and conformity, and break open another way of seeing and understanding. It can bring people to the edge of what Barthes calls 'bliss'. He describes the text of *bliss* as:

the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomferts ... unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his [sic] tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes, 1975, p. 14)

Pleasure and bliss are not understood as a binary pair to be set in opposition to each other. They are mutually dependent, with bliss arising at the edge of pleasure, the boundary of the known. Davies suggests that the movement from pleasure to bliss is in part the knowledge of 'how to break the rules in creative and exciting ways ... It is an engagement in a redistribution of language, a movement beyond the endless stultifying repetitions of the culture' (Davies, 1993, p. 199). It involves a breaking of stereotypes, an imaginative shift into what *might be*, which can sometimes be experienced through story. That is, stories provide the opportunity both for pleasure and for bliss—for imaginative positionings that (for some) confirm the known, and simultaneously (for some) open up the possibility of new ways of being in the world. The essence of this kind of 'bliss' response seems to be a sudden awareness of a new knowing. It is achieved (at least in part) through a use of language which breaks through stereotypes:

All official institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology. Confronting it, the New is bliss. (Barthes, 1975, p. 40)

The experience of the breaking down of one of the dualisms of binary thinking (however briefly) can be an important source of the bliss of new knowing. Moments of positioning across the male/female dualism particularly seem to catch this edge of novelty. Potentially, each time a child positions her or himself with a hero of the other gender, a moment of bliss becomes possible.

Bliss at the cutting edge of pleasure—a precondition for imagining new ways of being—can not be achieved by any formula, either in one story or in combinations of stories. The playful/serious rupture of dualistic thinking is the teacher's/storyteller's most creative tool. But there is no recipe for success: one telling of a story will offer different experiences, of pleasure and/or bliss, to different individual listeners, in ways that probably are not controllable by (or even visible to) the teacher. Stories which on the whole reinforce the conventional attributes of femininity and masculinity, will be very pleasurable to some children as they take themselves up as competent in those positionings. They confirm what the children already 'know' about themselves and their world. But those same stories might be taken up by other children (or by the same children at a different time) in ways that expand or break down conventional knowing. Davies's account of a favourite childhood story, *The Fairy Who Wouldn't Fly* (Davies, 1993, p. 150) is a good example of a child reading a story against the grain in this way.

Though any story can be taken up by children according to their own desires and understandings, it nevertheless matters a great deal both what stories are told and how they are told and talked about. Ultimately most stories can be read as versions of the

dominant discourse; but some make more available than others the opportunity for resistance and negotiation. Pleasure and bliss cannot be produced to order, but their *conditions of possibility* can be provided in generous quantities, through a grand array of imaginative positionings in a multitude of stories.

### **The Self and the School: critical imagination at work**

Work with critical imagination—serious play—is essential if post-structuralist theory is to be able to make a difference in children's (any person's) subjectivities and lived experiences. In this section I will try to imagine what a classroom might look like that was informed by critical imagination in its 'teaching-as-usual', day-to-day working. This would be a classroom in which the workings of dominant and other discourses are understood, in which non-dualistic ways of thinking are taught and practised, in which different concepts of identity are explored. It is also one in which an ethical base is sought and articulated that is congruent with post-structuralist understandings, and in which multiplicities of stories are created, adapted, told, read and talked about. It is not possible to know yet what such a classroom would look like. Presumably it would be both *like* other classrooms (since it would still be necessarily immersed in dominant discourses) and *unlike* them (since deconstructive work would change the ways that children understood themselves, each other, the teacher and the school). A necessary precondition would be the teacher's own understanding of post-structuralist theory in relation to the classroom:

Making individuals conscious of the discourses they encounter and the positionings they experience is one of the most radically empowering moves possible. Or, to look at it another way, the real power of hegemonic discourses is the power of the familiar, the habitual, of positionings accepted without conscious thought ... Individual subjects are basically the prey of dominant discourses if they are not aware of other discourses and the positionings they construct. (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 14)

#### *(i) The Teacher and Post-structuralist Theory*

The kinds of theoretical knowledge needed by the teacher would most likely need to be achieved through a commitment of considerable time and effort, for example through in-service study conferences (Brodsky, 1993). In the first instance as gendered beings, they would need to have an understanding of identity as multiple and fluid, not unitary and fixed; of gender as a construction, not a biological given; of themselves as positioned and taking up positions within discourse. They would need to understand the present time as one of change and transition in terms of cultural understandings about gender (and not be threatened by this), and be willing to take questions about gender on board as a serious and central question for our time. Such teachers would understand that children bring with them to the classroom a range of experiences of being positioned (and positioning themselves) within the gendered dualisms of dominant discourses, as well as their own individual lived experience of gender within their family. They would understand how usual teaching practices confirm girls' limited positionings:

while subject positions available to girls in the primary classroom (and elsewhere) are multiple, they are still inevitably inflected with wider gendered power relations as girls take on the 'available' subject position mother/teacher/nurturer. In other words, the dominant gender narratives, and the process of

learning 'the usual' gender-differentiated positions, are clearly not interrupted. There is no 'pure' (or non-gendered, or non-patriarchal) space within which girls develop and become powerful. (Jones, 1993, p. 161)

The teachers would understand that there is therefore no possibility of compelling children to change (for example, of compelling girls to be more assertive or boys to be more nurturing) and that at this stage, there is no way of existing in the classroom that is outside of the male/female dualism. What teachers would understand that they could do, however, is to provide a context in which both they and the children could learn about how discourse functions, and about how they might take up, resist and negotiate positions within it.

The teacher's consciousness of the range of feminine and masculine positionings available to children would need also to be grounded in an ethical position which valued the individual child and respected her or his specific subjectivity. Teaching practice which was deliberately not sexist, racist or authoritarian (practice which is usually understood to be based on values drawn from a liberal humanist discourse) would provide the necessary context for working with critical imagination in the classroom. From a post-structuralist position, such practice (whatever its ethical base) can be seen as lessening the more extreme force or expression of some of the dualisms of the culture. The combination of post-structuralist theory and ethical concern would make less likely the kind of unreflective acceptance of dominant discourses that resulted, for example, in the 'Bloodbath Efa Bunnies' story (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991) being written and read as an exciting and amusing adventure. However, the limitations of a humanist ethical base would also need to be explicitly understood. The meaning, for example, of the humanist or liberal feminist value of 'equal treatment' would need to be radically rethought in the light of post-structuralist understandings about how difference is constructed. Both teacher and children might be better able to negotiate amongst contradictory discursive positionings when these are made visible.

A key question for such a teacher is then likely to be how to use post-structuralist theory in the classroom—specifically, whether, when and how to make some of its key concepts explicit to the children at a particular age. A teacher's work with younger children might be underpinned by post-structuralist theory (see for example, Mellor & Patterson, 1993). Teachers and older children might work together to deconstruct some of the common narrative forms of the dominant discourse. Materials designed for this purpose have begun to be published for the use of English teachers, for example anthologies of stories with a variety of (deconstructive) ways of reading them with a focus on gender, race and class: 'Our concern is not so much with "meaning", as with the process and production of meaning through various approaches to a text' (Mellor *et al.*, 1987a, p. 1). Teachers can, of course, also find their own stories for this purpose. This approach is a radical extension of what many English teachers have often seen as part of their task.

Teachers might also decide that learning about discourse, positioning, resistance, binary thinking and identity, for example, as concepts, might only be considered appropriate for children from a certain age—say, middle or upper primary school (Davies, 1993) or junior secondary school. Much research needs to be done on this kind of work with children. However, both before and after such concepts were introduced to children, the teacher's own understanding of post-structuralist theory would need to inform all aspects of teaching and class activities.

(ii) *Using Story in a Post-structuralist Classroom*

Alongside appropriate intellectual work on deconstruction, teachers who were trying to bring post-structuralist ideas into the 'obviousness' of the classroom world would need to work with children on their embodied 'lived' experiences—work which, as Walkerdine says, must 'map onto the crucial issues around desire' (1984, p. 182). Stories make hero positions desirable (for at least some children). They form a significant part of the context for children's acquisition of a confident and fluent literacy. And narrative knowing seems to be one of the basic human ways of understanding or making sense of the world. So a well-considered approach to the use of stories (including work with gendered understandings of what makes a hero heroic) is a vital part of any long-term strategy,

Narrative can be used for (at least) two purposes—to make available the 'cultural capital' of the dominant discourse, and to voice another storyline. Access to both of these narrative strategies is important for children: 'You can't play the game unless you know the rules. But to change the game, you need to know that the rules are neither static nor non-negotiable' (Luke, 1993, p. 150). The teacher's responsibility to the child can be understood to include making both knowledges available. Children/listeners will accept, resist and negotiate meanings, both of dominant and of disruptive storylines. The teacher's use of story will include a recognition of this active participation by children in the construction of their own gender.

In this context, what considerations might inform a teacher's approach to stories in the classroom? In this section, I want to explore the criteria and strategies a teacher might bring to bear on the processes of writing, choosing, adapting, inventing and telling stories, knowing that, as Cranny-Francis & Gillard (1990) point out, story is never innocent. Davies (1989) has shown that simple reversal or substitution (for example of female for male heroes) is not enough to disrupt dominant discourses. Luke warns that 'Substitution of heretofore marginal faces, "voices", "images" and values may leave the very narrative structures of dominant cultures intact and beyond criticism' (Luke, 1993, p. 150). Razack reminds teachers that they need to recognise the 'coercive power of stories' (Razak, 1993, p. 58) and keep in mind that subjectivity is in large part the effect of being positioned by others within discourse. So a teacher's considerations in working with story are likely to be multiple, diverse and sometimes contradictory.

(a) *Avoiding patriarchal stories.* One way to deal with the fictional and traditional heroes of patriarchy in the classroom would be to try to discard them. For example, an adult might choose not to tell children stories from the Old Testament, or stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, because of their portrayal of women. (I am not advocating this approach, as will become clear below.) This approach (in some ways a radical feminist one) is suggested by Bateson, who speaks of the 'heroic narrative of a life' which dominates Western individualistic (and masculine) thinking:

There is a pattern deeply rooted in myth and folklore that recurs in biography and may create inappropriate expectation and blur our ability to see the actual shape of lives. Much biography of exceptional people is built on the image of a quest, a journey through a timeless landscape towards an end that is specific, even though it is not fully known. (Bateson, 1990, p. 5)

This is a narrative form that Bateson sees as limiting, especially for women, whose lives, she says, follow a different pattern. She offers women an alternative narrative form—what she calls 'improvisation' (because its end point is not visible from the beginning).



This is an attractive way of conceptualising a life, one which values the quality that Keats called 'negative capability'.

But Bateson has set up the 'heroic' and the 'improvised' life as another pair of binary opposites, corresponding to male and female ways of being, and so remains within the dominant discursive understanding even as she tries to escape it. 'Heroic' and 'improvised' are better understood not as opposites but as two ways of thinking about a life, ways with different focuses and a different selection of 'facts' that add up to a constructed pattern. Each can be made conceptually available both to girls and to boys. The traditional idea of the hero has undoubtedly been a male one. But it is one with which girls have been able to identify (at some cost) by juggling their positioning across the male/female dualism and going against the grain of the dominant 'feminine' positionings available in Western discourse. The traditional pattern of the 'heroic quest' can be of immense value to a girl struggling, for example to achieve a difficult ambition, taking herself up as subject of her own life rather than primarily as the object of someone else's gaze. To discard the dominant narratives (or narrative forms) of Western culture in the classroom because they are patriarchal in their treatment of women, would be to discard powerful stories in which agency and desire coalesce in the position of the hero.

(b) *Making new stories.* Another approach to the question of what stories to use in class is to write new ones. Feminist and 'fractured' fairy-tales are one outcome of this approach. Some of the satisfactions and difficulties of this process are evident in Davies's *Shards of Glass* (1993), where stories written by the children consciously challenge some dualisms but remain enmeshed in others. For example, Mal's story resists his negative positioning as Aboriginal but endorses his positioning as hegemonic male in opposition to female. Davies gives two examples of adult-constructed stories which attempt specifically to resist conventional feminine positionings for their female heroes while still making them desirable figures. As Davies points out, the stories can be read conservatively, along the grain of traditional gender relations, or in a different way, against that grain—a reading that 'disrupts the familiar patterns of gender relations and provides the reader with an alternative storyline' (Davies, 1993, p. 192).

The writing of her or his own stories is potentially a powerful tool for the teacher who wants critical imagination to become part of the 'obviousness' of the classroom. But a teacher who writes new stories with female heroes needs to be constantly aware of the negative discursive meanings that commonly attach to the subject position 'powerful woman'. (New stories with male heroes can be constructed with comparative ease.) No hero position is unproblematic. The sacrificial god-hero or martyr of some traditional literatures, for example, might too easily become a template for female self-negation. So criteria appropriate to a post-structuralist understanding of identity and gender are needed to guide the storying process. One aim of such criteria would be to enable girls to position themselves as agentic rather than passive: 'increasing the numbers of ways girls can *be*' (Jones, 1993 p. 162). Another would be to make *desirable* the widest possible range of positions for both girls and boys. Other criteria relevant for writing new stories are discussed below.

(c) *Choosing stories.* One of the important 'conditions of possibility' for making a wide range of positions available and desirable, is for both girls and boys to hear and read about large numbers of heroes of both sexes. (It is not only how girls and boys understand themselves, but how they understand each other, that informs their construction of

gender, since feminine and masculine are taken up in relation to each other). This means that the baseline for a teacher would be to tell and read stories with equal numbers of both females and males as central characters (heroes), acting in equally powerful ways in storylines not stereotyped by gender. (The use of the word 'hero' for both female and male central characters is a significant part of this process.) Both girls and boys need stories with girl heroes in the same plenitude as they already have stories with boy heroes. This may seem like a return to the simple 'equivalence of the sexes' of a liberal feminist agenda, or possibly a radical feminist reaffirmation of the female. I would argue that a teacher's (and possibly the children's) awareness of post-structuralist theory and analysis of discursive practices would put the stories into a different context. Classroom talk and work around the stories would be different, and so make different readings available. A simple numerical equivalence of female and male heroes, on a week by week basis, would be the context for other decisions about gender and story.

Teachers need to recognise that one attraction of stories is their complexity, and say with Aptheker that 'I have been drawn to the poetry and the stories: because they are layered, because more than one truth is represented, because there is ambiguity and paradox' (quoted in Razack, 1993, p. 62). As one starting point, the traditional literatures of many cultures offer a huge reservoir of stories that have proved popular (desire-able) over time. They can be used as models, or adapted, or told as found. That these are embedded within patriarchal discourse, is inevitable. But they may still be the best available narrative material for a teacher's intervention, not necessarily at the level of the individual story but in terms of longer planning. When traditional stories offer a preponderance of male heroes, the teacher might make up or find (for example in contemporary children's literature) a corresponding number of female heroes. In fact, many traditional literatures (for example, folk-tales) do contain stories with strong female heroes which have tended to be overlooked. In deciding whether or not to tell a particular story, a teacher would be free to adapt or modify problematic details in its storyline or characterisation—but rather than substantially change a story, would probably choose not to tell it. (The telling rather than reading of any traditional story can give a teacher greater freedom to innovate in emphasis and detail.) From amongst the available stories, a teacher might choose to tell some stories with conventional heroes of both genders, as well as many stories with non-traditional women heroes and non-traditional men. It would seem preferable to avoid stories with passive heroines who are seen primarily as 'objects' of the male gaze, stories which are already too familiar in the dominant culture (though these stories might be useful to critique). But to some extent all females, including heroes, are necessarily implicated in patriarchy. Another source of story material would be the lives of contemporary women and men of achievement. These stories, too, can be co-opted back into the dominant discourse (Davies, 1993), but such co-option can also be challenged. For secondary English classrooms, another source of stories would be post-colonial literature; for Australian children in particular, Aboriginal literature (Morgan, 1993).

With such stories teachers can open up creative possibilities, briefly but powerfully to shape discourse in new ways. Cognitive work on understanding the constitutive power of discourse would then be situated in, not separated from, the affective or emotional world of the children. Deconstruction of the dominant cultural storylines that hold oppressive subject positionings in place would happen in a classroom where the abundance of stories (interesting, funny, exciting, scary, sad) made available a multiplicity of positions (including 'hero' positions) for the children to desire and to take up. The deconstruction of the dualisms of binary thought would be an ongoing process throughout a child's

entire school life, as the (invisible) power of the dominant discourse to reassert its 'naturalness' would need to be constantly made (re)visible.

(d) *Interrupting binary thinking.* For a teacher working with critical imagination, the process of choosing a story to tell the children in class would involve at least one crucial additional step. The teacher needs to examine any story to make visible to her or himself the way that binary thinking is embedded in it—that is, to begin the process of deconstructing the story. The knowledge so gained will make it possible for the teacher consciously to rethink and restructure both the telling, and the classroom talk that accompanies the telling.

The most essential ingredient of this process will be a teacher's understanding of discourse and binary thinking. When the dualisms that underpin dominant discourse are understood as effects of language rather than as reflections of an essential reality, it becomes possible to think beyond the limitations of binary categories such as male and female, and to start to deconstruct the opposition between them. Derrida's ideas about non-oppositional logic and *differance* are crucial here (Sampson, 1989). If in oppositional (binary) logic masculinity is fundamentally understood as being hard, active and powerful (opposed to femininity as soft, passive and weak), in the logic of Derridaean supplementary thinking there are always already present a multitude of (non-oppositional) categories that a teacher can use, to begin to shape and change stories (and hopefully, to shape and change children's understandings of gender). Difficult as it might be to achieve, the teacher can attempt to place even the words 'male' and 'female', 'feminine' and 'masculine', under erasure (*sous rature*)---that is, s/he can recognise these words as both necessary and insufficient. This strategy of holding contradictory meanings in mind is essential for the breaking down of dualistic thinking. It is part of the mental struggle to remember that no attribute and no positioning is essentially gendered.

So an attempt to enlarge the ideas available to children about heroism, for example, (or about courage or agency) would need to work with the dualism courage/fear: to deconstruct each of the binaries in relation to gender, and to reconstruct narratives that explored the new understandings that became available. A simple reversal of female and male hero roles or qualities in a story would not be adequate. A 'new' male hero might be someone who was courageous enough to go against the demands of the dominant discourse about masculine bravery. (Whether the actions of such a hero are understood as brave or cowardly depends on the telling.) A 'new' female hero might be someone who recognises physical danger and learns to overcome her fear of it, who leads men and women into battle, or rules wisely, or undertakes a solitary journey or quest. For these stories, as for any story, readings would be possible that reinforced the male/female dualism. But in a context where binary thinking, especially about gender, was being challenged, the possibilities would be enhanced for children to position themselves as courageous and agentic in multiple ways.

The teacher might ask her or himself questions of any story, such as:

- Where and how am I located in this text as I read it?
- What binary pairs are made important here?
- What is the relationship between the two sides of the dualism (the two categories)?
- How does each binary category relate to the male/female dualism?
- How might the categories be expanded?
- How can the negative side of the dualism be valorised?
- How can the opposition between the categories itself be brought into question?

- Whose interests are served by the story as it stands?
- How can voice be given to the silenced?
- How can I reconstruct this story to make a wider range of positions available to both girls and boys?
- What are the ethical implications of this story? How do these relate to the male/female dualism?

Bringing together deconstruction, imagination and values to examine and adapt traditional or original narratives gives teachers one strategy with which to tackle questions about gender. Sometimes this process might lead a teacher to abandon a story; sometimes quite small changes of emphasis might make its telling more appropriate and enjoyable. Not every story can do all the work that needs to be done. But over the course of a term or a year, a teacher might achieve a wide range of hero positions that encompassed a variety of qualities, all of which were potentially desirable and available to both girls and boys.

### Conclusion

The male/female dualism is made up of clusters of qualities or ideas attached to the categories 'male' and 'female', linking each to the whole social order. Deconstructing particular terms, such as 'fast' or 'strong' or 'beautiful' can expand those categories but will not necessarily challenge the male/female dualism itself; which will continue to be reasserted by the dominant discourse as 'natural' even as the meanings of the terms in each category shift. Is it possible, then, to bring critical imagination to the male/female dualism in a more comprehensive way, rather than to its multitude of component parts? Could 'male' and 'female' be used to refer not to the genitals a person has, but simply to ways of being, related to each other in learned or constructed, not biological, ways? Is it possible to imagine a hero who genuinely moves beyond the male/female dualism? This is a task that 'storytellers of the future' such as Ursula Le Guin (1973) and Marge Piercy (1979) have undertaken, devising on the way strategies to deal with the intractable nature of gendered personal pronouns in the English language. Teachers and children, too, can exercise their imaginations in playing with stories where the gender of the hero genuinely encompasses a multitude of the possibilities that we currently attach to 'maleness' or 'femaleness'—and trying to do this without simply reversing binary opposite pairs. Imaginatively positioning heroes in stories in this way might help to make it possible for both teachers and children imaginatively to position *themselves* beyond the male/female dualism in their lived experiences. The coercive effects of binary logic will make this difficult to sustain. But the movement from pleasure to the edge of bliss as binaries are disrupted and new knowing becomes possible would, perhaps, be so desirable as to make them/us attempt it again and again.

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