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## Final MA Portfolio

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# FINAL PORTFOLIO

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of  
Bowling Green State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the field of English

7 December 2018

Dr. Sherri Wells-Jensen, First Reader

Kimberly Spallinger, Second Reader

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I'm so glad I came. I have finally arrived at the point of this program where I can see the finish line, a finish line I was once uncertain that I would reach in a race I was not sure I could run. I earned my bachelor's degree in the spring of 1990. Then, six years ago when I began to teach full-time, it became obvious to me how much I still needed to learn. I had always wanted to return to go back to school but the time never seemed right. However, after three years of teaching, I came to the realization that *not* returning to school was no longer an option. My primary motivation for enrolling in the MA program at Bowling Green State University was so I could master my craft, teaching English. I will be proud to have earned an advanced degree but, for me, the more valuable take away is that I have achieved my goal—to become a better teacher.

More than the acquisition of an advanced degree, my time here has been a period of deep self-reflection. I began this journey thinking that I would earn a master's degree and potentially explore teaching at a collegiate level. Trying to teach kids to write can be maddening. Interestingly enough, being in this program has actually helped to solidify my love for and commitment to helping young people to learn to write well. Once I thought I was burned out from teaching but I think I was merely exasperated from spending day after day not knowing what to do to help my students succeed. Now I can see that I have not only evolved as a teacher but as a person. I do not feel overwhelmed by the difficulties of teaching now that I am better equipped to find solutions. Since I have embraced writing as a process and not a product, I am not discouraged by my students' errors. Instead, I have developed the capacity to see writing errors as a student's attempt to incorporate learning into writing. Sometimes I feel like young Lucy after she discovered there was an entire world there beyond the wardrobe, one she never knew existed. There are so many ideas of which I have been unaware and conversations of

which I was never a part until I became a student at Bowling Green. I was unfamiliar with Mina Shaughnessy before I was a student here. Her vast work in the study of writing errors now informs my own views of my students' writing. As Shaughnessy explains in *Errors and expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, writing students are not “indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence” but the solution to resolving their writing conundrums is often found in the problematic constructions teachers disdainfully label as “errors” (5).

As previously stated, I have gained a great deal from my participation in the program, more than I could address in the confines of this paper. I have endeavored to narrow the list of theories and methods that have been most impactful down to three things. First has been coming to understand the significance of the rhetorical situation. Secondly, I have learned better ways to give students feedback about their writing. The third thing is not so much a theory or method but rather becoming a part of a language arts discourse community.

Of all of the theories and methods I have been exposed to in the program, one thing that has altered the way I teach writing is learning about rhetorical writing and thinking for writers. While I had heard the expression “rhetorical situation” in the past, I had relegated it to the realm of more pedagogical jargon. It was in the course of the ENG 6040 Academic Writing class that I came to understand what a rhetorical situation is and why it matters for writers. In “Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar”, Laura Micciche decries the use of “teaching methods that present grammar as a fix-it approach to weak writing rather than, as Martha Kolln describes, ‘a rhetorical tool that all writers should understand and control’” (Kolln qtd. in Micciche 716). More than teaching “rules” for writing, I am striving to teach students to make rhetorical choices. I want to impress upon students that the ultimate goal of writing is to express themselves successfully to their intended audiences rather than to create a showcase to demonstrate their slavish adherence

to prescriptive grammar rules. It is also my hope that students will not only write rhetorically but begin to think rhetorically. Writing then is no longer an isolated activity imposed upon students in composition classes but a form of engagement with the society in which the students live.

In *The Joy of Teaching*, Peter Filene warns teachers about confusing condemnation for assessment. He writes that a teacher must “resist becoming a judge whose sentences reward or punish rather than teach” (92). The process of assessing writing is not merely an end unto itself but an opportunity to initiate a dialogue with writers about their writing. This is an exciting revelation and has helped me to advance closer to what Micciche calls “the larger goal of emancipatory teaching” (Micciche 717). I can vividly remember spending hours pouring over stacks of student papers, red pen in hand, marking every error and plastering the margins with suggestions, knowing the whole time it was an exercise in futility. Once these meticulously marked papers were back in the students’ hands the race would be on to see who could throw theirs into the recycling bin the fastest or from the farthest distance. To curtail this practice, I began to require that students submit the paper with my comments along with their revised work. I once heard Maya Angelou say, “When you know better, you do better” and, even though I knew what I was doing wasn’t working, I continued to do it because I did not know what else to do. Now, I know better. I give very minimal suggestions, focusing on a few things in any given assignment rather than overwhelming students with a sea of ink. More often, I highlight areas of concern and, when I meet with students in individual writers’ conferences, I have *them* write notes to themselves about what to do differently. I used to think I did not have time to meet with students individually to discuss their writing but I now know that doing this actually saves time in the long run.

In “Learning Participatory Practices in Graduate School: Some Perspective-Taking by a Mainstream Educator”, Christine Pearson Casanave shares her frustration with trying to understand and participate in the discourse community for her field of study. My frustration has been trying to function outside of such a community. When I first applied to the program at BGSU, I had several misgivings. I envisioned myself as a “face-to-face” learner. I worried that if I had questions about the course material the instructors might not be available to answer them quickly. Now that I am near the end of the program, I cannot imagine having done it any other way. What I will miss most when this program ends is the interaction with my peers on the discussion boards. The majority of the classes have been set up so that there is robust discussion about a variety of topics. However, in the course of that discussion students were encouraged to share ideas, techniques and concerns. I have culled countless ideas. Not only have I been inspired by my classmates but I have had the chance to contribute to them as well. Over the past two years, I have been able to I began teaching middle school language arts six years ago at a small private K-12 school in Pennsylvania. Currently I teach all of the language arts classes for middle and high school. Being the lone English teacher at my school, I do not have a ready-made community discourse community. Over the years I have taught in virtual isolation, trying to educate and motivate myself through reading books, blogs and the occasional interaction with English teachers from other schools. I could not have articulated it well at the time but, as Casanave explains, students are “being ‘spoken to’ by real people” when they read (19). Now I have made connections with several teachers, some of whom will be my lifelong friends. I have also been exposed to other organizations and resources that have been useful to me.

The four projects I have selected for my portfolio are reflective of my teaching goals. Specifically, the goals I have set for myself are: 1) to prepare myself for advanced studies, 2) to

teach students to express themselves in writing in a way that is effective and compassionate, 3) to help students see the real-life value of the work we do in class, and 4) to communicate with and motivate all of my students.

### **Project One: A Literary Analysis of *Jezebel's Daughter* by Wilkie Collins**

*We write to think.* These words, written by Heidi Estrem, have been transformative for me. Research papers are no longer tasks to be accomplished but the writing becomes a form of visible thought. In “Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity” she goes on to say that “Understanding and identifying how writing is in itself an act of thinking can help people more intentionally recognize and engage with writing as a creative activity, inextricably linked to thought” (Estrem 19). Out of all of the papers I have written as a student at BGSU, the research project I have chosen to include in this portfolio best represents the type of scholarly work I may undertake if I am accepted into a Ph.D. program. Though it is only 15 pages, the maximum page allowance, I was able to use that space to explore and challenge the notion of femme fatales as being strictly negative characters. The project I have selected is a literary analysis of two characters from the novel *Jezebel's Daughter* by Wilkie Collins. This paper was the final assignment for an elective course I took this summer, ENG 6880 Victorian Femme Fatales: Fiction, Art and Film taught by Dr. Piya Pal-Lapinski.

For my revision, I relied on the guidance of my first reader. I incorporated a quote from the book into the paper's introduction. It was also suggested that, given the strong emphasis on gender roles in the novel, that I incorporate add an analysis of how the character's communication aligns with Deborah Tannen's theories about the different ways men and women communicate. This exercise was very enlightening because the two main characters, who are both female, each gravitated to different styles of speaking. One character appropriated a

speaking style Tannen identifies as primarily male while the other adopted the female style of speaking while secretly harboring stereotypical male ambitions.

### **Project Two: Movie Review Analysis**

Kelly Gallagher was one of the first writing theorists whose work I integrated into my teaching. He presents two premises for preparing writers for the real world. One is to “introduce young writers to real-world discourses” (Gallagher 8) and the other is to “provide students with extensive teacher and real-world models” (15). One of the projects I have included, a lesson plan for writing a movie review, addressed both of Gallagher’s objectives. The lesson prepares students to write about something that mattered to them using professionally written movie reviews as models. It developed as part of an assignment from ENG 620 The Teaching of Writing taught by Dr. Heather Jordan. Initially the lesson was just an analysis of a single written movie critique to determine the components. However, based on the instructor’s comments, it has been revised to present students with more than one movie review as a sample for analysis. Another concern from the original lesson was that it featured a movie currently in theaters. Students who had seen it could easily blurt out spoilers, even when asked not to do so. In the revision, the movie being discussed is an older film almost everyone has seen, Disney’s *Frozen*. One thing I learned when I initially did the lesson was that I was trying to cover too much in too short a period of time. In the revision, there is more scaffolding and the actual writing of a review is not a part of this lesson.

### **Project Three: A Lesson Plan about Standard American English and Rhetorical Situations**

My third submission is an effort to help students understand rhetorical situations. This project is in alignment with my goal to help students see the real-life value of writing well. Both within the realm of academic writing and beyond, certain writing errors can be status-marking.

Such errors include using informal writing in situations where formal writing is required. The original project, a reader response and lesson plan based on Henry Hitchings's *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English*, was initially written for ENG 6150 Linguistics taught by Dr. Sherri Wells-Jensen. I am in agreement with Crovitz and Devereaux that students need to understand that Standard American English is "an alpha dog dialect" (23) which they need to learn in order to "access mainstream power structures" if that is their ambition (24). Certain errors in writing can be status-marking and limit a students' future opportunities. The purpose of the lesson plan was to show students the long-term value of knowing when to write in conformance to the standards of SAE.

After receiving feedback from the instructor that the lesson did not seem particularly engaging for students, I altered the focus of the lesson to focus on code switching. One of the suggestions made by Dr. Wells-Jensen was to have students think about how they would ask for water for different reasons—a drink or to put out a fire—to recognize when it is appropriate to use SAE. The revised plan calls for students to work collaboratively to match prewritten messages to various audiences. I have created a matching game called *To Whom Are You Writing?* Students will begin by working with partners and then they will individually craft messages to different audiences. In this way, students will learn that there are different ways to convey the same information to different people.

#### **Project Four: Gender Difference in Communication**

The fourth project is also a reader response in fulfillment of an assignment for ENG 6150 Linguistics. The text read was *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. The feedback I received from the instructor, Dr. Wells-Jensen, was that I should create a lesson plan, perhaps something involving literary analysis in light of Tannen's book. I

have designed a lesson plan that will direct students to compare the ways women and men communicate in the short story *The Dinner Party* by Mona Gardner with Tannen's statements about how women and men communicate.

One of the greatest benefits to becoming a student again is that it has made me a better teacher. The following papers document my experiences here at Bowling Green University. I have been privileged to be exposed to the research and theories of some of the greatest minds within the field of English studies. These papers show how I have attempted to integrate the knowledge I have acquired into my teaching. As a result, some of the practices I have employed in the past have been affirmed, others abandoned and replaced by more efficacious models. My time spent here has made an indelible impact on my life and, by extension, the lives of my students.

Beyond the actual content of any course, being on the "other side" of the desk has given me a front row seat to observe several seasoned teachers in action. This has been an education in itself, seeing how other professionals organize their courses and provide feedback. Being here has caused me to engage in a level of self-reflection and empathy with my students that would not have been possible otherwise. I strive to emulate the positive things that I have witnessed in my teachers and peers. I can honestly say I have not had many negative experiences here at Bowling Green but, when I have, they also make me examine myself to make sure I am not doing these things in the classes I teach. Now, as a direct result of the time I have spent in the ...program at Bowling Green, I am a more competent, compassionate and intentional teacher. So, yes, I'm so glad I came.

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*Jezebel's Daughter: The New Femme Fatale*

“Who among us knows the capacity for wickedness that lies dormant in our natures, until the fatal event comes and calls it forth?” (Collins 75). For most people, the “fatal event” never occurs. But, that is not the case for Madame Fontaine, the dark protagonist in Wilkie Collins’ sensation novel, *Jezebel's Daughter*. Through Madame Fontaine, Collins plunges readers into the murky depths of the human psyche to discover what happens when her “capacity for wickedness” is called forth. Working in opposition to her is the saintly Mrs. Wagner. However, the unique appeal of the book is that the lines between light and dark and good and evil are not clearly drawn. Both Madame Fontaine *and* Mrs. Wagner function as femme fatales in Collins’ novel. One follows a well-worn path established by her literary predecessors while the other forges a new course that urges others to follow. Historically, the response to powerful women was to fear and then, ultimately, subdue them. The classic mythos of the femme fatale revolves around diabolical characters such as Madame Fontaine who choose to negotiate the obstructions placed in their paths by patriarchal society using deceit and even murder. However, in Collins’ novel, he presents an equally formidable yet virtuous character in Mrs. Wagner who, despite facing many of the same prejudices as Madame Fontaine, uses her intellect and agency to not only improve her own situation but that of others. It is my contention that Collins used *Jezebel's Daughter* not to reinforce the stereotypical femme fatale trope but to challenge and redefine it.

Another fascinating thing about Collins' novel is the exploration of the different ways Mrs. Wagner and Madame Fontaine communicate. Linguist Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, suggests that men and women have different approaches to and purposes for communication. According to Tannen, women use communication to build relationships while men use it to establish status. As a historical novel, *Jezebel's Daughter* gives readers a glimpse into the Victorian world with its well-defined expectations for males and females. However, as will be shown, Collins' protagonists do not always adhere to Tannen's theories.

### The Many Facets of the Femme Fatale

The femme fatale, or fatal woman, has inspired both fascination and dread in those she encounters. A problematic aspect of trying to categorize femme fatales is that there is not one clear-cut definition. Those who find themselves bearing the "femme fatale" label may have any combination of characteristics thought to be the provenance of these women: familiarity with the occult, overt sensuality, exoticism and the ability to dominate men. Madame Fontaine and Mrs. Wagner do not readily fit into many of these categories. Yet they both showed the capacity to do what all femme fatales *are* known for doing: causing disquiet to the men around them. The specific ways these women operate as femme fatales will be addressed in detail shortly. Prior to examining these intriguing women, it may be useful to explore the predilections attributed to femme fatales in general.

There is a precedent in literature for femme fatales to have an unnatural ability to bend helpless mortal men to her will. Sometimes this is achieved either through the practice of witchcraft or, in some cases, through a direct alliance with the Devil. Consider Shakespeare's

Lady Macbeth, one of the most notable femme fatales in literary history. She makes a desperate plea to the spirit realm prior to helping her husband murder Duncan, his perceived rival to the throne:

...Come you Spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful  
Of direst cruelty! (Macbeth, Act I, scene 5)

Something similar occurs in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Poor Clare*. The villagers long believed Bridget Fitzgerald to be a witch who needed "a ducking, if ever a woman did" (Gaskell 7). This fearsome reputation kept hostile neighbors at bay. The unnamed narrator says "the very thought of offending her...became invested with a kind of horror; it was believed that, dead or alive, she would not fail to avenge it" (6). Their fears are realized when Bridget proceeds to place a curse on Gisborne who cruelly killed her beloved dog Mignon, a surrogate for her missing daughter. Bridget petitions the "blessed ones"—"hear me while I ask for sorrow on this bad, cruel man" (7). However, as her confessor later explains, the request was rerouted because "her unholy prayers could never reach the ears of the holy saints! Other powers intercepted them" (27).

Another quality of the femme fatale is what Mario Praz describes as "diabolical beauty" (202) used to seduce and then corrupt men who fall under the femme fatale's power. In *Lady Macbeth*, the film adaptation of Nikolai Leskov's novella *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Katherine begins her affair with her husband's employee, Sebastian, when he appears at her bedroom door one night to complain about being bored. However, from that point forward, she takes on the role of sexual aggressor, actively seeking him out for her pleasure and then leading him to his doom.

Femme fatales tend to be seen as an exotic "other" of the men who are drawn to them. This is best seen in Prospero Merimee's novella *Carmen*, a panegyric to colonialism. In

“Exorcising Exoticism: *Carmen* and the Construction of Oriental Spain”, Jose Colmeiro describes the long-standing practice of Europeans to impose their “romantic imagination” on those places they believed to be inhabited by others, such as Spain. Using this imagination, they “exoticised the strange non-Western substrate of Andalusia in particular—its oriental influence, the legends of its Moorish past, and most importantly, the continuous presence of the Gypsies” (130). The result was the construction of “an us/them dichotomy that reinforce(d) cultural hegemony” (131). Merimee creates Carmen, the “dark” fortune-telling, Gypsy in the short skirt who was definitely not the girl next door. Somehow, just saying “No” to this brazen beauty is not an option; men are easy prey to her exotic, mysterious otherness. The lure of her exoticness continually poses the threat of emasculation to the men around her and, like Spain itself, Merimee suggests she is an object that must be conquered and controlled.

Not all femme fatales subscribe to every cliché. Yet, if there is one universalism concerning femme fatales, it is that they pose a threat to men because they refuse to operate within the carefully constructed confines designed for them by their hegemonic male societies. Unfortunately for the femme fatale, she will not be suffered lightly. In literary tradition, she is punished for challenging male supremacy, for not knowing her place. Carmen’s refusal to be possessed by don Jose leads him to take her life. Colmeiro writes that “Carmen embodies a quality of excess that makes her a threat to the patriarchal political order, an excess impossible to neutralize except through her sacrificial death” (Colmeiro 140). She is not alone. In Vernon Lee’s *Oke of Okehurst*, unhappily married Alice Oke is murdered by her husband after she taunts him with her obsession with a dead poet.

### Collins' Daughters: Madame Fontaine and Mrs. Wagner

In Wilkie Collins' novel *Jezebel's Daughter*, he presents the readers with two dynamic female characters, the diabolical Madame Fontaine and the (usually) virtuous Mrs. Wagner. According to Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, sensation writers "flouted moral concerns through their improper heroines and subverted the Hegelian belief that art should generate moral betterment" (260). Instead of flouting morality, however, Collins seems to be espousing it. His heroines slip on the femme fatale mantle as they seek to assume some parts of their respective husbands' identities to navigate the male-dominated world they must inhabit. Collins was not above moralizing and this novel has a didactic message: wicked women will be punished, upstanding women will thrive. In *Jezebel's Daughter*, neither Madame Fontaine nor Mrs. Wagner appeal to the realm of darkness to achieve their ends. Madame Fontaine turns to manmade poison to remedy her problems while Mrs. Wagner relies on her own agency to exert her will on others. Also, wanton sexuality is notably absent from the text. Still, while not sexualized, Madame Fontaine's appearance, specifically her gaze, becomes pivotal in how she is perceived. An unnamed critic noted Collins' ambition to "enlighten humanity in regard to certain moral problems of deep and momentous import" (*The Critical Heritage: Wilkie Collins* 219). Talairach-Vielmas points out that "both Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Victorian writers involved in the sensation genre, were concerned with the new reading masses and the need to educate the taste of the reading public" (261). One woman serves as a warning, the other a role model: Collins found death the only suitable outcome for villainous Madame Fontaine while the rebellious Mrs. Wagner proved formidable enough to prevail over the grave.

### Madame Fontaine: The Problem Child

In the novel's introduction, Jason Hall calls Madame Fontaine a "potentially disruptive female agency" (xv). This would be putting it mildly. She and Mrs. Wagner begin the novel in similar circumstances. David, the story's English narrator and Mrs. Wagner's nephew, begins his narrative with the announcement of "the deaths of two foreign gentlemen, in two different countries, on the same day of the same year" (Collins 5). Mrs. Wagner takes over her husband's business as well as his social reform efforts. Madame Fontaine also attempts to partially assume her husband's identity but in ways that are both more subtle and more sinister. Unlike Mrs. Wagner, at the time of her husband's death, Madame Fontaine is left in financial ruin with her daughter's prospect of marriage to wealthy Fritz Keller jeopardized. Mrs. Wagner can bandy her husband's name about and garner respect. Madame Fontaine's reputation is in tatters; she is the quarry of gossips. Her husband's estate consists only of a trove of potions from his work as a chemist. Even those are meant to be discarded. Her decision to secretly retain them was not to further her husband's life's work, as Mrs. Wagner aspires to do, but to exert power over those who stand in her way.

Mr. Keller has forbidden his son Fritz to marry Madame Fontaine's daughter, Minna, on account of debts accrued by Madame Fontaine. In the absence of a large estate and in the face of insurmountable debt which threatens to curtail her daughter's marriage to Fritz Keller, Madame Fontaine turns to her dark inheritance, the collection of lethal potions. Like Mr. Wagner, Dr. Fontaine also expressed his final wishes to his wife, that these chemicals be destroyed. Mrs. Wagner faithfully adhered to her husband's wishes, Madame Fontaine disregarded her husband's directives. Mrs. Wagner was able to seamlessly take her husband's place in managing his affairs because she was fully acquainted with the way he handled his business (6). By contrast,

Madame Fontaine held her husband's work in disdain. In a letter written to her friend Julie, she writes rather contemptuously, "I may look forward to being the wife of a poor Professor, who shows experiments to stupid lads in a school" (74). Her disinterest in his affairs left her incompetent to wield his potions after his demise and this would eventually be her undoing. Still, with the limited knowledge she did have, she poisoned Mr. Keller and then revived him with the antidote, making herself his savior and positioning herself in his good graces. It could be said that the deadly poisons were Madame Fontaine's greatest weapon. But really what made her so dangerous was her duplicity, her innate ability to inflict harm and then conceal it.

Madame Fontaine lurks and sneaks and lies. Mrs. Wagner is always direct and forthright in her dealings. "Even in trifles, *I speak the truth*" she tells Madame Fontaine (190). While Madame Fontaine initially hopes Mrs. Wagner, who becomes the head partner in Mr. Keller's business concern, will become an ally. Instead, she poses an even greater threat to Madame Fontaine's plans. After Madame Fontaine poisons Mrs. Wagner, she rather daringly gives Dr. Dormann, the attending physician, what he later learns is the label from one of Dr. Fontaine's potions. It is written in a cypher that Madame Fontaine cannot decode and she enlists the doctor's help, assuring him that her only interest is to prevent anything dangerous from falling into "unscrupulous hands" (220). The cypher becomes a metaphor for the cryptic nature of the femme fatale whose mind cannot be fathomed.

Collins also goes to pains to make Madame Fontaine, who is German, appear more exotic than her English counterpart, Mrs. Wagner. At the outset of the novel, Mrs. Wagner's lawyer foreshadows the inherent dangers foreign women present "in a strange place like Frankfort" (9). Gabrielle Ceraldi, referencing Collins' novel *The Woman in White*, notes a tendency of Collins to create "a clear dichotomy between the English upper and middle classes, and the dark, racialized

world outside. At first glance it might seem, however, that Collins has reversed the hierarchy: his English characters are weak and nervous, while his foreign characters are strong and vigorous” (183). This pattern is complicated in *Jezebel’s Daughter*. English Mrs. Wagner imperiously makes decrees while Madame Fontaine engages in shadow play, masking her true intentions and choosing her words to beguile her listeners. In this way, Madame Fontaine must belie her strength and constantly present herself in a submissive manner. One of Madame Fontaine’s detractors shows David some of the widow’s letters written to “Julie.” In one, Madame Fontaine confesses to wishing she had wealth “to make my power felt in this place. The insolent women should fawn on me and fear me. I would have my own house and establishment in the country” (77). Much to her dismay, it is she who must fawn and plead, first with Mr. Keller for the courtesy of explaining the rumors about her, later with the various jewelers as she attempts to sell Minna’s necklace to pay her debt and then with Mrs. Wagner to not expose her theft of company funds to Mr. Keller. Far from having her own house, she infiltrates Keller’s in the subservient guise of a housekeeper, constantly feigning weakness.

Setting Madame Fontaine against Mrs. Wagner, “one can perceive a comparison between sensible English reform, on the one hand, and potentially uncontrollable European revolutionary, on the other” (Collins xv). Fritz describes the half German, half French Minna as “Dark, slim, delightful, desirable” (Collins 14), adding that she undoubtedly resembled Madame Fontaine when she was that age. Currently, Madame Fontaine is “a grand creature, a Roman matron.” In this way, Collins not only distinguishes her from an Englishwoman but even from Fritz who is himself German. Furthermore, while Madame Fontaine does not ply her sexuality as other femme fatales have done, she manages to achieve more than amenable results by deftly using her gaze. In the introduction to her *Femme Fatale* course, Piya Pal-Lipinski describes the femme

fatale's gaze as "powerful", having the ability to "enthrall and bewitch men into a state of perpetual captivity and depression." Mrs. Wagner describes Madame Fontaine as "the woman with the snaky movements and the sleepy eyes" (125). During David's first encounter with Madame Fontaine, he remarks on the fact that her eyes were never fully opened (44), a feature he alludes to throughout the text. This is ironic because, through her half-lidded gaze, nothing escaped Madame Fontaine, no nuanced gesture, no opportunity. It is those around her whose eyes are wide open who fail to perceive her evil intentions. When her admirer, Mr. Engelman, envied her taking more interest in Mr. Keller's night time drink than his own, David said "the widow answered him by a look; he heaved a little sigh of happiness. Poor Mr. Engelman!" (59).

Though Mrs. Wagner demonstrates a preternatural zeal to her deceased husband's memory, seeking to immortalize him through her own being, it does not rise to the level of Madame Fontaine's fierce devotion to her daughter Minna. While Mrs. Wagner largely uses her agency to fulfill her spouse's charitable aims, Madame Fontaine uses hers to eliminate anyone who becomes an obstacle to her greatest goal, seeing her daughter Minna married to Fritz. Like Gaskell's Bridget, Collins purports that Madame Fontaine is driven by maternal instinct to do the things that she does, trying to convince readers that all of Madame Fontaine's wickedness is a manifestation of her unequivocal love for her angelic daughter Minna. In this way, he tries to curry sympathy for her. It seems to be untenable that she should behave as she does without some justifiable reason. When Mrs. Wagner threatens to expose Madame Fontaine for stealing, she insists she had only done it for her daughter—"I entreat you, in Minna's interests—oh! not in mine!" (191). But doth she protest too much? Collins' unnamed critic argues that the reason people do evil things is because they are inherently evil. He states:

why should Mr. Collins try to make us believe that Jezebel, the modern Lucrezia Borgia, who will poison you as soon as look at you, ...is redeemed, in other words, by the

supremacy of her maternal affection? This redemption is so palpable lugged in by the head and ears, and is in itself so grotesquely preposterous, that we should have supposed even Mr. Collins might have hesitated to suggest it. (*The Critical Heritage: Wilkie Collins* 220)

Madame Fontaine continues to play “The Minna Card” throughout the novel and, to be fair, she may have convinced herself that this was the driving force behind her actions. But, true to the classic femme fatale, some of her behavior can be attributed to something far less noble—a quest for power. She laments her lack of power in one of her letters, writing “Power-oh, if I had the power to make the fury that consumes me felt! The curse of our sex is in our helplessness” (75). Later, as she admires her poison and corresponding antidote in her room, she declares, “The power I have dreamed of all my life is mine at last!” (145). Presumably this dream pre-dates her daughter’s birth. However, she fails to perceive the danger poison holds for the poisoner as well as the victim. In *Chemical Seductions*, Pal-Lapinski says “Poison inscribed the bodies of both poisoner and victim with a dangerous sense of hybridity,” using Homi Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as something that “intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence” (Lapinski 96). Madame Fontaine uses poison as a substitute for the remedy she cannot obtain—money. She told Julie more than once that if she were wealthy, she could wield her power fully. In *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra references Frank Norris’ suggestion that a woman’s desire for power was really penis envy in disguise. “For Norris it was clear that women hungered for a power they did not possess, and if male potency was what women desired, then the material symbol of the male potency—gold—became equally desirable, and in a sense, obtainable in a way which ‘maleness’ itself never could be” (368). Collins affirms this sentiment as Madame Fontaine clearly equates money with power, seeing it as the means to advance herself in her society.

Madame Fontaine poisons Mr. Keller, then Mrs. Wagner, who is only saved through the intervention of her foundling from the insane asylum, Jack Straw. Madame Fontaine contemplates poisoning Jack as well but does not. Jack, believing the poison to be a healing elixir, ends up accidentally poisoning her instead. After allowing Madame Fontaine a brief reign of terror, Collins exacts his punishment. Like many of her literary femme fatale compatriots, she is left desperate and fallen. Collins prescribes the ultimate penalty from his troublesome femme fatale. He does away with her and then all of the remaining characters flee Germany, the story's main setting, to England, "the apex of Europe." Many Victorians claimed Britain had "racial, cultural, and industrial superiority to the rest of the world" (Ceraldi 174) so it is not surprising that England is presented as a place of stability and refuge.

#### Mrs. Wagner: The Father's Favorite

In the biblical narrative, Jacob loved Joseph "more than all his children" and he bestowed upon him a splendid coat of many colors (*The Holy Bible*, Genesis 37:3). Collins is also unabashed in his partiality for Mrs. Wagner. Unlike Madame Fontaine, Collins lavishes Mrs. Wagner with every advantage. Madame Fontaine, Mrs. Wagner participates in the "interrogation of transgressive femininity" (Hall xix) but Mrs. Wagner far surpasses Madame Fontaine in most every respect. Hall rightly states that Madame Fontaine is Mrs. Wagner's "foil" (Collins xv). Mrs. Wagner was even more redoubtable than Madame Fontaine since the former does what the latter cannot; she rises from the dead. It is as if, after her death at the hands of Madame Fontaine, Collins declares, "Daughter, come forth!"<sup>1</sup> As Hall puts it, Mrs. Wagner demonstrates "the power of (certain) women to 'resurrect' themselves" (Collins xxiv). Madame

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to a statement made by Jesus when he resurrected a young girl from the dead. This account is found in the Bible in Mark 5:41.

Fontaine is left to rot in the grave, recompense for her evil works. Mrs. Wagner's reward for her virtue is to become impervious to death. Also, in rising from the dead, Collins makes her almost messianic. Consider her ward, Jack Straw, who goes far beyond expressing gratitude for Mrs. Wagner's intervention in his life. He ascribes to her the power to give life, as if through her he is born again—"I began to live when Mistress first came to see me. I don't remember, and won't remember, anything before that" (252). Through Mrs. Wagner, Collins presents a new, highly-evolved paradigm for the femme fatale. She is formidable when she has to be but now she is no longer fatal. When men allow her to function to her full potential she does not need to be. In fact, she would more accurately be called the femme vitalité, or vital woman. Still subversive but, in the end, her works redeem her.

Like Mrs. Wagner, Collins' own ideas were progressive for his time. Aspects of the plot echoes the opinion expressed by philosopher John Stuart Mill in his essay "The Subjection of Women":

The principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and is now one of the chief obstacles to human improvement; and it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality that doesn't allow any power or privilege on one side or disability on the other. (Mills 1)

Still, before anyone labels Collins a card-carrying feminist, it should be noted that the secret to Mrs. Wagner's success was that she utilized her agency almost exclusively to fulfill her *husband's* wishes. Mr. Wagner, a successful merchant, left his entire estate to his widow, declaring her "the fittest person to succeed me" (Collins 6).

After her husband's death, Mrs. Wagner not only continued to run the business as he would have but also sets out to perpetuate his existence by devoting herself to accomplishing his goals. Any resistance to her efforts is met with her assertion that she must honor her husband's

wishes. “I love and revere his memory” she insists (7). “You know already that the memory of my husband’s plans and wishes is a sacred memory to me,” she explains (12). At one point she even proclaims, “Whatever my good husband thought, I think” (188). Within a week of the reading of the will, Mrs. Wagner announces her plans to continue her husband’s legacy in two respects. First, she wants to expand upon Mr. Wagner’s “audacious” but nonetheless successful experiment of dividing positions in his firm between men and women without regard for gender, a decision that David tells us created nothing short of scandal. Ignoring her attorney’s objections, Mrs. Wagner plans to implement her husband’s policy at the company’s Frankfort location as well (8).

Even more unsettling to David and her attorney is a plan to undertake another of her husband’s planned experiments that she read about in his diary. He wanted to see the insane treated with “patience and kindness” in place of the barbaric practices currently in use. She intends to bring such a person into her home and reform him with the treatment prescribed by her husband to serve as a case study for mental healthcare providers. Madame Fontaine tried to appropriate her husband’s poisons to enact her own will and she failed. By faithfully following her husband’s example, Mrs. Wagner is able to successfully traverse her misogynistic society from a place of authority.

Operating as a newer version of the femme fatale, Mrs. Wagner refused to be subjugated but rather compelled the men around her to conform to her will. When she revealed her plans to execute her husband’s last wishes to her lawyer, he looked after her “gravely and doubtfully” (Collins 6). David, the lawyer, and the head-clerk, Mr. Hartney, begged her to reconsider but, “Say what we might, however, our remonstrances produced no effect on my aunt” (12). The “lunatic” Jack Straw took up residence shortly after this conversation and Mr. Keller, the head of

the Frankfort location, was notified of plans to hire female employees. Keller's initial response was to go on a tirade about the "incapabilities of women" (42). Ultimately, he capitulated and she prevailed in everything she wanted to accomplish in spite of male resistance.

Though Mrs. Wagner may be the apple of Collins' eye, she is not a saint. At least once she yielded to the more base elements of the femme fatale. While steadfast in her dedication to her husband's memory, she deviated in an attempt to dominate Madame Fontaine. Once Madame Fontaine has no further use for Mr. Engelman, Mr. Keller's business partner who is quite smitten with the widow, she unceremoniously dumps him. Out of concern for the broken-hearted man, Mrs. Wagner tells David, "I mean to force Madame Fontaine to marry him" (Collins 125). After coercing Madame Fontaine's consent, Mrs. Wagner tells David "I hesitate to write to Engelman" (129). It is interesting to observe that this is the *only* time she doubts herself, when she veers from the straight and narrow path set before her by her husband to indulge in a more stereotypically feminine pursuit of being a busybody. Still, even this impulse to help Mr. Engelman mirrors a proclivity of her husband's. David described his uncle as someone who would "act on his convictions without a moment's delay (8). She seems to even surprise herself from this deviation from her usual altruistic nature, telling David, "I have found out something about myself which I never suspected before. If you want to see a cold-blooded wretch, look at me!" (129). Mrs. Wagner quickly recovers, abandoning the scheme and resuming her role as the trustee of her husband's legacy. She tells David, "I have other interests to consider besides Engelman's interests" (131). Collins' choice to assign her such a cult-like devotion to her husband's memory is troubling. On the one hand, Collins presents her as a prototype for the new, liberated woman who will not let any man stand in her way. Yet her agency is primarily employed in service to her dead husband rather than to herself. Collins

rewards her for her radical fidelity to her husband. Madame Fontaine, who held her husband in contempt, dies ignominiously.

The most convincing evidence of Collins' exaltation of Mrs. Wagner over Madame Fontaine is the disparate fates of the two women. Madame Fontaine reaps what she sows, ingesting her own toxins. Prior to her demise, Mrs. Wagner confronts Madame Fontaine, threatening to expose Madame Fontaine as a thief. The result of this disclosure would bring a certain end to Fritz and Minna's matrimonial plans. Blinded perhaps by righteous indignation, Mrs. Wagner fails to see "the suppressed fury struggling to force its way in words through [Madame Fontaine's] lips...It was the first, and last warning of what was to come and [Mrs. Wagner] missed it" (191). After she poisons Mrs. Wagner, Madame Fontaine does not revel in the fact that she had vanquished her foe. Instead she started to unravel. Collins forsakes her as all of the cold deceit and cunning he had endowed her with up to this point suddenly vanishes. After potentially exposing herself by giving Dr. Dormann the cypher for her husband's poison, she hastily disposes of the cache, divesting herself of "the power of life and death." Collins left her alone and fallen. Then, after joining the vigil at the Deadhouse, she is horror-stricken to hear the tolling of the bell signaling the indomitable Mrs. Wagner's resurrection. In another ironic turn, "the life seemed to have been struck out of her by the stroke of the bell" as Mrs. Wagner's pale arm emerged from behind the curtains concealing her body (237). If Jack had not already poisoned her, Madame Fontaine may have simply died from shock. In the world Collins had created, there was no longer a place for the old-school femme fatale. She was being displaced entirely by a more palatable version of feminine power.

### Tannen Talk in *Jezebel's Daughter*

According to Tannen, men and women “engage the world differently” (Tannen 22). Essentially, she suggests that men strive to navigate through “a hierarchal social order in which (they are) either one-up or one down. In this world, conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can and protect themselves from other’s attempts to push them around or put them down.” For women, conversations are viewed as “negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus (25).” The men in the story (written by a male author) stay in step with trying to maintain and achieve status. However, what is interesting is that the irreproachable Mrs. Wagner more often adapts the communication style Tannen attributes to males while Mrs. Fontaine uses the expected female communication style as a guise.

Mrs. Wagner is constantly being challenged by men who struggle to accept her as simply being competent to make decisions, much less being capable to run her deceased husband’s affairs. This tension is seen the moment Collins introduces her to the readers. Mrs. Wagner informs her attorney of her plans to hire female clerks, positions typically reserved for men, at the German outpost of her husband’s business concern. Her attorney expresses concern that the English Mrs. Wagner may have difficulty “in a strange place like Frankfort, to guard against the danger” (9). He goes on to explain that “the danger” he fears is that con artists will prey upon her “gentle nature.” Mrs. Wagner’s response is to dispatch her nephew, David, to the Frankfort office to personally deliver the news that women will soon be hired as clerks. By refusing to even debate the subject, Mrs. Wagner demonstrates her authority and puts her male naysayers in their respective places. Striving for what Tannen calls “sameness” is not adequate with and

audience of men who cannot conceive of her ever being their equal. She must “one-up”, or present herself in a position of power.

Ignoring critics was not typical of Mrs. Wagner, however. She spoke decisively and directly and could accurately be called “bossy”, ordering Minna to “Go and fetch” Madame Fontaine and even directing Madame Fontaine to resume the abruptly-ended relationship with the broken-hearted Mr. Engelman. Once when Madame Fontaine wanted to talk to Mrs. Wagner, the latter’s response was, “I will give you five minutes. And, mind, I mean five minutes” (190). The effect of Mrs. Wagner’s style of speech is telling. David noted that another male character, who had roused his aunt’s ire “knew nothing of the reserves of resolution in her” (18). After her first encounter with Mrs. Wagner, Minna told David that his aunt was “a person entirely without sentiment!” (125). There is no evidence in the book of Mrs. Wagner attempting to “negotiate closeness”; she is on a constant quest to establish her status as an authority.

Lacking the wealth and social status of Mrs. Wagner, Madame Fontaine turned to self-deprecating charm to ingratiate herself with those around her. Madame Fontaine attempts to “one-down” herself by elevating others when she speaks. Tannen points out that there are certain individuals who recognize the dynamics of status in relationship and attempt to take a one-down position, not to build relationship but to manipulate or deceive (Tannen 38). When David catches her alone in the room of Mr. Keller, her daughter’s future father-in-law, doing something suspicious with his cup, she instantly apologizes, praises David for his “kind sympathy” and explains that she was drawn to the architecture—“Don’t be hard on a poor artist who takes her opportunity when she finds it” (86). When Mrs. Wagner threatens to expose one of Madame Fontaine’s deceptions to Minna’s future father-in-law, Madame Fontaine begs for mercy. She tells Mrs. Wagner, “You are an honest woman, and I am a thief” (191).

Mrs. Wagner is right to suspect Madame Fontaine when she tells David, “Madame Fontaine spoke charmingly—with perfect taste and feeling. And all the time some devilish spirit of distrust kept whispering to me, ‘Don’t believe her, she has her motive!’” (129). In a candid confession to an acquaintance, Julie, Madame Fontaine laments having to maintain the one-down façade. Speaking of her demeanor towards her husband, she says, “I must live a life of deceit, and feign respect and regard for a man whom I despise with my whole heart” (74).

Part of the genius of *Jezebel’s Daughter* lies in Collins’ decision to have Mrs. Wagner abandon the mode of communication attributed to women but still be viewed as a positive force while Madame Fontaine, who presents herself to the world as a demure and socially appropriate Victorian lady, is the villain. The dynamic Collins’ had created between his characters may be more rhetorical than simply artistic; it may also be more evidence of Collins’ otherwise latent feminist sympathies.

### Conclusion

In *Jezebel’s Daughter* Collins embraces the social reforms of his day while advocating for a more enlightened mindset towards women in his society. In the paths he ordains for the characters in his novel, he ultimately denounces the bygone femme fatale and advances a new trope through Mrs. Wagner. She is not an invulnerable superwoman yet her fallibility is expressed in ways that are endearing rather than destabilizing. With the newly envisioned femme *vitalité*, any discomfort she imposes on male supremacy is offset by the fact that her motives are pure and her results will ultimately be of benefit to men and women alike. Collins seems to strongly suggest that women who aspire to Mrs. Wagner’s verve and acceptance by their male peers can achieve this triumph by emulating the patterns of men who have already demonstrated success. Madame Fontaine’s stated idol was “that wonderful criminal, Anna Maria

Zwangiger” whose path is “strewn with the dead whom she has poisoned” (77). We see how that worked out for her. In contrast, Mrs. Wagner made herself an extension of her husband. One has to wonder how the story would be different if Mrs. Wagner had the luxury of her own thoughts and ambitions but still prevailed against male resistance. What if, after Mr. Wagner’s death, it was *Mrs. Wagner* who, following her own convictions, decided to admit women into the company’s workforce and to adopt a mental patient? Would she find herself a resident at one of the very asylums she sought to reform? Still Collins’ efforts in *Jezebel’s Daughter* reveal a depth of understanding for the plight of women like Madame Fontaine who struggled to break through from the male-imposed restrictions of her time as well as Mrs. Wagner who managed to eviscerate the restrictions altogether.

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## Analytical Writing – Movie Review

**GRADE LEVEL:** Grades 9-10

**STANDARDS:** CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2, CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:** Students will need access to movie reviews which they can view on computers or printed out. For this lesson, I would print out the following reviews for the movie *Frozen*. At our school, they actually show it each year during an in-school Christmas party. I chose this film because most students have seen it already and there is little risk of spoiling the movie for others. I personally like to print copies of the reviews so 1) I can number the paragraphs for easy reference, 2) students can easily mark them up and, 3) we can avoid the profusion of banner ads on the various websites. I found two glowing reviews from Rottentomatoes.com. The first is *Disney's Frozen Will Melt Your Heart* by Maricar Estella from the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* (<https://www.star-telegram.com/living/family/moms/article3838036.html>) and *It's Cold Outside*, a review by Anthony Lane for *The New Yorker* (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/09/its-cold-outside>). There are also two negative review: Dan Shindel from *Movie Mezzanine* gives the film one star in his review *Frozen Tries and Fails to Be Both Traditional and Modern* (<http://moviemezzanine.com/frozen-review/>) and Damien Straker is no fan either in his *Gamer Impulse* review *Frozen (3D)-Film Review* (<http://www.impulsegamer.com/frozen-3d-film-review/>).

### OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of this assignment is to have students analyze professionally written movie reviews and create an outline of the writing to determine its components of the writing as well as make observations on the style and techniques used by the writer. Ideally, students will watch a movie and apply these insights in the writing of their own movie reviews in a follow-up lesson. However, this lesson is focused on writing analysis.

### PRIOR TO CLASS:

Prior to class I would cue up a clip from the movie being discussed. I happen to own a copy of *Frozen* but the epic scene when Elsa belts out *Let It Go* can be seen on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moSF1vxnbqk>). Leave small squares of paper on each student's desk. Also, I would have enough photocopies of the movie reviews being used for each student. Before making the copies, I would number each paragraph for easier reference.

### PROCEDURE:

Day One:

I would keep the lights out and as soon as class begins, I would show the clip from *Frozen* without any preliminaries. Then, I would turn on the light and ask students to write their names. Then tell them to imagine they had to describe what they have just seen to someone who has not seen it. They should write 3-5 adjectives to describe the clip they have seen on the paper. While there may be some repetition, it is important to have students silently write their own adjectives prior to discussion or there may be a large chorus of "So-and-so already took all of mine."

Next, I would tell them that we are going to review some movie reviews of *Frozen* to determine the kind of information that is included and the writer's other choices. I would read one of the views, most likely a positive one such as Estrella's. I would read the titles of Estrella's review—*Disney's 'Frozen' Will Melt Your Heart*—and Shindel's—*'Frozen' Tries and Fails to Be Both Traditional and Modern*. Ask students what they can infer about the writer's opinion based solely on the titles. Ask if the impact would be the same if the title were just *Frozen*.

Next, I would distribute copies of the movie review to each student and then engage the whole class in analyzing it, paragraph-by-paragraph, pausing to ask the students what they notice about the text. Also if there are potentially unfamiliar words in the text, I would stop and go over them.

The first paragraph of the Shindel review says:

Disney is in a strange place with its animated features, especially when it comes to fairy tales. In some ways, the studio is still struggling in a post-*Shrek* world, trying to figure out how to sell unironic sentimentality like dreams and true love to a more cynical audience. At the same time, the studio has become more corporately controlled, and everything is constantly focus-tested and second-guessed. As a result of this schizoid approach to filmmaking, many aspects of *Frozen* feel uncertain.

I would then ask students what information is expressed in this paragraph. Essentially Shindel tells the readers he is not impressed with the movie. I would work through the next three paragraphs with the whole class. Then I would break them into small groups. Each group would be assigned one of the paragraphs that was not done to analyze for content. Groups should highlight and look up unknown words.

After each group has had a chance to read its paragraph and document what it was about, each group should then present its findings. I would ask students which words they had to look up. If they do not have any, then I would ask them to define words that I had noted such as *eccentric*, *generic*, *blatantly*, *archetype*, etc. The breakdown by paragraph for this review is:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction with thesis
- Paragraphs 2-3: Story summary
- Paragraph 4: Brief history of Disney's attempt to make this movie
- Paragraph 5: A positive about the film
- Paragraph 6: A negative about the film
- Paragraph 7: Another positive
- Paragraph 8: Another negative
- Paragraph 9: A comparison with another Disney movie, *Tangled*
- Paragraph 10: Analysis of how the movie fits in overall in this genre

Paragraph 11: Commentary on the film's musical score

Paragraph 12: Conclusion

This will probably take the entire class period. At the end, I would simply give everyone a class participation grade.

### **Day Two:**

Students will work in the same groups. Each group will be given copies of one of the remaining reviews to analyze. I would either give each group a copy or project the list of the paragraph summary from the day before. Personally, I would give each group different reviews since they will all be read during the presentation anyway. However, other teachers may opt to have the each group working on the same review. I would circulate while each group works. Each group would then give a presentation as before. During the presentation, a reader from each group should read the paragraph in question first and then state what information the paragraph provides.

### **Day Three:**

After the group has completed its analysis in the same format of the one from yesterday, they would then be instructed to take one copy of the review and cut it apart with the lines of separation being between each paragraph. Ask groups to rearrange the paragraphs and then reach a decision as to whether or not the order of the review matters. For example, would it make more sense to combine paragraphs 2 and 3? Should any paragraphs be eliminated? Then groups can present their findings. They should be able to defend their choices for moving paragraphs or leaving them where they are.

### **EVIDENCE OF LEARNING:**

As an individual assessment, I would ask each student to write a one-page paper to identify at least three things they learned about writing movie reviews. Also I would ask them to write an outline of the information they would potentially include when they write own reviews.

### **FOLLOW-UP:**

As alluded to earlier, the follow-up activity would be to view a movie as a class and have students write reviews. I like to find movies most students have not seen. For middle school, I like *The Letter Writer* directed by Christian Vuissa. *October Baby* directed by Andrew Erwin is good for high-schoolers. The latter is produced by a religious film company but there are no overt religious messages in the film. Another suggestion for any age group is older Disney films students are not likely to have seen such as *The Emperor's New Groove* or *Mulan*.

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6 July 2018

*A Response to The Language Wars: A History of Proper English* by Henry Hitchings

Hitchings has created a tome that is both informative and entertaining. It is a chronological exploration of the origins and evolution of the English language. One of the most remarkable aspects of this book is Hitchings' ability to write something so comprehensive and still have a text that is readable. This book demystifies some of the eccentricities of English. As an English teacher, I have faithfully enforced the time-honored precept of not ending sentences with prepositions though I never understood why my students should be compelled to write in a way that was so at odds with how they speak. However, Hitchings suggests one reason for this practice is that it is an attempt to make written English conform to the patterns of Latin wherein the preposition would be placed before the word it governs (Hitchings 58). Hitchings even delves into the history of obscenities and how and why certain words came to be designated as "not now in decent use" (242). While the book certainly provides an education into the vast history of the English language, the operative word in the book title is definitely "Wars." For as long as human beings have been communicating, it seems there has been an ongoing battle to define *how* they should communicate. Hitchings poses the question, "Who decides whether someone speaks well?" (2). This is the book's driving question, a question for which there is no simple answer.

Undeniably, *The Language Wars*, with its detailed chronicle of more than a thousand years of English history is impressive. However, the most significant facet of this book is Hitchings' efforts to challenge the elusive notion of "proper" as it pertains to the English language. According to Noam Chomsky, "Questions of language are basically questions of power" (qtd. in Hitchings 20). There are certainly practical reasons for a society to reach a consensus about the meaning of words and syntax. Some proponents for proper English even saw it as "a symbol of unity" (38). A fear of "a fragmented America" was an impetus for Benjamin Franklin to advocate for mass education and "a united community" (108).

Unfortunately, there were others who saw correct grammar usage as the means of "marking their own superiority" (55). At one point, the poor were not even taught grammar to further inculcate the class system. This prompted William Cobbett to write *A Grammar of the English Language* in an attempt to help the poor "to protect themselves from abuse" (148). The most common way those who want to be seen as language authorities establish what is deemed proper is to highlight what is improper. The result is that much of the teaching of English has centered on the practice of avoidance. Hitchings states that this pedagogy promotes:

...one of the most pernicious features of the English-speaker's world: the belief that the avoidance of mistakes is more important than the achievement of excellence. This belief is allied to a tendency to think that one misstep undoes the effect of a hundred perfect strides (24).

Hitchings decries the demonizing of dialects (192) and extols multilingualism, stating that "maintaining the diversity of languages supports a complex ecosystem" that mirrors the genetic variety necessary for evolution and growth to occur (166). He also supports allowing common sense to prevail, arguing that the "proper thing to do is whatever seems most natural"

(13). More than anything, *The Language Wars* invites its readers to recognize that standard English “as we know it is a construct” (206) as opposed to being a divine ordinance.

As an educator there are many implications to Hitchings’ work. Speaking pragmatically, *Language Wars* is an invaluable resource and should be required reading for anyone who teaches English or aspires to (must I add “teach this subject” to avoid ending this sentence with a preposition?). It is a treasure trove of “things I didn’t know I didn’t know” and I have gained several insights into the idiosyncrasies of English. For instance, though the word *bowdlerize* is on the twelfth-grade vocabulary list that I teach each year, I had never heard of Thomas Bowdler prior to reading this book. After reading Hitchings’ description of Bowdler’s attempt to censor sexual references in Shakespeare it made me think that perhaps Mr. Bowdler took Lady Macbeth too literally and broadly in her plea to “Unsex me now.” More importantly, the book challenges me to celebrate the “hundred perfect strides” (or 80, or perhaps 2) while gently addressing the missteps. I have included the outline of a lesson plan that I would use with my students to help them explore the idea of proper English.

There are two other writings which relate to Hitchings’ book. The first is *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers through Innovative Grammar Instruction* by Edgar Schuster. He cites an NCTE presentation by Bill Strong called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Pedagogue”, a parody of the well-known sermon by Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In Edwards’ sermon, he depicts an infuriated God mercilessly dangling sinners over the mouth of Hell. Strong puts forth the analogy that composition teachers are often of the same mind, saying “As we read and react to student writing, we are like the wrathful God, we cannot keep our flaming pens off of the papers of our sinful congregation” (qtd. in Schuster 92). Schuster laments the fact that “too often we return writing assignments

looking as if they had been graded on a battlefield” and that when students make mistakes they are “typically beaten up” (93). He strongly advocates for the abolishing of rules and conventions that are done simply because they are always done but do not serve any real purpose. One of his more radical assertions is that the thesis statement, which is usually presented to students as a beacon that will enable them to steer clear of unfocussed writing, is often a “linguistic straightjacket for student writers invested in writing anything beyond dummy-runs and blether” (136). While he concedes thesis statements can be beneficial sometimes, he insists the need for them is not universal.

Another provocative book that challenges the status quo of English is a collection of essays entitled *Bad Ideas about Writing* edited by Cheryl Ball and Drew Loewe. One “bad idea” is addressed in Anajli Pattanayak’s essay “There Is Only One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking.” She writes that “espousing the ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by society” (83). She says that the first step to combat this problem is to acknowledge that “correctness reinforces inequality” (Ball and Loewe 86). The second strategy she recommends is “code-switching”, teaching people how to discern situations when different ways of communicating may be required. Pattanayak sees this skill as a way to empower people without “devaluing the writer’s identity” (85). While code-switching is a step in the right direction, Pattanayak still laments the fact that “it is rooted in the mentality that there is one correct way of writing” and that difference is often perceived as “lesser” (86).

Overall I liked *The Language Wars*. I appreciated Hitchings’ insertions of humor into what could otherwise be a very dull read. This is a *long* book. Putting the length aside, Hitchings’ book can be seen as a call to reimagine writing instruction with a goal of helping

students achieve the greatest clarity in their expression rather than creating a labyrinth of obstacles.

## Works Cited

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- Hitchings, Henry. *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
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Lesson Plan: – When to Use Standard American English in Written Communication

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-10

**STANDARDS:** CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3

**OBJECTIVE:**

To help students understand the different rhetorical situations. Working in groups, students will practice conveying written messages to different audiences. At the end of the lesson, students should be able to identify situations when it is appropriate to use their own vernaculars and when they should code-switch to SAE.

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

Students will be working in groups so each group will need a set of the *To Whom Are You Writing?* cards, three cards in each set.

**PROCEDURE:**

Ask students to state occasions when people should write using Standard American English (SAE). On the board, make two columns. List the occasions when to use SAE on one side. Some possible answers are when writing school papers, a resume, etc. Next, ask students to identify times when adhering to SAE is not that important. Possible answers may include texting, a post on SnapChat, etc. Write these responses in the second column.

This is a good time to introduce the term *rhetorical situation*, explaining that it simply means the topic, purpose and audience. When people write, they should understand the rhetorical situation so that they can respond appropriately.

It may also be worthwhile to discuss reasons people do not use good grammar when it is appropriate if not doing so may have an adverse effect on their lives. Possible reasons for avoiding good grammar are that it's confusing/too many "rules", it's elitist, it is possible to make a good living without it, etc.

On the board, write/project *Code Switching – The practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation* (Google definition). Give an example of a time you have (or still do) code switch. For example, *When I send a text to my sister, I use texting abbreviations like bc for because or ty for thank you. However, when I am texting my boss I take the time to spell out the words.* Ask students to share instances when they find code switching useful. Once everyone has an understanding of what it means to code switch, use one of the *To Whom Are You Writing?* cards and model how students should work through them. Each numbered card contains a message expressed in two different ways and a list of two different audiences. Each message must be matched to the correct audience.

Here is what one of the cards says:

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A nurse explaining the importance of a healthy diet.*

**Message 1:** Failure to consume the appropriate diet can result in obesity, hypertension, coronary disease, and diabetes.

**Message 2:** Veggies are your tummy's best friend! If you don't eat them, you can get really sick.

**Audience A:** A picture book for 5-year-olds who hate vegetables.

**Audience B:** Nursing students viewing a Powerpoint presentation during a nutrition class.

Explain your rationale for assigning Message 1 with Audience B and Message 2 with Audience A.

Next divide the students into pairs or small groups. Give each group a set of *To Whom Are You Writing?* cards. Each group should have a person writing the answers, ideally the person with the most legible handwriting. On the response form, students should write the number of the card and then write the letters A or B next to the correct message.

After each group has had an opportunity to complete the exercise, each group should share their answers, explaining why they paired the messages and audiences in the way that they did.

At the completion of the presentations, individual students should be given a situation with three audiences. Instruct students to re-write the message appropriately for each of the audiences listed.

### **EVIDENCE OF LEARNING**

After working in groups, students should be able to independently respond in writing correctly to a given rhetorical situation. For example, students may be asked to express that they are unable to attend an audition for a popular show but they are glad to have been asked in an email to the show's producer as well as a message on Snapchat to a friend. It may be helpful to create different rhetorical situations for the students to prevent copying.

### **FOLLOW-UP:**

PBS has a great documentary on code switching called *American Promise*. It shows two African-American boys who are enrolled at an all-white private school. The boys must code switch to navigate their different worlds in and outside of school. It is interesting that the code switching is not restricted to language but also involves appearance and mannerisms. Here is a clip from the film:

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/americanpromise/video/idris-code-switches/>

## *To Whom Are You Writing?*

Card 1

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A tenth-grader summarizing “Romeo and Juliet”*

**Message 1:** Its this messed up story about dude and his gf who kill themselves cuz they cant be tghr.

**Message 2:** Shakespeare’s “star-crossed lovers”, Romeo and Juliet, end up killing themselves rather than live without each other.

**Audience A:** A literary essay for Language Arts Class.

**Audience B:** A Facebook post to a classmate who didn’t read the play yet and wants to know what it is about

Card 2

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A high school student explaining why she wants to attend Princeton University*

**Message 1:** It would be straight fire if I get accepted so I can be like Michelle B.

**Message 2** One reason want to attend Princeton University is because it is where my role model, Michelle Obama, earned her undergraduate degree. Like Mrs. Obama, I want to live a life dedicated to public service.

**Audience A:** A college admission essay.

**Audience B:** An IM to the student’s friend.

## Card 3

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A dissatisfied customer telling someone why he is unhappy with the local franchise of a popular coffee shop.*

**Message 1:** I am writing to tell you about my experience at your establishment where I had the worst customer service experience of my life. When I told the cashier that he did not give me the correct amount of change, he opened the register and started pelting me with coins. I calmly asked him to calm down and, in response he threatened me with bodily harm. To say that I am shocked and appalled is an understatement.

**Message 2:** Storytime, Ya'll. Your boy went to a coffee shop round the way. Got my espresso, paid dude behind the ccounter. He didn't give me the right amount back so I pointed it out. Then he went cray-cray and started throwing coins at me. I was like, *Chill, Bruh! Whassup with that?* Then he was like, *Shut up, Snake! Imma catch you outside!* I was just standing there like *What the...Still SMH.*

**Audience A:** A post on a blog the customer keeps about places to visit in the town where he lives.

**Audience B:** A letter to the president of the coffee store headquarters.

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## Card 4

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A person describing a car accident.*

**Message 1:** I was sitting in my car which was parked in my driveway when a blue pickup truck came speeding down the street, rolled up onto the sidewalk and then crashed into the side of my car.

**Message 2:** i wuz in my car when this blue pickup rolled up on me and ran into the side of jimmi my car

**Audience A:** A police report.

**Audience B:** A diary entry.

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Card 5

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A person leaving a note to let others know where she has gone.*

**Message 1:** Went 2 store. B back in a few. Txt me if u need anything

**Message 2:** I had to go to the store and will be back shortly. I have my cell phone if you need to reach me before I get back to the office.

**Audience A:** The supervisor at her job.

**Audience B:** A room mate.

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Card 6

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A message in a card wishing someone a happy retirement.*

**Message 1:** Bout time! Congrats, Man!

**Message 2:** Congratulations! I wish you the best in your upcoming retirement.

**Audience A:** A partner in the law firm where you are an intern.

**Audience B:** A card to your older brother.

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Card 7

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Dispute about a grade.*

**Message 1:** I wuz shook when I saw my grade cuz I know my game wuz tight. I need to ask her wassup

**Message 2:** I am writing about my grade for my project. I thought that I had fulfilled the rubric so I was surprised when I saw my score. I was hoping to meet with you to go over it.

**Audience A:** A text to your friend.

**Audience B:** An email to the professor of the class.

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Card 8

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Thesis statement about Pilgrims.*

**Message 1:** Pilgrims most sig/America what is 2day

**Message 2:** The Pilgrims founded one of our countries most significant colonies and, without them, America would not be what it is today.

**Audience A:** In a school paper.

**Audience B:** A note to yourself

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Card 9

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Soliciting business for your lawn care service.*

**Message 1:** Call on me for your lawn care needs!

**Message 2:** Holler when u need me.

**Audience A:** A line in your brochure you will distribute to neighbors.

**Audience B:** A text to your grandmother who lives on your block.

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Card 10

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Explain your life philosophy.*

**Message 1:** #slay

**Message 2:** I rise to every challenge and persevere until I succeed.

**Audience A:** On a tee shirt.

**Audience B:** On a resume.

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Card 11

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Expressing your displeasure with the city's plan to sell a public park to a private developer to build a shopping center.*

**Message 1:** I am so broken/Must corporate greed triumph/leaving us empty?

**Message 2:** I'm saddened to hear of the city's plan to sell The Park to private developers. With this being urban area, many residents do not have yards. Eliminating our only park will have an adverse effect on our community.

**Audience A:** A haiku.

**Audience B:** A letter to the editor of the local newspaper.

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Card 12

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Express thoughts about #MeToo!*

**Message 1:** its so messed up how pple treat women bad

**Message 2:** The Metoo movement strives to dismantle systems of oppression that have been designed to subjugate and demoralize women for years.

**Audience A:** A freewriting exercise prior to writing about the topic.

**Audience B:** A paper about the history of the #metoo movement.

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Card 13

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Invitation to your band's upcoming gig.*

**Message 1:** Word to the Squad, if you wanna get turnt, be there Friday @ 6!

**Message 2:** You won't be sorry when you hear what we can do. We will be performing this Friday at 6:00 p.m.

**Audience A:** An email to a producer from a prominent recording label.

**Audience B:** An evite to your friends.

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Card 14

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A description of healthy snacks.*

**Message 1:** Top 5 Socomf Snacky Foods

**Message 2:** The Top Five Comfort Foods That Are Also Good for You

**Audience A:** A headline in article in a magazine about healthy living.

**Audience B:** The name of a pin on Pinterest.

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Card 15

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A statement about being punctual.*

**Message 1:** If you not on time, you won't get paid so get your face in the place, better do it my way!

**Message 2:** Any employees who are tardy for work will have their wages docked.

**Audience A:** An employee handbook for a company you started.

**Audience B:** A rap song.

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Card 16

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Explaining the reason for a product return.*

**Message 1:** I want to return the sweater because it did not resemble the description. Also it was of poor quality and was already beginning to unravel as soon as I unpacked it.

**Message 2:** The sweater was trash. It was already jacked up when I took it out the box.

**Audience A:** A statement on your social media site.

**Audience B:** In the Reason for Return dialog box on Ebay.

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Card 17

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Announcing a flash sale for your mom's boutique.*

**Message 1:**

**Message 2:** Today only, 70% off flash sale on wardrobe staples!

**Audience A:** Your mom's business webpage.

**Audience B:** Your personal social media account.

Card 18

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Explaining reason for a loan.*

**Message 1:** The purpose of the \$5,000 loan is to cover the start-up costs for an online wedding gown business I am starting.

**Message 2:** Getting' someone to let me hold 5 grand so I can get my grind on with this online bridal biz

**Audience A:** A loan application from a bank

**Audience B:** An entry on a personal vision board.

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Card 19

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Describing purpose of a 501C3*

**Message 1:** School Is Cool! is a charitable organization dedicated to decreasing the high school drop out rate in the greater Pittsburgh area.

**Message 2:** School Is Cool! trynna tell kids to stay n schl n the steel city

**Audience A:** A form that will be submitted to the IRS.

**Audience B:** A post on a social media.

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Card 20

**Rhetorical Situation:** *Statement about your job qualifications.*

**Message 1:** Yo, my tech skills r tight!

**Message 2:** I consider myself tech-savvy and I am extremely competent in several programs.

**Audience A:** A cover letter to a potential employer.

**Audience B:** A post on SnapChat.

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Card 21

**Rhetorical Situation:** *A nurse explaining the importance of a healthy diet.*

**Message 1:** Failure to consume the appropriate diet can result in obesity, hypertension, coronary disease, and diabetes.

**Message 2:** Veggies are your tummy's best friend! If you don't eat them, you can get really sick.

**Audience A:** A picture book for 5-year-olds who hate vegetables.

**Audience B:** Nursing students viewing a Powerpoint presentation during a nutrition class.

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*To Whom Are You Writing*  
**Response Form**

Names of people in your group; \_\_\_\_\_

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Card number: \_\_\_\_\_

Write the correct audience next the messages.

Message 1 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Message 2 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Card number: \_\_\_\_\_

Write the correct audience next the messages.

Message 1 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Message 2 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Card number: \_\_\_\_\_

Write the correct audience next the messages.

Message 1 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Message 2 goes best with Audience \_\_\_\_\_

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*A Response to You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*

by Deborah Tannen

According to Deborah Tannen, men and women communicate in different ways to achieve different goals. Men are often seeking to affirm and establish status while women want to build connection. Even though men and women may grow up in the same place technically speaking the same language, from early childhood “girls and boys grow in up in different worlds of words”. By this Tannen means that boys and girls are spoken to in different ways and are socialized in different ways. Boys tend to be in larger groups with hierarchical structures, engaging in activities that are competitive with winners and losers. By contrast, girls are more likely to play in small groups or pairs and seek to develop intimacy rather than bragging rights. (43). Tannen explores the ways men and women talk, describing male conversation as leaning more to reporting information and female conversation as seeking to develop rapport. While she does not deem one style superior to the other, Tannen does point out that, in order to be successful, women have to adopt to male norms (235). Ultimately, she concludes that men and women could have more fruitful communication if they embrace the fact that they each express themselves differently and “different” is not synonymous with “wrong.”

The most interesting thing from *You Just Don't Understand* was that it challenged by beliefs about people from other ethnic groups who I have categorized as “rude” or “pushy” because of the way in which they speak. As Tannen put it, “When people who are identified as

culturally different have different conversational styles, their ways of speaking become the basis for negative stereotyping” (206). I live in a small town in Ohio that is basically devoid of ethnic diversity. However, I frequently visit my family in New Jersey and New York where I regularly encounter people from all walks of life. In my encounters with Middle Eastern and African men, I frequently find their abrupt, to-the-point manner off-putting. This is because I have not really considered that their culture has shaped their way of speaking just as my African-American culture has shaped mine. Instead, I have judged them by American conversational standards. While I know there are some Middle Eastern and African men who are in fact rude, more often than not it may be the case that they are merely adhering to the conversational guidelines of their culture, particularly in their dealings with women.

The most important take-away from the book is Tannen’s sage advice: “The answer for both men and women is to take each other on their own terms rather than applying the standards of one group to the behavior of the other” (120-1). As a teacher of high school students, I have often characterized the behavior of some of the boys in my class as simply disrespectful and obnoxious but I now need to consider the possibility that *some* of this behavior could just be boys trying to engage on their own terms. One example of this is the need of some of the male students to try to challenge my expertise and attempt to engage me in arguments during class. In the past, I have dismissed this as attention-seeking behavior because, when I invite them to stay after class and talk about it with me, they never do. This past school year, the primary students who would try to shift discussions to something off-topic were male. It is not that the girls are always compliant or care more about the joys of composition; they just are far more nuanced and non-confrontational in their dissent.

However, according to Tannen, challenges and disagreement should not always be interpreted as threatening. For some males, aggression is actually a way to initiate interaction or even create involvement (163). Tannen goes on to say that some males see challenge as “constructive in an academic interchange” (169). I know I will have students who are unashamedly obnoxious but, going forward, I will not immediately vilify male students for not behaving like female students. I know that what I have learned about the differences in male-female communication styles will also benefit me personally. I am now better equipped to interpret a male response to something I have said that is incongruent with my expectations instead of being offended by it. What also resonated with me was Tannen’s comment that “Women who avoid conflict at all costs would be better off if they learned that a little conflict won’t kill them” (187). I know this will benefit me both personally and professionally.

Perhaps the most obvious work that correlates to *You Just Don’t Understand* would be John Gray’s classic *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Throughout the book Gray highlights the different ways men and women approach communication and problem solving. In chapter 7 entitled “Women Are Like Waves”, Gray issues a caution to men not to try to offer solutions to a woman’s problem when all she is looking for is understanding and compassion. He states:

The last thing a woman needs when she is on her way down is someone telling her why she should not be down. What she needs is someone to be with her as she goes down, to listen to her while she shares her feelings, and to empathize with what she is going through. Even if a man can’t fully understand why a woman feels overwhelmed, he can offer his love, attention, and support.

Tannen asserts that when women engage in “trouble talk” with men they do not want men to offer solutions. Rather, “trouble talk is intended to reinforce rapport by sending the meta-message ‘We’re the same; you’re not alone;’” (Tannen 53). When men offer advice instead of this emotional reinforcement, it creates distance instead of the connection women are seeking.

A second tie-in is a personal experience I had with a co-worker many years ago. A co-worker, who I will call Ted, visited my church one Sunday. When I went to work the next day, I entered a common area where Ted was telling another co-worker, “Bob”, about his visit to my church and his surprise at learning I played the piano (I was the church’s musician at the time). Bob then declared, “Wow, I never knew you were a penis!” Ted and I both laughed and, in an attempt to be humorous, I said, “Oh, is that what people are saying?” However, it became apparent that Bob thought the words “penis” and “pianist” were interchangeable. Ted immediately tried to correct him—“It’s ‘pianist;’”—but Bob would not be dissuaded. “Yea, penis! That’s what I said!”

Ted was thoroughly enjoying this exchange and seemed to relish in the fact that he was clearly one-upping Bob in this situation, even though Bob outranked us both in terms of position in the company. When Bob lamented that, “I always wanted to be a penis but I never had the discipline to practice,” Ted countered, “You’re doing great now.” We also learned Bob’s niece was a phenomenal penis at Julliard. But, in spite of my initial amusement, I began to grow increasingly uncomfortable because Bob was embarrassing himself and, should he find himself in a similar situation, he would likely do so again. Tannen points out how women often want to be peacemakers and restore symmetry (167). Still, as much as I wanted Bob to stop loudly bandying the word *penis* about, I could not bring myself to force a full-on intervention. I felt guilty about my lack of action for the next few days and even thought about going to Bob

privately but did not. First, I did not really know Bob well enough to be discussing penises in any context and second, while I was trying to create symmetry with Bob on this issue, my being a subordinate and a woman might make him more uncomfortable. Or maybe it made me uncomfortable to force asymmetry on Bob. I did not see myself fulfilling a gender role in this situation at the time but now I can see that I was following the cosmic script Tannen describes in her book.

Overall, I found the book very fascinating. There were some redundancies but it was very well written and extremely useful. While there are certainly some men who are more inclined to communicate in ways that may be deemed “feminine” and vice-versa, I think Tannen’s findings align with my own observations of the dynamics in male-female communication. There really was not anything in the book with which I found myself in disagreement. It is very provocative and has changed my thinking about people who converse in ways differently than I do. As Tannen points out, “The biggest mistake is believing there is one right way to listen, to talk, to have a conversation—or a relationship (297).

## Works Cited

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Lesson Plan: Literary Analysis Based on *You Just Don't Understand:  
Women and Men in Conversation*

**GRADE: 9-10**

**OBJECTIVE:** Students will analyze a short story to determine whether or not the characters conform to Tannen's suppositions about how women and men communicate. Tannen explains these beliefs in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, about how men and women use language differently. At the end of this lesson, students should write a literary analysis paper describing ways characters do or do not adhere to Tannen's presuppositions.

**NEEDED:**

Students need a copy of *The Dinner Party* by Mona Gardner and each student will need two highlighters, each one in a different color. A pdf of the story can be found here: <https://1.cdn.edl.io/h7A6QF2iKjqcueV2x85MgHXo1w0i1amcxKO0mX0nHrWqP7yT.pdf>. This lesson presumes students have read Tannen's book. If this is not the case, a good summary of the book can be found here: : <https://drdouggreen.com/wp-content/You-Understand2.pdf>.

**PROCEDURE:**

First, have students read *The Dinner Party*. Ask students to summarize the story. This can be done orally or you could ask them to do this in writing.

Once the elements of the plot have been established, review Tannen's theories about the different ways women and men respond to language. According to Tannen, women seek intimacy and, as a result, seek to create equality between themselves and their listeners. Men seek status and seek to show themselves as having a higher status than their listeners. Invite students to weigh in as to whether or not they agree or disagree with Tannen's statements.

Next, ask students to re-read *The Dinner Party*. This time, have them highlight any statements made by Mrs. Wynne in one color and statements made by the colonel in another. Give students adequate time to do this and then review to make sure they have highlighted all of the statements which are as follows:

The Colonel

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis," the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, he has that ounce more of nerve control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts."

Mrs. Wynne

"You were right, Colonel," the host exclaims. "A man has just shown us an example of perfect control."

...she replies: "Because it was crawling across my foot."

**Evidence of Learning**

After students have located these quotes, ask them to evaluate them in light of Tannen's book. In writing, students should explain whether or not they feel the characters' behavior is in keeping with Tannen's generalizations. In order to differentiate this lesson, you can limit the assignment to only analyzing the statements of either the colonel or Mrs. Wynne. To deepen the students' understanding of the topic, they may also be asked to include a statement explaining whether they think the generalizations accurately describe how men and women communicate. Another question students should consider is what, if any, are the practical implications of this information.