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FINAL MASTER’S 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 with a certificate in College Writing: Theory and Practice

May 10, 2020

Dr. Ethan Jordan, First Reader
Ms. Kimberly Spallinger, Second Reader
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Analytical Narrative

In writing this analytical narrative, I’ve spent many hours reflecting on my master’s degree journey. And now that I’m inching closer and closer to the program’s finale, I feel inspired to go back to the beginning. In applying to the Master of Arts in English program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I wrote the following in my statement of purpose: “The ways in which fiction both empowers and governs its readers is of vital importance to me as both a reader and a writer. I’ve always loved to read, and as a natural consequence of that, I’ve grown to love to write, but only recently, only within the last eighteen months, have I come to understand the import of a well-told story.” This, somehow, remains truer now than it ever has, and I have a feeling I felt it couldn’t be truer then, either. However, I’d like to make one small amendment to what I wrote two years ago on my statement of purpose in applying to be a part of what has been an incredible program: I’d like to remove the word “fiction” from my statement and replace it instead with “a story.” In my time at BGSU, I’ve read deeply and extensively, and I’ve expanded my ideas not only of storytelling itself, but also of who I am as a citizen of the world.

Though, it’s only in reflecting on all that I’ve read, all that I’ve written, all the classes I’ve taken, discussions I’ve had, and people I’ve met that I have realized this. In looking in the rearview mirror of my work throughout this program, I’ve learned that it’s only in thoughtful reflection that I’m able to recognize how much I’ve grown as a reader and writer and how I can best carry the lessons I learned here with me as I move forward beyond this program.

Here’s a bit of what I’ve learned: storytelling is a part of who I am. It’s as real within me as any organ. I thought I had an affinity specifically for fiction, though I’ve learned this isn’t true
anymore—I gravitate towards any kind of narrative, whether that’s memoir, graphic novels, short stories, or anything in between. I’ve learned about theorists like Hélène Cixous, about how to make grammar engaging within a middle school classroom and why it’s valuable to integrate grammar into writing as opposed to teaching it in isolation, about multimedia writing, about how to appropriately teach to college-aged students, how to analyze literature thoughtfully and critically, and why diversity is valuable in young adult writing. Between each of these lessons, I’ve learned dozens more. This program has been invaluable for me as I move forward in my career and hone the skillset needed to be a lifelong learner.

Throughout this analytical narrative, I’ll touch on four pieces of writing I created over the course of my two years at BGSU and how each of those pieces specifically has enlivened my love of narrative. Writing these pieces forced me to evaluate narrative—whether fiction or nonfiction—as a sort of truth. My writings provided in this portfolio, in one way or another, showcase my ability to critically analyze a piece of writing and how in doing and engaging in this kind of reflection, I create my own kind of narrative and truth about the respective pieces of writing.

My first piece of this portfolio is called, “The Subaltern and The Submissive: A Comparison of the Works of Hélène Cixous, J.L. Austin, Gayatri Chakravorty, and Sigmund Freud.” This piece originated in Dr. Erin Labbie’s “Introduction to Literary and Critical Theory” semester-long graduate-level course. This was a class I took during my first semester within the program, and I remember each week dedicating hours and hours to reading the material and engaging with my classmates. I’d never taken a critical theory class before and was fascinated by the theory we were reading. Admittedly, this was not an easy class for me, but I enjoyed it nonetheless; particularly now in reflection, I can appreciate the influence it had on me. In
completing Dr. Labbie’s course, I felt better equipped to read new material on my own and learned that theory, as Dr. Labbie said, “is about critique and resists institutionalization. [It’s not] to provide mastery of a subject, because mastery replicates the very systems that theory seeks to question, but to help one attain the special place in which she knows that she does not know enough.” These visionary theorists that we read paved the way for my appreciation of narrative and reflection, because it seems to me that each theorist we read came up with their theory about culture, representation, gender, writing, whatever it may be, by doing deep and serious thinking and reflection.

Of all the pieces I compiled for this portfolio, this one presented the largest challenge in the revision process. It was only with Dr. Jordan’s support and guidance was I able to turn it into the piece it is now. Because it was written during my first semester at BGSU, I hadn’t yet acquired the skillset and knowledge-base I now have, and Dr. Jordan pointed out to me the strengths of this project, but also where it could really benefit from further elaboration, further research, further explanation, and textual support. I present the idea of the critical analysis: how a woman’s laugh is an act of agency and power in Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” but do not quote enough from the text itself, nor do I have enough secondary sources to support my claim throughout my writing. I added a new introduction; I wanted to hook my readers into the topic while also explaining who Medusa is, why she’s relevant to this writing, and what exactly “The Laugh of the Medusa” is about. So much of my revision process involved research and adding in that textual evidence that further supports my claims and ensuring those sources are pertinent and reliable. For example, instead of using Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, I opted to use The Oxford English Dictionary. Additionally, I included texts that analyzed “The Laugh of the Medusa” to offer new perspective of the piece itself and further aid in arguing my claim. I realized that my
sources were limited and that I was only referencing the texts I was analyzing. I needed to utilize other resources (journals, essays, articles) to effectively argue my claims.

The second piece in this portfolio is titled, “The Subversion of the Traditional Female Archetype in the Domestic Noir: Gillian Flynn’s Sharp Objects.” This piece originated from Dr. Piya Pal-Lapinski’s course, “Gone Girls: Women in the Domestic Thriller.” For this graduate-level course, we explored various novels that focus on the darker side of personal and architectural spaces in women’s lives, including: suspense, violence, flawed or dysfunctional heroines, sibling relationships, adultery, and criminality, all themes that present themselves in Sharp Objects. In Dr. Pal-Lapinski’s course and in writing this analysis, I learned that meaning from a text is only garnered when I spend time engaging with it and reflecting on it. When reflecting on the geography of Sharp Objects, for example, I am able to better understand who Camille, the novel’s protagonist, is and why she may subvert the traditional female archetype. As a reader at the graduate level, I have a responsibility to be a thoughtful participant in reading the text, for that’s the only way I’ll draw any kind of personal meaning from it. So, that’s what I did in writing this analysis that I’ve included in my portfolio. At the time of writing this, I feel I’d had a better understanding of the expectations for quality of writing at the graduate level, and so many of my edits on this piece involved grammar and mechanics. I’d had a typo here and there, and those simple fixes, though small, make a huge difference in terms of professionalism and clarity. I did reorganize some of the content, as well, to make my claim more powerful and effective, so that whomever is reading can better plan and anticipate the claim I make, as it’s presented in a more cohesive way.

The third piece of this portfolio is broken into two parts. First, I include a comic that I drew, which is called “The Weekend,” which is then followed by a reflection of my work and an
analysis of several graphic novelists and graphic memoirists, which is called, “One Atlanta Drawing: The Weekend”. This piece originated in Dr. Khani Begum’s “Graphic Novels: Art or Agenda,” a course in which we explored how the graphic novel (or memoir) integrates both the visual and the textual to appeal and persuade the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of its readers (Begum). Though I’d read graphic literature previously, I’d never engaged with it in the way that Dr. Begum encouraged us. Additionally, the graphic piece I drew and have attached within this portfolio is something I’d never done before. In this program, however, I wanted to grow myself and expand what I think I’m capable of doing. I enjoyed the visual aspect of it despite the fact that I felt very challenged by it. In terms of revision, there was very little I could do with the drawing itself, but as far as my reflection on my drawing and the artists I read over the course of the class, similar to the other projects I’ve included in this portfolio, I edited for grammar and punctuation clarity while also ensuring that I offer enough textual evidence and support in defending my claim. In studying Nick Drasno’s Sabrina, Sarah Glidden’s Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria and Iraq and Adrian Tomine’s New York Drawings: A Decade of Covers, Comics, Illustrations, and Sketches from The New Yorker and Beyond, I was able to (mostly) effectively draw The Weekend. By studying those three writers and artists, I learned about line thickness, color palette, and how to tell a story through image using mostly dialogue. These are all components of storytelling I’d never studied before, and in this class, I was forced to analyze the relationship between the visual and textual, both as a reader and a writer/drawer. In my revision, I needed better explain how Drasno’s, Glidden’s, and Tomine’s work informed my own writing and drawing.

My fourth and final piece is titled, “A Reflection on Reflective Practices in the Classroom.” This piece is originated in Dr. Ethan Jordan’s “Graduate Writing,” a semester-long
graduate-level course in which my classmates and I learned about and engaged in the concept of scholarly writing from both theoretical and practical standpoints. For my culminating project, I elected to explore the idea of reflective practices within the classroom by creating a well-researched analysis of what reflection looks like, why it’s valuable, and how it could be implemented within a teaching classroom. I’ve always believed in the power of reflection; I wrote about that in my Statement of Purpose, and it’s been a recurring theme throughout many of my classes here at BGSU, and in this class, in particular, we read several essays and articles about how powerful reflection could be for the student if and when it’s implemented correctly. Those articles combined with my enthusiasm for reflective practice compelled me to evaluate and analyze how reflective writing could transform student understanding within the classroom. I argue that we need to change the way we grade to better allow students to tell the stories they want to tell, and they need to tell without worrying about the consequence of what they’ve written—good or bad. In revising and preparing this piece for this portfolio, I, initially, had reservations about including it. Halfway through my BGSU program, I decided to step away from teaching as a career. Though I loved working with my students, loved the material I was teaching, I felt a calling to pursue a career-path that asked me to think, write, and reflect differently. I wanted to do more writing myself instead of only teaching my students about writing. I’m now a content writer with a software company, and I write, edit, research and reflect all day long. Because I was no longer in the classroom, I wasn’t sure it was appropriate to include this writing simply because much of what I wrote about no longer informed my career path; I, however, opted to include it. I still firmly believe that reflective writing is an invaluable tool within the classroom, and what I hoped for my students in that paper still remains true. Those, too, are skills that I apply to my own writing and my own life. And, in the end, I think my
portfolio is stronger and more-well-rounded for having included it. In the revision process for this piece, I elaborated on my critical analysis, and I worked to improve the evidence I present in this paper. Originally, I relied very heavily on Kathleen Blake Yancey, and honestly, I still do. She’s a leader in terms of reflective writing analysis, but I was sure to also include other sources to support my claim and I eliminated other sources that weren’t helpful in supporting it. I also cleaned up some mechanical and grammatical points, which, inevitably, aided in clarity of expression.

When I joined BGSU’s MA in English program, I knew I wanted to learn more about my relationship between with language about how text is a reflection of the culture and time in which it was produced. Within this portfolio, I present four pieces, each analyzing a different text, each engaging with a different kind of writing. Not only does my work highlight the importance of reflection, but it is my hope that it also emphasizes the value of a strong narrative. In the first piece, I examine Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” and uncover the agency and power in a woman’s laugh, particularly after years of repression and when positioned against writings by Chakravorty and Freud. In the second piece, regarding Gillian Flynn’s Sharp Objects, I examine the subversion of traditional female archetypes. It’s a piece whose themes are similar to that of the first piece of writing in this portfolio. In the third piece, I draw my own graphic story based on the techniques and practices learned in a class I took about graphic literature. I reflect on the stories I read and allow those stories to inform my own creative experience. In the fourth piece, I reflect on the idea of, well, reflection, particularly as it relates to student writing within the classroom. Each of the pieces in this portfolio represent the culmination of years of work; I spent hours and hours researching and exploring ideas about
narrative and reflection over the course of my graduate program. Additionally, it is my hope that this collection demonstrates my abilities as a writer, reader, literary critic and scholar.

In the conclusion of my Statement of Purpose, I wrote the following:

With this program of study, I further commit to becoming a lifelong learner and building my life around that of teaching, of social engagement, of being an active and eager writer for the times in which we live. As a student within Bowling Green University Master of Arts in English program… I hope for two things: one, a challenging educational experience that will push me to hone and grow my skills as a writer, and two, to make me a more thoughtful reader, and consequently a better teacher. With thoughtful reading and determined practice, I’m confident my writing will improve. As it is only through reading past writers that we will better understand our collective history, and its only through reading current readers will we better understand each other.

I can confidently say that this program has done all of those things for me. Though I’m no longer a teacher within the classroom, I’ve acquired a skillset that could be applied to any career, and that’s due, in larger part, to the guidance and curriculum within this program. My time at Bowling Green has come to an end, but the experiences and knowledge I’ve gained here will carry me into the future.
The Subaltern and The Submissive: A Comparison of the Works of Hélène Cixous, J.L. Austin, Gayatri Chakravorty, and Sigmund Freud

In Greek mythology, Medusa is a dangerous woman. She boasts a head not of hair but of loathsome snakes with quick and venomous tongues, and she has powerful eyes, for anyone who gazed into them would immediately turn to stone. To possess such destructive power, Medusa in her life endured much loss, much pain. And as the mythology goes, in death, she’s powerful and deadly. She’s a beast who refuses to go silently into the night, wallowing in her sadness and accepting how horribly she was treated in life. She becomes her own agent and manages to have the last laugh. In the Hélène Cixous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous emphasizes and validates the need for women to express themselves, claiming that their capacity for growth and imagination has been stunted and repressed by men for centuries. Cixous first encourages women to write and then through their writing, they’ll be able to better vocalize their meaning. Though men may be afraid of Medusa, Cixous writes, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing” (885).

In terms of defining a self, Hélène Cixous, J.L. Austin, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Sigmund Freud address the powerful role women have, or conversely do not have, in speech and in writing. All renowned theorists, Cixous, Austin, Chakravorty, and Freud each have different approaches when writing about the dichotomy between power and weakness, particularly as it relates to women and men. Cixous screams her plea to the world, a manifesto that urges and appeals: “Women, create! You have been silent for too long.” Austin, in a similar fashion, asserts that speech is a powerful and active tool. Spivak and Freud’s ideas are more closely aligned. Spivak and Freud contradict both Cixous and Austin, defining women in how women relate to men, when women exist in and of themselves already. In her essays, Cixous asks that women
define themselves on their own terms, not in terms of men. She calls for more women to write *their* stories, to reclaim *their* histories, to proclaim *their* bodies, to assert *their* voices (or silences), and to laugh louder among the many men who have bolded and written and proclaimed and asserted before them. This will be no easy task, as Freud iterates, but the work is absolutely essential if any kind of honest female representation is to be expected in storytelling. Spivak and Freud assert that women are subaltern, defined only in how they relate to the dominant male, while Cixous and Austin advise responses to those assertions of submissiveness and how women should best reclaim and define themselves. Cixous specifically stresses that the power of the woman lies explicitly in the woman’s self-expression: in her speech, in her writing, and in the utilization of laughter as a speech act. Cixous, along with Austin and ancillary support from contemporary novelist Margaret Atwood, argues that women must subvert the normative structures of power in the stories that are being told. In exploring how women can reclaim their voices and reassert their power, Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” will serve as a primary text, though several secondary texts will further support the claim that women’s self-expression, particularly through laughter, is a type of activism. These secondary texts include essays by Atwood, Austin’s Performative Utterances,” Cixous and Kuhn’s “Castration or Decapitation?” and Freud’s “Fetishism.”

Atwood, an established novelist who often writes about the imbalance of power between genders, supports Cixous’s proposition that there is agency in speech. Though she is not a theorist, Atwood is an important touchstone in Cixous’s case for resounding and performative speech. In a collection of essays, Atwood comments on the drastic differences in which men and women laugh, and in noting these differences, she effectively highlights an essential difference in the way men and women self-express, just as Cixous mentions. Cixous calls for women to
speak, suggesting that women must speak, they must utter, and they must laugh in order to assert themselves as powerful.

Laughter is a tool best used for the expression of self and of power, and Atwood’s writing proves to be a perfect reference point. In an essay entitled, “Writing the Male Character,” Atwood poses an interesting question to a male friend: “Why do men feel threatened by women?” Atwood elaborates, “‘I mean,’ I said, ‘men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on the average a lot more money and power.’ ‘They’re afraid women will laugh at them,’ he said. ‘Undercut their world view.’” (413). It is an interesting question that Atwood asks, and it is one that urges the reader to question the nature of the response. Men are afraid of being embarrassed. They are afraid of being laughed at, an idea which only serves to highlight the point that laughter is a tool. It is a powerful agent in the reclamation of the woman’s self. Later, Atwood asks her students in a poetry seminar, “Why do women feel threatened by men?”, to which they respond, “‘They’re afraid of being killed’” (Atwood 413). The imbalance in these two responses is startling; men are afraid of laughter, while women are afraid of death. This fear that has dwelled in the souls of women has silenced them into submission. It is a fear of embarrassment and shame that has, historically, dulled their agency and quieted their voices. Cixous, who writes about the social construction of gender in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” refuses to accept this as a means to an end, refuses to propel these ideas of superiority and inferiority, and Austin, whose theoretical and philosophical research focuses most heavily on the powerful and assertive nature of language, provides the means to which women can begin to reclaim and redefine themselves.

To fully articulate the power of laughter, it is necessary to offer a brief investigation of the word itself. In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb *laugh* is defined as something used
“to make the spontaneous sounds and movements of the face and body usual in expressing joy, mirth, amusement, or (sometimes) derision” (“laugh”). The laugh is multifaceted; it is multipurposed, and depending on one’s mood and the definition above, it could be either duplicitous or earnest. It’s an expression of feeling, of emotion, and it’s a sensation that’s wholly relatable. Laughter, in terms of Cixous’s motivation and theory, exists in terms of seeking joy, pleasure and control on women’s own terms. It subsists for the sake of pleasure and for the sake of self-expression; it is neither vindictive or trite, but instead it is happy and festive. A simple way to assert power in any kind of conversation, for example, would be to either laugh or keep from laughing. Restraining one’s laughter, is just as powerful as sharing it because it is an assertion over expression. It is a choice and an illustration of agency that lies entirely with the self. Within “The Laugh of the Medusa, Cixous demands that a woman let her body “articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction” (Cixous 885). In freely expressing feeling, like laughter, women are articulating meaning for themselves.

There is also the kind of laughter that occurs in the face of adversity. This laughter is not ignorant or blind to the tragedy itself but chooses instead to acknowledge it with a perverse attitude. This laughter tends to occur when victory feels distant and nearly impossible, but the person laughing recognizes the difficulty and continues to move forward. Cixous writes, “Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible” (889). It is an expression of simultaneous will and exhaustion, and it exists more for the self than it does for anybody else. This kind of laughter is the juxtaposition of dismissal and acceptance because it is an expression of the self as it acknowledges and relents to his or her set of given circumstances. This kind of laughter is not feeble-minded, but it is strong-willed. It, like J.L. Austin writes and this essay will further explore, can act as an agent. Marjean Purinton, in a critical analysis of
Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” writes that Cixous “suggests that laughter can deconstruct the structures of heteropatriarchy in its dispersing of fears that keep entrapping structures of thought in place” (Purinton). This is women laughing their way out of adversity, out of danger, out of entrapment.

Additionally, laughter can be expressed as the antithesis of silence; in fact, Cixous calls speech “a place other than silence” (881). For years, women have been forced into silence. Women, for years, have listened to theories and articulations and stories of men, or worse, men’s ideas about women. Cixous references a story to evidence the power of the laugh, particularly as an emboldened rejection of silence. In a similar vein, laughter is a release of internalized silence of doubt and insecurity. It is a vocalization, an utterance, a rejection of the silence and a dismissal of the insecurities that developed as a result of being silent for so long. About Cixous’s "The Laugh of the Medusa," Purinton writes, “Cixous validates and valorizes woman's capacity for imagination and expression, for she has been silenced, shamed, ‘kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parentalconjugal phallocentrism,’ ‘surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives’; she ‘accused herself of being a monster’ (Cixous 876)” (Purinton).

The effects of laughter as a powerful speech act reverberate in several essays by Cixous. In her essay, “Castration or Decapitation,” Cixous borrows a story from “‘Sun Tse’s Manual of Strategy,’ which is a kind of handbook for the warrior,” and her purpose in sharing this story is poignant and clear: laughter is a powerful agent (42). In Tse’s story, the king commands General Sun Tse to take all one hundred and eighty of the king’s wives and turn them into soldiers, and General Sun Tse eagerly agrees. The General tries to teach them “the language of the drumbeat,” but every time he explains the process, they laugh and chatter, minding him none of the attention
he believes he has earned (42). The more righteous and rigorous he becomes, the more the
women laugh.

General Sun Tse, a man of absolute principle, does not like their laughter, and he
becomes frustrated and embarrassed. He deems their actions mutinous and sentences all one
hundred and eighty women to death. After he beheads two of the women, the rest of the women
immediately stop laughing. They become silent. Feeling they have no choice but to obey the
General, they silence themselves. When their choices become limited to death and silence, the
women choose to self-preserve. They elect to be silent, and they mute their laughter.

Cixous parallels the story of the General and the king’s wives to the quiet and submissive
position that women occupy in speech and in writing. In the story, laughter is used as a mode of
power, and the silencing of their laughter effectively serves as an oppressive mechanism:
“Women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they
don’t actually lose their heads by sword, they only keep them on condition that they lose them—
lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons” (42–43). For so long, men have
been the vocal dictators and tellers of women’s stories; the silencing of the women’s laughter in
the General story is no exception to that. The women have resigned to their roles, and they have
become silent.

In the story of General Sun Tse, the women’s laughter is an expression of joy, pleasure,
agency and control. Conversely, for General Sun Tse, it means one thing: disorder, and the
unexpectedness of it angers the General. Not only is it disruptive, but it threatens all semblance
of order; it is a threat to his power and his agency as a man. Their laughter means chaos,
upheaval, and worst of all, unpredictability. If they were laughing at him at the height of his
power, it makes the General question the very nature of his power, and he believed that the
laughter was threatening enough to him, as a representative of the male gender, that death was a reasonable solution. Women, in this anecdote about the General, are silenced into submission, reinforcing the idea that women are inferior to men.

In Spivak’s essay “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason” and Freud’s essay “Fetishism,” much of their writing suggests that women are defined by their position relative to the dominating male sex, and with this essay, Cixous proposes that women rewrite that definition. Instead of suffering in resounding silence, women, instead, should speak, or rather, laugh. In the instance of this story, laughter stands as a speech act where previously there was nothing. In Austin’s essay, “Performative Utterances,” his argument for agency begins at his attempt to define speech acts, or utterances, as “anything we say” (1289). He claims that all of our speech acts must be “true or at least false” (1289). Austin works to simplify his language, and he successfully makes his meaning and intention clear. He encourages his readers to recognize the power of language and the agency that inherently lies within it. With this kind of enlightenment about speech, there is no room for submissiveness, for passivity.

Austin states that performative language is language that performs an action. For example, language has the potential to perform the action of a marriage. During a wedding, in saying “I Do,” one is indulging in the act of marriage. The action is in the language itself. The bride or groom is doing something as opposed to simply saying something. Performative language is not descriptive, and it is not commentary. It is language that upon its utterance performs an action. In order for speech to be performative, however, several rules must be observed. First, “the convention invoked must exist and be accepted” (1292). Second, the situation in which the convention (or statement or performative utterance) must be appropriate. Additionally, the intention behind the language must be sincere (Austin). This kind of language,
Austin emphasizes, must be employed with sincere thoughts and feelings and intentions. It does become difficult, however, to determine whether speech is either performative or not, whether the language is sincere or not. Here the power lies in the speaker, in the intention of the speaker, and in the very act of speech. This is Cixous’s point exactly: speech is powerful. Cixous would argue, and Austin would tend to agree based on his ideas about performative power of language, that women will only reclaim their power and their belief in self when they too believe in the power of what they have to say. To say, “I am strong,” for example, is to be strong. It is a way to assert, to do. Moreover, Austin claims that “It is better, perhaps, to stick to the old saying that our word is our bond” (1291). It is as good as saying, “Our word is our truth,” or why the adage, “I’m a man of my word” exists. In these instances, language is a connection, and it is a mechanism used to communicate and relay feeling and intention. It is a mode of action.

Laughter as a speech act, similarly, is a way to express joy, assert control, and reclaim the self. This is exactly how Cixous writes; her language and word choices are immersed in performative power. Additionally, Cixous encourages women to write, to speak, and to laugh as a way to reclaim the power within their voices. Cixous’s first sentence in her essay entitled “The Laugh of the Medusa” is “I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do” (875). This very clearly highlights the power of language. In this sentence specifically, Cixous mentions writing, but she goes on to say that:

In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because
no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man (Cioux 881).

Within this, Cixous is not referencing instrumental sounds; instead, she means vocal sounds and utterances. It is only in speaking, or in any case, laughing, that women will reclaim themselves as powerful.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous addresses the sheer physicality that fear has when a woman may be asked to present her ideas, to share her thoughts, and to vocalize her feelings. She writes, “Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public” (880). When a woman’s opinion has been silenced or dismissed so many times, she begins to believe in her opinions are, in fact, invalid. She begins to question the validity of herself and her ideas, but Cixous is adamant that the only way to rectify and correct this fear is to laugh in the face it and speak up anyway by highlighting the nuances in male dominance and female submission in her writing. The difficulty of speaking or performing any kind of speech act in front of men tends to be particularly trying. Cixous writes that it is “A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (880). When she fumbles, she is even more attuned to her mistakes, more likely to fall into the pits of silence, and consequently, more likely to remain silent next time. Because of this, Cixous so boldly supports the idea that her speech acts are performative, as Austin suggests they could be. When she does speak, “She doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech” (Cixous 881). Her voice is her
power. The simple act of speaking up, or more specifically of laughing, is transformative. It is only gaining comfort in using her speech as an act of power, that she will continue to use it.

Cixous and Austin advocate for powerful speech acts, whereas Spivak and Freud establish the idea of the subaltern. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the subaltern as “a person or (occasionally) thing of inferior rank or status; a subordinate.” Leitch, the editor of the anthology in which Spivak’s essay is nestled, elaborates on the idea of the subaltern, indicating that “The ‘subaltern’ always stands in an ambiguous relation to power-- subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity” (2111). The subaltern, and in this instance, the woman, can only be seen as she relates to someone else. She is not a fully formed, independent being; instead, she is seen as less than and as someone who is lacking. She is seen as someone who is inferior to the man.

If Spivak suggests that the female is defined by her positioning against the dominant male, then one must ask, how might that definition be changed or corrected? Can it even be changed? Spivak, in all her bold theorizing, remains faithfully bipartisan. She “remains leery of any attempt to fix and celebrate the subaltern’s distinctive voice by claims that the subaltern occupies the position of victim, abjected other, scapegoat, savior, and so on” but acknowledges that there is a problem that does in fact need fixing (2112). It is a double-edged sword that Spivak wields, as she presents the argument but then fails to suggest any kind of action or progress.

Freud, on the other hand, defines “‘Woman’ not in terms of what she has but in terms of what she lacks—that is, a penis” (1940). In Freud’s essay, “Fetishism,” he proposes that woman once had a penis but has since been castrated. This idea creates a fetishism of the phallus, for “it
remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (843). Freud goes on to say that, “Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital” (843). The gall of Freud to assume this assertive position on behalf of all male human beings is evidence of the dominant male mentality. He assumes the right, as a male, to speak on behalf of all men. Women, however, rarely assert such power; rarely do they vocalize their bold claims, no matter how, arguably, outlandish they may be. In identifying the woman as a human who is lacking, who is incomplete on her own, he identifies her as someone who is less than, as someone who needs a male counterpart to be defined as whole. When writing about women and fetishism, Freud employs the word “repression.” The meanings behind that word are vast and expansive, and in the context of this essay, Freud refers specifically to pathological process. But it is a word that is also regularly used to describe women. It is regularly employed when referencing the subjugation and suppression of women, when referencing and acknowledging the imbalanced treatment between the sexes.

Just as Spivac did in deeming women subaltern, Freud does so in proclaiming the castration of women. Vincent Leitch further explains the relationship between the two theorists: “Spivak thinks that Freud…can aid us to keep the ‘sentence’ open, to explore the dynamics of the unfolding human relationships without foreclosing narratives by assigning determinate roles” (2112). Spivak, again, remains conservatively skeptical on the issue. Cixous, on the other hand, does not buy into this kind of passivity; she demands action, even if it means provocation, claiming that “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulation, self-congratulatory phallocentrism” (879). She believes that Freud is too self-congratulatory to think
logically. He is too proud of his masculinity to be reasonable because all that Cixous is asking, really, is that women, at some point, abandon the silence and be similarly proud and self-congratulatory, that they be unafraid of their own voices, their own laughter.

In exploring the silences of the past, women are able to relearn how to speak proudly and laugh unabashedly. It is only through studying the past and attempting to correct those errors in judgement, that women can begin to reclaim their sense of self. Cixous emphasizes this idea: “The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them” (875). Spivak agrees with Cixous here, at least to a certain degree, claiming that “Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate our participation in that formation—by measuring silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (2122). The participation in silencing women, however, between Cixous and Spivak would likely be up for debate. What have women done, or conversely, what has been done to women, is an ugly part of history, but it is only in acknowledging it, and in changing behaviors because of it, that women will be able to insert themselves into yet untold stories.

Cixous encourages all women to step into their lives with “a certain kind of laughter” (55). Despite Freud and Spivak’s suggestions that women exist relative only to their male counterparts, Austin and Cixous argue differently. Austin insists on agency within language, on the power of certain and specific word choice, and Cixous demands that women be their own agents: that they write, that they share, that they scream and sing and laugh. It is the responsibility and the right of women to embrace their volume, to speak into their silences, to laugh even when men describe the laughter as shrill and offensive and disobedient. Men will continue to try to suppress and repress and quiet; they will dig and search for every counter argument to the volume, because just as Margaret Atwood touched on earlier, her volume, her
laughter threatens to “undercut” his worldview. Regardless of the naysayers, the time is now to eliminate the antiquated ideas about female submission and subjugation. Spivak and Freud claim that women are defined only in how they relate to the dominant male, but Cixous’s and Austin’s arguments are sound. In response to accusations of submission, Cixous emboldens women by reminding them of the power they hold in their speech, their laughter, and in their true expression of self. It is time to eliminate the idea of the subaltern. Cixous says that it is the responsibility and right of women to find joy where men say they should not. Cixous goes on to say that “Women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women” (55). It is time, then, for women, finally, to have the last laugh.
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The Subversion of the Traditional Female Archetype in the Domestic Noir: Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects*

In a recent discussion about female archetypes and tropes, television critic Emily Nussbaum introduced the term “the hummingbird.” The term was inspired by the birds who move impossibly fast, suggest mania, fly with equal parts grace and insanity, and still defy predictability. The characters in *Sharp Objects*, similarly, defy predictability and tradition; they are characters who are “idealistic feminine dreamers whose personalities are irritants. They are not merely spunky but downright oppressive” (Nussbaum). Though Nussbaum is referring to television characters, the term could be aptly applied to any type of content with a female protagonist who meanders outside traditional female archetypes. Camille Preaker, the protagonist of Gillian Flynn’s bestselling debut novel, *Sharp Objects*, could be considered such a hummingbird. Camille, in all her tortured self-loathing, desperately yearns to be nurtured; in all of her quiet self-assertiveness, she worries about how men might digest her scarred and mutilated body. She’s a series of contradictions: insecure and strong-willed, bothersome and persnickety, rye and desperate. Camille is not the feminist icon that readers have been waiting for, or necessarily even want, but she is, nonetheless, the exact kind of protagonist that readers need. She’s an access point that Flynn expertly uses to examine gender roles and expectations and a character that exists to both highlight and subvert traditional ideas of femininity and domesticity.

*Sharp Objects* both begins and ends with Camille Preaker, the novel’s tortured, rapacious protagonist. She’s a reporter at Chicago’s fourth-most-popular newspaper and returns to her childhood home in Wind Gap, Missouri, after a long, intentional absence to investigate the disturbing murders of two teenage girls. Wind Gap is “one of those crummy towns prone to
misery,” made up of “about two thousand people [who] live there. Old money and trash” (Flynn 3). Camille sardonically explains that she’s “Trash. From old money” (Flynn 3). Camille is less than excited about returning home and even less so about reuniting with her mother, Adora; stepfather, Alan; and doll-like half-sister, Amma. Camille installs herself in her old bedroom in her family’s Victorian mansion. She relates, in a dreadful, helpless way, to the younger victims and becomes entrapped by the dreadful piety of her mother, the cutting beauty of her half-sister, and subsumed by the puzzle surrounding these murders. Particularly with her half-sister, Amma, Camille recognizes herself, and she resents Amma for the way she behaves and acts out because her actions remind Camille so much of the regrettable ways she behaved when she lived in Wind Gap.

Because of Camille and her contentious, dangerous relationship with her mother, half-sister, and her childhood homestead, Sharp Objects asserts itself as a domestic noir. Julie Crouch, a writer of domestic noirs herself, defines this subcategory of thriller as a text that “takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants” (Crouch). It’s a haunting narrative that plucks Camille from her comfortable city life in Chicago and places her, with only slighted chagrin, back home. Her tragic childhood, her experience of life in the big-city of Chicago, and her exposure to horrors within her work, sculpts her idea of how she fits within the scheme of the world, how she fits within the smaller walls of her life. Camille has not had a comfortable life, and this discomfort she has experienced is reinforced by the idea that what are normally considered safe places—homes, parks, schools—have never really been safe for Camille, and a “contemporary domestic noir can be categorized
as a literary and cinematic phenomenon foregrounding the home and/or workplace which, by exposing those seemingly ‘safe’ spaces, highlights and reflects women’s experience: exposing what was often assumed to be a ‘safe’ space” (Peters 12). When Camille is forced to return back home, her ideas of herself and of the self she built after she left Wind Gap are challenged. The person Camille identifies with back home is not the person she left in Wind Gap. Because of the environment of Wind Gap, Camille finds herself, in small ways, relenting to who she was when she was young. Elena Alvarez, a writer on the subject of domestic noir, elaborates on this idea: “Domestic noir then, subverts traditional gendered roles and destabilizes heteronormative institutions and relationships such as marriage, child rearing, and domestic tasks” (Alvarez 182). When Camille returns home to investigate the teenage murders, she is confronted by those traditional gender roles.

Through Camille’s eyes, the domestic space, something sentimentalized and often associated with coziness and comfort, has become haunted and treacherous. As this is a domestic noir, Camille functions as “an individual, in her own space, whether that be her commute, her gym, her home or some other setting; it is the place of her choosing, and she plays a crucial role in shaping and directing the narrative” (Miller 90). Though she does not love the idea of returning back home, it is of her own volition that she accepts the reporting assignment to report on the girls’ murders. Because she is now considered an outsider, she’s able to assess the situation differently from those who live there. *Sharp Objects* uses Camille to reinforce the idea that this novel should be categorized as a domestic noir because of, “Its sense of alienation, entrapment and paranoia, and its facility for critiquing social and economic ideology, [it] is an ideal genre in which to explore and evaluate current cultural discourses. Hilfer suggests that
these crime novels are ‘radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice or the way society is run’” (Redhead 117).

Camille relents to the narrative, and she reluctantly accepts the new and old space that she must occupy. In Wind Gap, Flynn sketches a variety of lives, particularly female lives, that are lived in small-town America at the start of the millennium. Additionally, Camille’s mother was never tender and nurturing towards her, and at the end of the novel, Adora even admits to never really loving Camille. In fact, she resented her. Adora resented Camille for her independence and autonomy, for the fact that she didn’t seem to really need her. This, too, emphasizes the expectations of women and girls in Wind Gap.

*Sharp Objects* was published in 2006, and the story itself takes place within a similar time period. To contextualize the novel and Camille’s role within it, it’s important to reflect on the time in which the text was written and the place in which the story takes place. In the 1990s, the term “postfeminism” popularized entangling ideas spouted by both feminists and anti-feminists. It was a time not to be identified as a historical shift or an “epistemological perspective,” but instead to be considered a shift in sensibilities, including the “notion that femininity is a bodily property… a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment… a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference. These themes coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability—as well as gender” (Gill). This means, simply, that a woman is not easily defined, and that women, as people, exist outside of their relativity to men. They are capable of being independent people and multidimensional.

Traditional ideas of femininity, including stereotyping based on historical and dated gender roles; arcane ideas about women in the workforce; how womanhood was often associated
and linked with motherhood; how women are shamed for being sexualized beings but condemned if they are not feminine enough, were introduced but not fully addressed by the novel (Gill). The early 2000s were a time when conversations about feminism were empowering, if not completely proactive, but still, often, they were dismissed. For example, in October 2005, *Glamour Magazine* wrote the following in their “Relationtips” column:

> It is possible to make the euphoria of the first date last. In the early weeks, says Blafour, it’s best to be the first to end the date. ‘It leaves him wanting more.’ Then remember the golden rules: don’t talk endlessly about your ex, be bitter about men or moan about your awful job/family/life. Most men agree a confident, secure, optimistic, and happy woman is easier to fall in love with than a needy, neurotic one. ‘It’s not about ‘I need to be more sexy for him and he’ll love me more,’ it’s about being confident in yourself’ (Gill).

Published in 2005, this, too, was a part of the conversation about the function and expectation of what it meant to be a woman. She does not need to exist in her own right but in order to be pleasant and accessible to men. Camille falls into many of these traps when it comes to romantic interest in the novel, but despite that, she refuses to conform to this traditional strain of femininity. Though Camille may, occasionally, present herself in a way such as to appeal to men, she does not compromise her core beliefs.

Additionally, it is critical to note that the story takes place in the fictional town of Wind Gap, described by Camille to be in “the boot heel… spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas” in the very real state of Missouri (Flynn 3). Missouri is a state with some of the strictest abortion laws in the country (even in 2006 when *Sharp Objects* was published), and the state even institutionalized English as the state’s official language and created laws prohibiting
gay marriage. From 2001 to 2009, Rod Jetton was a Republican member of the Missouri House of Representatives, representing Missouri’s 156th District, communities comprised mostly of “farmers and small businessmen, laborers and tradesmen” (Smith). Over Jetton’s tenure, he “intuitively understood that the way to these men’s political hearts was through their gun racks. And he knew that the way to their wives’ hearts’ was through the local preacher” (Smith). It’s interesting that women are referred to as wives, as if their identity was tied to that of their husbands’. The environment, clearly, is extremely conservative, especially at this juncture in history. Camille finds it to be suffocating, and she intuitively reacts to her home with aversion. She does not want to be there, even holds her breath as she passes the sign welcoming her to Wind Gap at the beginning of the novel but feels compelled to be there, nonetheless. She feels pulled to it, even if she reluctantly claims it as part of her identity.

This is the state, the community, in which Camille, *Sharp Object*’s provocative protagonist, is plopped. It is a community that’s built on a façade of beauty and perfection. There are large, sprawling Victorians, manicured lawns, happy and smiling children on bicycles. The residents are quick to dismiss Camille when she arrives, as they’re trained to protect the clean façade of the perfect town. No one wants to talk with her about the murders, but they don’t dismiss her with harsh words or aggression. Instead, there is a passive aggressive kindness to welcome her. Camille admits, “It’s the politeness that I find most upsetting” (6). She feels this way because to be polite, often, one must mask the true nature of his/her feelings. The pleasantries, particularly when juxtaposed with the content of the novel, is unsettling.

The spaces and relationships in which Camille ought to feel security and comfort do not exist. She feels isolated from her mother, from the environment in which she was raised, and with her half-sister, Amma. Amma is everything that Camille is not but instead everything
Camille once was, which only goes to highlight the town’s effect on young women. Presently, Amma has everything that Camille lacks. She’s girlish, comfortable, confident, and in both subtle and obtuse ways claims and proclaims the space she occupies. Camille is subtler. Flynn writes:

> Amma stayed up, staring down John, rubbing suntan oil on her shoulders, her chest, breasts, slipping her hands under her bikini top, watching John watching her [...] One triangle of her top had fallen off to reveal the plump breast beneath.

Thirteen years old, I thought to myself, but I felt a spear of admiration for the girl. When I’d been sad, I hurt myself. Amma hurt other people. When I’d wanted attention, I’d submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want; just like me*. Amma’s sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression. (Flynn 239)

In this passage, Camille acknowledges where she thinks she failed in her childhood. She does not resent her younger sister for doing what she herself could not. It is here that two types of women are pitted against each other. Mystery writer AJ Finn elaborates, “Loveliness, in fiction, typically graces a pair of archetypes: the angel and the temptress. Yet Camille is neither, although she allows she might be ‘a soft touch’” (Finn). Again, Camille serves to indicate to the reader all the complexities involved in being a person, woman or not, but specifically within this space she highlights subversive ideas of femininity and womanhood. Camille is beautiful but not girlish, and though she does not necessarily want to be all that Amma is, she also cannot help but be envious of her. This is the hummingbird—she does not want to be Amma but jealously also burns within her for all that Amma can do but Camille cannot. Camille often does not fit comfortably into the space in which she’s been placed, particularly if that space is shared by her younger half-sister. Camille’s half-sister, Amma, serves to further highlight for both Camille and
the reader everything that Camille isn’t: she’s no longer youthful, she lacks innocence, she’s an outsider, she’s scarred, she’s unwed and not-so-virginal. Though many of these descriptors could also apply to Amma, Amma presents the façade of girlishness, of pure and virginal womanhood.

Camille admits jealousy, admits to twisted admiration for her younger sister. Though this does nothing to make her more likable to the reader, it does aid in creating a sense of relatability. Camille’s willingness to admit her own flaws somehow makes her more human and more trustworthy. Finn further explains Flynn’s flawed characters by claiming that “Flynn's novels are feminist precisely because they aim a megawatt beam, bright as prison lights, into the dark corners of women's minds and lives” (Finn). Flynn is a feminist because she grants the reader access to Camille’s entire persona, not only the polite, lovely parts of herself. Camille is unabashedly herself, no matter how much she dislikes who that might be.

The bland normality of the town is what makes the story itself so eerie, what makes Camille such a compelling character, and part of what qualifies the text as a domestic noir. What could have happened in this white-bread town that made her so broken, so sad? Her resurgence in the town in which she experienced adolescence and then promptly abandoned is the perfect space for her to embolden fraught nerves and confront her mother, an overwrought woman with manners as backhanded and dangerous as knives, and her younger half-sister, Amma, who is everything that Camille never could be.

The fact that Amma and Camille are both juxtaposed and paired through the novel only emphasizes the character archetypes at play and thus confront the notions of what the reader expects each of the characters to be. Camille is a frayed nerve to every woman in the town doing her best to maintain equilibrium and save face. They’re a society rich in insecurity, and much of their decisions and actions are rotted in their neighbor’s perceptions. About midway through the
novel, Camille goes over to Angie’s house with a handful of women who she knew when she lived back in Wind Gap. Camille hopes, with a simmering fervor, to uncover news about the murders. The following conversation ensues:

“With Tyler in preschool I thought I wanted to. I thought I need a purpose.”

“Oh honey, you have a purpose. Don’t let society tell you how to raise your family, don’t let feminists—” here she looked at me “—make you feel guilty for having what they can’t have.”

“She’s right Tish,” offered Becca, “feminism means allowing women to make whatever kind of choices they want.”

The women were looking dubiously at Becca.

[…] “Camille doesn’t have children,” Katie said piously. “I don’t think she can feel that hurt the way we do.”

“I feel very sad about those girls,” I said, but it sounded artificial […] I did feel sad, but articulating it seemed cheap to me.

“I don’t mean this to sound cruel,” Tish began, “but it seems like part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids. Like it will always be shut off.”

“I agree,” Katie said. “I didn’t really become a woman until I felt Mackenzie inside me. I mean, there’s all this talk these days of God versus science, but it seems like, with babies, both sides agree. The bible says be fruitful and multiply, and science, well, when it all boils down, that’s what women were made for, right? To bear children.”

“Girl Power,” Becca muttered under her breath. (Flynn 131-134)
This passage is extremely dense. At the start of it, Tish explains that she went back to work because she wanted to find purpose in her own life. The women around her dismiss the idea that this could be self-motivated, that Tish could want to go back to work because she thinks it might make her a fuller, more well-rounded woman, that she might even like to work. They chide her for thinking that her purpose could lie outside her family life, as is the nature of a domestic noir. When Camille enters the conversation, a woman with no children who has contentious relationships with her existing family members, they cannot help but see her as less than. In fact, the women with whom Camille is speaking make femininity synonymous with motherhood. They suggest that Camille feels less because she does not have children. The argument they present is backwards, however. When Becca suggests that “Feminism means allowing women to make whatever kind of choices they want,” shouldn’t that include Camille’s choice to be childless? Additionally, when Flynn articulates Camille’s sadness over the murders of the girls, she writes, “I did feel sad, but articulating it seemed cheap to me” (134). It seems like that could be a parallel for how Flynn addresses feminism and, specifically, Camille’s agency within the novel.

Another instance in which Camille subverts the normative standards of femininity with regard to her own body and her own ideas of self-worth is when she purposefully cuts herself. As a coping mechanism for her anxiety and aggression, Camille self-harms, slicing angry words into her own pink and tender flesh. She is averting and dismissing what have “long been the requirements of the performance of successful femininity” (Gill). She’s ashamed of her cutting, indicated in the fact that she refuses to undress in front of men, fearful to expose her naked, scarred body, but she exercises agency in that choice as well. Camille is an “autonomous [agent] no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (Gill). Many of the
women, Camille aside, are either successful or beautiful. Amma is described as doll-like. The ancillary characters, mostly friends of Camille’s mother and Camille’s sister, abide by capricious rules about body shape, home size, skin clarity, etc. Camille abides by no such rules, often admiring their wealth and eating habits with a certain sense of dismissive disdain. Though, as mentioned, she’s a complex character, so her sense of disdain and disgust is rooted in something deeper, not in the things themselves, but in an honest and desperate search for sincere tenderness despite, or perhaps in spite, of all of these things.

Camille, when pitted against the women she so distains, presents to the reader a new perspective of womanhood. Flynn, in an interview when discussing her newest television show, says, “‘It’s not a women’s-issue movie. It’s unnerving, the idea that if there is a movie that has more than two women onscreen together, it’s a message movie’” (Oyler). Though Flynn is referencing her television show, the same idea could easily apply to all of her novels. Because this novel is about a woman, multiple women, in fact, it doesn’t make it a woman’s novel. Flynn does not attempt, and appears to have no interest in, preaching to her readers; she has no secret or alternative agenda she’d like to push, “which isn’t to say that it contains no messages, only that it resists being defined by them” (Oyler). She refuses to become obtuse and evangelical. Instead, she writes a character like Camille. Flynn follows this role by strategically placing Camille in spaces and against characters who challenge traditional notions of femininity. Camille is detailed, she is flawed, she is a sister and daughter, she is fearful, and she certainly is not defined by her likeability. She is, often, more than one thing at one time; similar to how the hummingbird is both lovely and irritating. Despite her surefootedness, for example, Camille remains throughout the entirety of the novel, saturated in her loneliness, the pain of it etched out in self-inflicted scars across her body.
In creating a character who so blatantly and regularly subverts the traditional ideas of the space in which she occupies, Flynn must be careful, however. To create a character with too blatant a disregard for her environment consequently becomes unbelievable. When writing about the kinds of characters that Flynn creates, Olyer writes:

The mainstreaming of feminism (and online surveillance thereof) has made many women I know—and myself—anxious about conforming to stereotypes, lest we perpetuate the same conditions we find so constraining. At the same time, self-consciously rejecting even harmless or positive ingrained ideas about women for the sake of doing so feels ridiculous, maybe even regressive.

The performance must be honest, and it must be rooted in some kind of reality in order for it to be, if not a relatable then at the very least an understandable, touchstone for readers. Camille does this, which is why, often, she is pegged as an unlikable character. She makes us fearful because of how dangerous, irritating and self-destructive she is. These are qualities that readers can identify within themselves, even if not in such a toxic, dramatic environment.

Flynn has created a stubbornness in Camille Preaker. Camille, too, can be tender. There are times in *Sharp Objects* when she’s righteous and other moments where she’s severely insecure. The adjectives by which one could describe Camille are endless only because Flynn made her a character of depth. She’s dynamic and faceted, not existing only to subvert traditional tropes and push a feminist agenda, but she exists despite, or even in spite, of all of that. She’s the hummingbird, attempting to answer the question of what it means to be an ambitious and driven woman, and “whether it makes [her] a heroine or whether it makes [her] an irritant… [And] we actually get, in the end, to root for the hummingbird and to recognize her value” (Nussbaum). Camille stretches beyond challenging traditional gender norms and practices. She’s
not asking permission, she’s not emboldening aged stereotypes; instead, Flynn’s character, in simply occupying the town that is Wind Gap, challenges old and rote ideas of femininity, thus making room for a new kind of woman in the domestic noir. Throughout the duration of the text, Camille’s role as a diffuser of gender subversion and feminist ideals is certainly flexible; her relationships with her mother and half-sister prove this to be true. At times she propagates outdated gender roles, and at other times she functions as evidence of the aftermath of tradition, and still she manages, throughout most of the text, to completely subvert the space and context in which the reader finds her. Flynn successfully reshapes the paradigms of obtuse gender roles by placing women in unfamiliar and challenging spaces in order to emphasize the multifaceted nature of women in nature—whether likable or not.
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THE END OF THE WEEKEND.
One Atlanta Drawing: The Weekend

Before I write about my own comic, I feel it’s important to first reflect on and evaluate the texts and themes we read throughout this class over the course of the semester. Through this class and the various texts we’ve read, I’ve come to learn that comics are most successful in addressing diversity and stereotypes when the message itself isn’t too obvious. The documentary, *Drawn Together: Comics, Diversity and Stereotypes*, features three artists who explore race, appearance and gender stereotypes—and how to combat them—through comics and cartoons. In the film, Keith Knight, one of the featured comics, articulates this idea very well; he says, “I wanted to make a commentary on race without making a commentary on race.” This same idea could be applied to any kind of stereotype or fixed idea about people. For my own comic, *The Weekend*, I wanted to comment on loneliness without really commenting on loneliness. I didn’t want to say, simply: it’s hard to be lonely. Or it’s isolating to be lonely; it’s redundant do to that. Instead, I wanted to try to create a very realistic story about what loneliness looks like.

There were several texts that we read over the course of the semester that helped to inspire and inform *The Weekend*. *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* by Sarah Glidden is graphic journalism that explores the purpose and power of journalism itself. Glidden trails her friends, Alex and Sarah, who are reporters writing about the effect the Iraq War has had on the Middle East. Glidden leaves home thinking her project is going to be one thing, but by the time she’s finished her project, it’s turned into something else entirely. Glidden had an idea for her work, as did journalists Sarah and Alex in their reporting on the Middle East, but they didn’t really know how their projects were going to end until they’ve worked through them and actually reached the end. Sometimes the story is in the process of creating a story as
opposed to simply the idea of it. It was a practice in patience when it came to this comic that I created; I began and stopped many different times. I knew I wanted to create a story that spoke to loneliness without doing so with a heavy and dramatic hand, which I think is what Glidden does with *Rolling Blackouts* and journalism. She’s certainly not a journalist but she explores what that means by trying to draw it and engage with the material.

While reading Drnaso’s *Sabrina*, I was able to appreciate (and then for my own purposes attempt to adapt) the solitude of the panels, the simplicity of the drawings, and how to best capture ‘quiet.’ Drnaso does an excellent job of capturing how “loud” quiet can be and how people are desperate for connection, as evidenced in the following series of panels from *Sabrina*:

![Panels from *Sabrina* by Nick Drnaso](image)

Drnaso emphasizes this sense of loneliness in the color palette and simplistic line drawings. That’s why, in *Sabrina*, I think Teddy is so quick to invest in the radio garble; he’s desperate to believe in and connect with someone.

That kind of wild desperation for intimacy and connectivity, I think, drives people to behave the way they do. Though I enjoyed so much of the reading for this course, I’ve found
Adrian Tomine’s *New York Drawings* to be the most formative and inspirational when it comes to my own story, *The Weekend*. This is true for several reasons. I found Tomine’s text to be extremely reflective. His comics include astute observations of a city and of a diverse collection of people who occupy that city. So much of his work touched me and stirred an emotional reaction. His style is distinctive and very precise when it comes to drawing people. Viewers and readers can sense the stirring emotions—whether good or bad—in his drawings. Very few of his comics have dialogue, and the panels that do are acute and poignant observations on how people connect and interact with each other. The very first strip we read in this collection, before the collection really even begins, involves Tomine himself attending a *The New Yorker* party circa 2004; and in this strip, as articulated through thought-bubbles and bits of dialogue, Tomine is socially awkward, uncomfortable with his surroundings, and admits to feeling insecure about being there. Because this is the small story that kickstarts the rest of the collection, the readers can’t help but feel sympathetic and open to the images they’ll soon see.

Another of Tomine’s comics with dialogue in this collection is called “My Ex-Barber.” Here Tomine attempts to reconnect with his old barber, and this strip highlights Tomine’s vulnerability and eagerness for connection. In this comic, Tomine moves away and then returns to his barber after a butchered haircut, to which his barber says, “You’re dead to me now.” It’s the matriculation of a very real and raw human fear: rejection. In so much of his work, Tomine draws on the feelings that everyday people experience—fear, rejection, loss, annoyance, happiness, joy, laughter, nostalgia—to make his illustrations so moving.

Tomite highlights human emotion very well in his *New York Drawings*. This collection, to me, is evidence of all the different kinds of people there are in the world, and it’s a touchstone to all those feelings that we share. Tomine does a great job of showcasing the fact that people
look different on the outside—through their hair style, skin color, piercings, make up, tattoos, etc., and he encourages the reader to embrace those differences because we as readers can see how interesting people can be when they’re simply being themselves. Of his comics, I particularly enjoyed those from pages 44-57. They’re illustrations of men and women on the subway, and Tomine writes notes about how the people seem to be and how he’s feeling.

They’re kind observations that highlight the idiosyncrasies of being a person. His notes said things like, “Exhaling loudly,” or, “He bowed when someone bumped into him,” or “Laughing heartily,” or, “Seemingly very content.” These observations resonate easily within me the reader because I can say, *I know what it is to laugh heartily, I long to be content, or I exhale loudly when I’m annoyed too.* Tomine is creating a connection and a sense of recognition between himself and whomever he’s drawing, but also with the reader and the person he’s depicted. In creating images from real people, he’s highlighting the idea that everybody is different. Despite shared interests, despite superficial similarities, despite a singular geography (in Tomine’s instance, New York), people operate differently; people feel and behave differently. I really appreciate that sentiment in his drawings because it evidences a sense of raw vulnerability.

The drawing used for the cover of *New York Drawings* called “Missed Connection” served as the greatest inspiration when it came to create my own comic.
“Missed Connection” includes a young man and a young woman sitting on two different subway trains. In this panel, they’re eyeing each other through the wide windows, and they’ve noticed that they’re reading the same book. Neither of them is reading though, and instead, they’re watching each other. They’ve discovered a shared interest but will never have the opportunity to talk to the other about it. Due to Tomine’s lovely craftsmanship, it’s an easy scene to imagine, and there’s something so tragic about it. I can envision them simply watching each other, waiting for their trains to depart, taking them in opposite directions…forever. I think the title of the piece is fitting, as well. It can be read literally: they’ve missed an opportunity to connect, through no fault of their own. “Missed connection” could also refer to loneliness; these are two people who are missing the idea of connection, community. They’re longing for it. I like how in the drawing, too, none of the other people depicted on either train are looking at other humans. Everyone else
is looking away or down or forward; no one, other than these two people who will never meet, have made an attempt to connect, and it’s like time slowed just long enough for these two to look at each other, before the train takes them away from each other. More than anything, this image struck me as lonely, which is the theme of my comic, *The Weekend*. In fact, I incorporated a version of Tomine’s “Missed Connection” into my comic. It’s the fourth panel on the first page, because, really, this singular image inspired so much of what I created.

I had to work within the confines and limits of my own artistic capabilities. I will warn you—my artistic abilities are limited. My stylistic choices weren’t specific nor, honestly, were they intentional, as my drawing skills are at a very basic, unrefined level. And knowing this about my artistry, I was able to make certain and specific choices as to how to best tell this story. For example, you’ll notice that throughout the panels, the central character, who remains purposefully nameless (as she could be any woman as opposed to being one specific woman), wears the same outfit except for when she’s sleeping. Additionally, she always has a bow on her head and her hair is always down. I did this to create consistency between the panels; so that readers would be able to easily recognize that this is the same person we’re following throughout the panels. Lastly, I purposefully made her a woman. I did this for two reasons: first, this is a perspective I understand, as I am a woman, and two, a news article I read stated the following, “Forty-eight percent more girls said they often felt left out in 2015 than in 2010, compared with 27 percent more boys” (Twenge). Not to say, of course, that men don’t feel lonely, but it’s a feeling more often admitted to by women.

The drawings themselves in *The Weekend* are rather simple. There’s very little dimension and depth. I took what I recognized as “real-life” moments and put them together to create a small story about loneliness. *The Weekend* begins at 4:03 on Friday afternoon and ends at 11:59
on Sunday night; it’s the time frame most people would consider to be their weekend. It begins the moment work lets out on Friday and ends after having gone to sleep on Sunday night. I wanted this story to take place over a weekend, because, generally, a weekend is seen as a particularly social time.

If you flip through the panels, you’ll noticed that oftentimes, the perspective is wrong. Meaning, when the central character is eating breakfast or dinner at the table, we’re seeing the entirety of the table while only looking at half of her body. This, obviously, if it were true to life would not be the case. I still wanted to include these images, though, because often, we track our time through the day by the meals we eat. Breakfast is early, then lunch midway through, and then lastly, dinner in the evening; the meals indicate a passage of time. These were also important to include in the comic because meals, often, are communal. It’s a perfect time to share and talk with somebody, and there’s a real intimacy involved in sharing food. Because food is nourishing, when it’s shared, it is a subtle way to say, *I want to grow with you.* The fact that the main character eats all of her meals alone, echoes her loneliness. She’s growing alone; she’s feeding her loneliness. And eventually, it becomes a habit, just like anything in life that becomes repetitive. The character in this story has created a routine for herself, and it seems, at this point, it’s easier to go along with the habits she’s created than introduce something new and different into her life. I read may articles on loneliness, because I’ve noticed it more readily in myself and in my friends in the past few years. It’s an open and honest conversation we’ve had many times: sometimes it’s hard to connect and to really feel connected with someone. Howe writes about this for *Forbes,* “According to the 2016 Viceland UK Census, loneliness is the number one fear of young people today—ranking ahead of losing a home or a job. Fully 42% of Millennial women are more afraid of loneliness than a cancer diagnosis, by far the highest share
of any generation. This fear has been ingrained into the very lexicon of Millennials, immortalized in acronyms like “FOMO” and its many companion terms” (Howe 2019). The fear of loneliness is very real. Where Tomine captures many feelings of many different people, I focused on one feeling for one person.

Inspired by Tomine’s efforts to showcase New York, I tried to do something similar. Only my story takes place in Atlanta, so the scenes in *The Weekend* are specific to Atlanta. My limited artistic abilities may not make that clear, so I’ll clarify and elaborate on that here. At the bus stops, she’s waiting for Marta, Atlanta’s public transit system. When she walks through the park, it’s a specific part of Piedmont Park. The coffee shop is Condesa; a coffee shop I regularly go to that has large stools that face outward towards the street. The used bookstore is Eagle Eye Books, and the movie theatre is a small and intimate theatre called Tara Cinemas. In my drawings, the reader can’t tell that they’re specific to Atlanta, but to me, they are. If I had a bit more talent, I could have made that clearer. Outside our central character’s window, you see uniquely Atlanta buildings: The Bank of America Plaza, the Skyview (Ferris Wheel), and SunTrust Plaza. I drew with intention, but I also wanted to make sure that translated to people not so familiar with Atlanta.

The fact that the panels are black and white was purposeful. The lack of color within *The Weekend* serves to highlight the lackluster nature of the main character’s life. Throughout *The Weekend* there’s very little dialogue. Almost no dialogue, in fact. The only time the main character speaks is in a stunted conversation at the coffee shop with the barista. She clearly wants to talk a bit more, she wants to further engage, which is why she’s the one (not the barista) to ask, “How are you?” But he simply responds with a definitive, “Fine.” I can really empathize
with her because she’s trying but is clearly floundering and doesn’t really know how to self-correct. Again, this is an honest human attempt to connect with somebody.

I think the cover of Tomine’s collection, the illustration called “Missed Connection,” is the cover for this very reason. I think, really, when we boil down our wants and desires as a human race, most people are looking for connection, which is why this image is so poignant and touching. It’s what everyone wants—and in the cover, it’s what these two people have a chance at but are, inevitably, missing. *The Weekend* is a commentary on the very idea of connectivity. In this story, the young woman at the center of the story has much opportunity for relationships and community; she tries to put herself out there in two ways: first, by engaging on social media networks. She goes onto Twitter and Bumble searching for connection only to eventually resort to watching Netflix alone. On Saturday and Sunday, she makes a bigger effort; she goes to the park and coffee shop, then to the movies and the bookstore. She’s putting herself out there in a space that other people occupy, in situations where conversation could start, but she struggles with what to do when she’s there. At one point later in the evening, she Googles, “How do adults make friends…”

This was an important story to tell, because often, I find that loneliness is something that’s permeating and ever-present. It’s not something dramatic and wholly debilitating. The character in *The Weekend* isn’t weeping or stuck in bed; she’s trying, and yet it persists. She goes to a movie despite having Netflix. She goes to a bookstore despite having a fat row of books above her television. She goes out to a coffee shop despite already having coffee with her breakfast earlier that morning. She’s searching for something, and I think, she’s doing the best she can to get it; she just doesn’t exactly know how.
I enjoyed the process of creating my own comic, despite the many challenges of it. It’s extremely difficult, I learned, to tell a story this way: through images, short descriptions, and bits of dialogue. When creating a piece of art, I think the goal is to inspire some kind of emotional reaction in the viewer/reader. It was really difficult for me to do that; not only because of my lack of artistic talent with a pen, but because it’s hard to really share feeling, which, really, is the thesis of *The Weekend*. It’s hard to be vulnerable in this way, to try to connect with someone through something you’ve created. Drawing *The Weekend* and writing this reflection to go with it made me further appreciate all those writers/illustrators we read throughout the semester and the challenging process of creating a cohesive comic.
Annotated Bibliography


Drnaso’s *Sabrina* is about the aftermath of Sabrina’s disappearance. Before discovering her body, there were conspiracy theories and predications and rumors about what had happened to her, who was involved, and what the motive was. Teddy, the former boyfriend of Sabrina, reaches his breaking point—he literally cannot deal with his grief any longer, he can’t stew in his loneliness, and so he seeks, rather desperately, something to believe in. He’s longing for community and connection, which is how the conspiracy theories garner momentum and steam. The fact that many of the panels do not have text adds to the loneliness of the narrative; it echoes the uncertainty and the idea of isolation. This book serves as support when creating my own comic with regard to theme and simplistic drawing style.


This documentary introduces the viewer to the comic book world. This film was necessary in writing this essay, as it provided context regarding the graphic novel medium. The film included interviews with comic book writers about character, narrative, theme, and stereotyping, as well as interviews with comic book readers about what they enjoy and look for in comics. Their responses informed how I created my comic in that I wanted to create commentary (without being too overt) on something many, many people experience on a daily basis: loneliness.

Glidden follows two of her journalist friends around the Middle East in an attempt to capture what it was a journalist actually did. From Glidden’s *Rolling Blackouts*, not only did I learn about journalism itself, but also about the way a story can be told. The way that Glidden tells the story of her time in the Middle East is very different from the way that her two journalist friends tell the story of their time in the Middle East. From *Rolling Blackouts*, I learned that sometimes the story is in the process of creating a story as opposed simply the idea of it.


Howe’s article articulates the troubling nature of loneliness within the millennial generation. The fear of being lonely drives many of the decisions that young people make. At one point the article indicates that 42% of millennial women are more afraid of loneliness than a cancer diagnosis, which was part of the reason why the main character in my comic was female. The research in Howe’s article informed which parts of social media and digital communication I included in my comic.


This article not only offers thoughtful insight into the strong storytelling of *Sabrina*, but also serves to reinforce my ideas about how loud loneliness can be. That sense of loneliness and isolation is reinforced with color palette and minimalistic drawings. Some
of Drnaso’s panels from *Sabrina* are on this site, one of which I have included in this paper.


This collection of *New York Drawings* informed most of what I wrote in my essay. The collection has very little text and dialogue; instead, Tomine choose to capture New York residents as they go about their lives through drawings and illustrations. In drawing many different kinds of people, I think Tomine creates a warmth within his pages. While reading this book, I noticed all the things that make us different (height, skin color, hair length, clothing style, piercings, religious garb, facial hair, heritage, ethnicity, language, interests, age, geography, etc.) and how despite all of those things, we are, in fact, still connected. We all long for connection and engagement and community. *New York Drawings* brims with all that life can be.


Twenge’s heavily researched article identifies the behavioral changes between generations. More young people today (than ever before) are electing to stay home and interact with their phones than they are going out and ‘hanging out’ with actual people. Twenge researches these behaviors and supports them with statistics and evidence. She highlights many of the same things I’ve observed with my own family and friends as well as the students I teach: our phones are platforms for connectivity, but they’re also a barrier between honest and vulnerable companionship.
A Reflection on Reflective Practices in the Classroom

Abstract

Reflective writing is an invaluable tool for students as they progress within their respective educations. When students reflect, they are able to better understand a text after-the-fact, how it compares to a text they’ve read before, and how it relates to themselves and those around them. Reflection makes them more informed and aware students and better prepares them for whatever challenges they may face in the future. In reflective writing, students are able to form a sense of awareness about who they are and their role as students within the classroom and within the grander scheme of life: who they are as people and their role as citizens within the world.

Introduction

I’ve spent much of my life reflecting. For my first ‘real’ job out of college, I was an executive assistant at a media management company. I knew very little about what media management actually was, and what I did know was from a Google search, and quite honestly, I wasn’t the most effective assistant. The man I reported to, Steve, however, was an excellent manager, for he was the one who really taught me about the value of reflection. He suggested that if I wanted to really build my artistic palate, after I consume a piece of art, I should ask myself how I felt about it and how I felt about the experience of digesting it. If I went to a movie or read a book or explored a museum or went to a concert, without fail, and I continue to do this now, nearly ten years later, I sit down and in a little notebook I write what I liked, what I didn’t, what I was moved by or bored by, and the overall sensation I feel now that my experience is over. Those small moments of reflection have proven invaluable to me in my life, particularly as it relates to my career. As a teacher, I’m in a privileged position. I have the opportunity to
engage with the leaders of tomorrow—though that may sound hokey (even to someone of extreme sincerity and earnestness, as myself), I do feel that because of this kind of reflection I’ve been doing for the better part of a decade, I can confidently say that I know and understand my strengths and weaknesses, my likes and dislikes. Though I can still change my mind, and often a piece of art (literature, movie or otherwise) can persuade me to do so, I’ve learned so much about who I am and how I can use what I know and feel to best engage with others.

When we were presented with an opportunity to take a deep dive into a lesson from this semester, I knew I wanted to focus on reflection. Because of that, most recently, I’ve spent quite a bit of time reflecting on, well, reflection. As a teacher, as a student, and as a citizen of the world, I’ve found reflective writing to be an invaluable tool when it comes to self-improvement, concept engagement and understanding, and building strong relationships. It’s for these reasons, and for the fact that, with any goal, reflection not only allows but encourages us to understand our goals—how we’ve met them, if we’ve met them, and why we have or haven’t—I believe reflective writing to be an invaluable part of student growth and adamantly support the idea that it should be present in all ELA classrooms.

Much of the research in this proposal supports the idea that reflective writing should be in the ELA classroom. Though it is practiced in some ELA classrooms, and I can speak on behalf of middle school ELA classes in Georgia, as that’s my experience: reflective writing is not a mandatory practice because it’s not listed within the standards anywhere. It’s obvious to say that the classroom is a busy place; any teacher with any kind of classroom experience will be quick to say this. Teachers hardly have time for lessons and units that are a part of standards, so when something like reflective writing is not a mandatory part of the curriculum, it tends to fall by the wayside.
Within this proposal, I’ll defend why reflective writing should be in the classroom and also suggest ways for how that may look—particularly with my sixth and seventh grade students at the private school in Atlanta, GA in which I teach. There’s no one way to do anything when it comes to teaching. The lessons tend to change as the groups of students change, as technology changes, as standards change. What works for me may not work for somebody else, but regardless of best practices, I do think reflective writing should be considered a part of the writing experience in the ELA classroom… and in all classrooms, really. Kathleen Blake Yancey was an invaluable resource in providing insight into why reflective writing presents such a strong opportunity for growth within the classroom. Yancey writes, “Reflection entails a looking forward to goals we might attain, as well as a casting backward to see where we have been” (Yancey 6). Reflective writing propels students forward but not before asking students to first consider how they were able to get where they are. Reflection encourages thoughtful consideration of the process of learning. If students were to do this regularly, this kind of self-evaluation and self-reflection, then they’d be better positioned to grow.

I do believe—and I’ve found research to support this thesis—that reflection encourages growth no matter the class with which it’s being applied, and that without it, it becomes exponentially more difficult for a child to grow academically. This is true, simply, because students are not taking the time to better understand what made them either fail or succeed.

**Literature Review**

This proposal defends the idea that reflective writing is a highly useful tool for students in the classroom and long after they’ve left it. Writing about a reading or writing experience, whether good or bad, is a fantastic opportunity for student growth because in the process of reflection students are opening themselves up to fully understanding their experience of it—what
they liked, what they didn’t, what moved them or made them indifferent and why. The *why* is, perhaps, one of the most valuable aspects of reflection because it motivates and informs future choices.

Of reflective writing, Yancey says, “Reflection, then, is the dialectical process by which we develop and achieve, first, specific goals for learning; second, strategies for reaching those goals; and third, means of determining whether or not we have met those goals or other goals” (Yancey 6). It’s essential that students have goals for themselves; goals that they themselves select, and perhaps goals that their teachers select for them. These goals could range from getting an A in a specific class to graduating from high school to admittance into a certain college; regardless of the goal, students should have something towards which they’re reaching. In the same way that goals keep me task-oriented and driven, goals can help keep students motivated and inspired, especially if they have at least one goal they’ve created for themselves. Once students have a goal in mind, the only way to ensure they’re making progress towards accomplishing those goals is if they reflect on the process.

In an essay called *Naming What We Know*, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle introduce the idea of threshold concepts, which “are concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2). Simply put, Alder-Kassner and Wardle attempt to name the threshold concepts of the writing field, despite how admittedly impossible it is. They want to do this because it then makes it easier to be a part of the conversation. Adler-Kassner and Wardle argue that writing “continues to both serve as a vehicle through which knowledge is both generated and demonstrated and to draw the attention of many stakeholders who, regardless of their expertise, weigh in on what ‘good writing’ is, how it should be taught and learned and by whom, and how that learning
should be assessed” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 6). In the classroom, students carry so much responsibility in terms of their writing. The expectations of their written performance can vary from teacher to teacher, students each have different expectations for themselves, and often, the administration carry certain expectations when it comes to the teachers’ and students’ performance levels in meeting the writing standards and performing on state-generated tests. I don’t think that threshold concepts created by Alder-Kassner and Wardle should be used as a checklist for writing dos-and-don’ts within the classroom, but they should, however, be used to inform the curriculum. How, for example, does the study of “Reflective Writing and A Reflective Analysis of a Novel” contribute to the development of a writing class? And, how do both of those aid in student understanding and a positive student experience?

Reflection, whether students fully realize it or not, is already part of students’ day-to-day lives. One student, for example, may have left his homework on the kitchen table and received a late grade as a consequence. Because of that experience and on subconsciously reflecting on that experience, he has then learned to immediately put his homework in his backpack upon completion. That’s an oversimplified example, but the point is that students figure out what works for them and what doesn’t based on trial-and-error. They reflect on that and then make specific choices about how to best move forward.

While the practice of reflective writing is most often associated with the writing classroom, many other professions use reflective writing as a tool to foster critical thinking, digest feedback, and manage levels of understanding. Monica Kennison discusses the best practices when teaching her nursing students about the power of reflective writing. Though she’s referencing the field of nursing, the same ideas could be applied to an ELA classroom, as the concepts and power of reflective writing, no matter the field or the classroom, still apply: “With
foresight and planning, reflective writing may be an empowering strategy for facilitating students’ thinking skills” (Kennison 306). Reflective writing encourages students to think, a concept dreaded by many of my students. The reason they’re so opposed to thinking is because they’re so out of practice. To teach them that thinking is one of the most valuable and sustainable parts of becoming a lifelong learner at an early age within the classroom can position them for success in later parts of their life. To become a successful reflective thinker, however, students must first translate those reflective thoughts onto paper.

Unless prompted, however, students don’t articulate these changes or ideas in writing. When learning, it’s essential to translate these ideas into writing. Joseph Harris elaborates on why this is valuable, “You come to terms with a text by translating its words and ideas into your own language, making them part of your own prose—not only re-presenting the work of another writer but also, at times, actually retyping it as you quote key terms and passages from a text” (Harris 32). In order to really learn, students must go beyond simply re-writing or defining; understanding requires deep and thorough thinking. Harris further explains, “This is why I find it helpful to think of the kind of rewriting in which you strive to represent the work of another, to translate the language and ideas of a text into words of your own, as a coming to terms—since, among other things, the phrase suggests a settling of accounts, a negotiation between reader and writer” (Harris 15). For reflection to be successful, students must be proactive in their learning; they must see value in the practice.

Not only does reflective writing encourage students to become better thinkers, but it tends to help students with transfer. Transfer is when a student has mastered a certain concept or skill in one context and is then able to apply that same concept or skill in a different context. The ability to transfer that knowledge indicates clear comprehension and understanding and allows
the student to recognize how knowledge can be relevant elsewhere. Transfer, generally, is seen as a marker of true learning, and studies indicate that reflective writing does, in fact, help students with transfer. However, transfer is notoriously difficult to track, see, and teach (Martin). Because reflective writing tends to be more personal, it’s difficult to track and see growth as far as writing skills. Additionally, it’s hard to track transfer as it pertains specifically to reflection, and it’s hard to track transfer in general. It’s hard to pinpoint what exactly contributes to a student’s ability to not only retain content but then apply it in future classes.

There’s no real way to measure transfer, nor is there a real measurement tool for how good/bad/helpful reflective writing is for a student. Although, as Martin suggests, “reflection and metacognition [are] ways to facilitate transfer” (3). This is true because reflection forces students to think about their relationships to texts, particularly if reflective writing is employed liberally throughout the semester as opposed to a last-ditch effort at the end of term. Yancey goes onto say,

We wondered, then, what difference, if any, it could make if we asked students to engage in a reiterative reflective practice, based both in their own experience and in a reiterative reflective practice, based both in their own experience and in a reflective curriculum, where the goal isn’t to document writing processes or argue that program outcomes have been met, but rather to develop a theory of writing that can be used to frame writing tasks both in FYC course and in other areas of writing. (Yancey, et al. 4)

It’s unlikely that this proposal will change the framework of instruction, and really, that’s not my goal. I want to emphasize that if the goal isn’t grade- or test- or standard-focused, then there’s so much room for students to develop and grow.
As a teacher, I need to be aware of how I may be limiting our students’ scope. By providing too much description and detail of what I, as a teacher am looking for, I am inhibiting my students’ abilities to write about what they want and what’s honest to them as far as their reflection. Yancey writes,

Students are often—perhaps typically—asked to provide an account of process or to compose a ‘reflective argument’ in which they cite their own work as evidence that they have met program outcomes. They are not asked to engage in another kind of reflection, what we might call big-picture thinking, which they consider how writing one setting is both different from and similar to the writing in another, or where they theorize writing so as to create a framework for future writing situations. (4)

Though it’s valuable for students to reflect on the assignment at hand, it’s also important to place their learning within a larger context. Often, students struggle within the classroom because they don’t see how what they’re learning applies to “the big-picture.” Reflection allows them to think about how they’re learning and why it’s valuable to their future academic career. It’s so important that students understand that they have a hand in their own learning, as it creates a framework for how they can write and learn in the future.

There is very little criticism against reflective writing. Most academics are proponents, and those who struggle with the concept of it tend to struggle most with its lack of grade-ability and traceability. There’s no real way to monitor and gauge growth when it comes to reflective writing. Because it’s not a type of writing that lends itself to being graded, there isn’t a strong way to track it. And because it’s not mandatory for standards or testing (and because time tends to be the enemy for many teachers), reflective writing isn’t a priority.
There are, of course, ELA classrooms that engage in reflective practice. Though my school doesn’t include reflective writing in the standards and doesn’t prioritize it as a practice, there are many schools that do. It’s invaluable to practice this kind of writing because it makes students agents in their own learning when they are able to write and reflect regularly within the ELA classroom.

**Proposal**

I propose that reflective writing be employed in the ELA classroom. My standards this year with my sixth and seventh grade students involve three types of writing: narrative, informative, and persuasive. After performing all this research, I firmly believe that reflective writing be included in the part of the standards as mandatory practice. Additionally, reflective writing not only helps with understanding, it helps with transfer. Students are more likely to be able to take what they’ve learned from one class or one grade to the next one so long as they participate in and engage in reflective writing.

Based on all the research and scholarship I’ve discovered over the course of this semester, I plan to reconstruct the plans I had for next semester. If a classroom is a place where anything is possible (that’s what I was told as a child, and that’s what I tell my students today), then reflective writing only reinforces this sentiment. Not only does reflective writing make students agents in their writing, but it creates a sense of possibility. Yancey says that the idea is that the classroom is “a place to make possible… Reflection as a means toward making possible, to help students learn about writing as they learn to write” (Yancey 20). I’ve looked over my lesson plans and inserted reflective writing into various projects and assignments for the second half of the year. With every ‘large piece’ (dedicated several weeks to the prewriting, writing and editing) of writing that the students do, we will add a reflective writing component to that
assignment. This spring, for example, I’ll read S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* with my seventh-grade students, and I’ve created several prompts for my students in which they reflect on the texts and attempt to make larger connects. These won’t be graded for accuracy, but for thoughtful completion. Some examples of these reflective exercises include:

- Listen to Neil Diamond’s “Cherry Cherry.” Write down your reactions and reflect on how this relates to our reading of *The Outsiders* so far.
- Listen to Neil Diamond’s “Forever in Blue Jeans.” Write down your reactions and reflect on how this relates to our reading of *The Outsiders* so far.

At the end of the unit, students will write a literary analysis based on prompts I provide, and my students will have to reflect on their experience of reading the novel and writing the analysis—honestly reflecting on how they think they did, why they struggled, why it was easy, why they enjoyed it or why they didn’t. With this particularly group of students, I’ve found my students do better with prompts. I recognize that this leaves less room for them to explore what they want to say, but too many students struggle with a starting point when I simply say “reflect.” This is a small way from me to help.

I also recognize that when a teacher attaches a grade to the reflective process, something is lost along the way. Monica Kennison articulates this perfectly when she says, “A reliable tool to evaluate reflective writing for evidence of critical thinking is lacking. And grading may inhibit students from acknowledging and learning from mistakes, a significant aspect of improving practice” (310). I do believe that grading will inhibit parts of the reflective process—some students will worry more about the grade of the reflective writing the practice itself. In addition, it makes me authority on their emotional, reflective experience, which is inherently dishonest. Frankly, I don’t know if there’s a real solution here. We’re required by the state and by
administration to grade; there must be some sort of barometer in place by which we can monitor student growth and understanding. If we plan to include reflective writing in the classroom, then it can’t help but be a part of the grading process. Kennison goes on to say,

It behooves faculty to clearly delineate expectations for reflective writing assignments and apply the standards consistently across sections of a course. Otherwise, students are quick to complain, and rightfully so, when one group has significantly more time-consuming assignments than another in the same course. Whenever criteria are used for evaluation, students have the right to a certain degree of appropriateness, fairness, and consistency. (Kennison 310)

If teachers do plan to grade these student reflections, it’s important to be sympathetic to the fact that their writing may not be what’s typically understood as formal, academic writing. It may be more conversational and stream-of-consciousness. It may be worth exploring a way to assess only the writing, not necessarily the content of it. There’s also the possibility of working with my students to come up with a shared grading criterion. Though it would be important to be clear about what my expectations are. Teachers are asking their students to be vulnerable—to share, occasionally, their fears and mistakes—teachers must understand that that information can be sensitive.

Sixth and seventh grade ELA classroom should have dedicated time in class for quiet and mindful reflection. Several professors studied the power of mindfulness within the classroom and concluded that it “has the potential to reduce stress and anxiety, leading students to increased academic performance and optimal learning” (Hartel, et al. 113). Because of this scholarship, I plan to dedicate the first five-seven minutes of every ELA class on quiet reflection. The only difference between my practice and that of the professors who studied mindfulness will be that
my students will have to write. I will not grade their reflection on performance but on participation. Students will not read their reflections aloud, which will encourage them to be more honest and sincere than they might otherwise be if they knew they had to share what they wrote with their classmates. There’s no sense of finality with this assignment, unlike the directed reflection questions as the end of their longer-form writing.

Setting clear expectations are essential to student success. Because of that, I’ll go over my expectations and requirements at the beginning of the semester regarding reflective assignments. In addition to setting expectations, I plan to emphasize how much I personally value this practice. Based on the students I’ve taught, I imagine many of them will be quite frightened at the idea of this kind of vulnerability. Shannon Huddy claims, “When instructors consciously demonstrate emotional vulnerability in the classroom and create a culture of trust, students are more receptive and better able to retain course information and develop skills essential for life after [school]” (Huddy 1). In sharing an honest and sincere part of myself with my students, it is not only my hope, but scholarship supports the idea that the students should feel comfortable trusting me with what they have to say in their reflections.

With the quick reflective writing at the beginning of each class, students will write about some media or art they consumed over the weekend: that could be anything from a YouTube video to a TV show to a chapter they read (for school or otherwise) to a song they listened to. In an article on creative thinking, Lina Sun says, “A thinking person must synthesize, question, interpret, and analyze what s/he hears and reads” (Sun 22). That’s exactly what my students will be doing. They have to keep their pencil moving from beginning to end of that five to seven-minute window, forcing them in the habit of thinking about the things they’re thinking about—
reflecting on all the media they consume and digest no matter if it’s for a graded assignment or not.

It’s hard for me to anticipate the results I’d like to see at the end of the semester, simply because reflective writing tends to be more personal, it looks different for everyone, and there’s no real ‘finish line’ when it comes to reflection and to writing. A professor once told me, “Nothing is ever done, it’s just due.” That idea is particularly poignant and relevant to the idea of reflective writing. At the end of the Spring semester my students will have begun reflecting at the beginning of each week and at the end of each of their larger writing projects (I try to fit three in). Additionally, there’s no real “right” or “wrong” when it comes to reflective writing—one student’s reflection may look entirely different from another student’s reflection.

I am eager, however, to see how their reflections have evolved from the beginning of the semester towards the end of the semester. I imagine there’ll be real growth from beginning to end, though, again, that growth won’t be measurable. There’s no real tangible starting and ending point when it comes to reflective writing.

Conclusion

Reflective writing needs to be seriously considered as valuable practice within all ELA classrooms. The benefits of this kind of practice—student awareness, student thoughtfulness, student progress—make it worth it. The only way to move on from a mistake is to understand why one made it at all. The road to progress and growth begins with reflection, for “reflection is the purposeful and recursive contemplation of thoughts, feelings, and happenings that pertain to significant practice experiences” (Kennison 306). Of course, teachers strive for student success in the classroom, but teachers hope for success beyond that. Encouraging students to reflect on
their work as they’re working (not only at the end), should be considered a valuable part of the learning experience.

There doesn’t seem to be too much debate about how valuable reflective writing is within the classroom; academics and researchers are pretty united on the fact that it’s good for the health of the student to do it, the struggle with reflective writing revolves around classroom implementation. Because reflective writing isn’t paramount (it’s not on standardized tests, it’s not necessarily gradable, and it’s not essential that students know it to move onto the next grade level), I think this kind of writing tends to be pushed to the wayside. I advise teachers to reconsider. If—beyond testing and grades and administrative duties—our goals as teachers are to prepare out students not only for the next grade level but how to be thinking citizens of the world, then it’s essential we include reflective writing in our best practices in the classroom. It’s too important not to.

Kathleen Blake Yancey said it best: “I liked reflection for what it promised (but often failed) to add to portfolios, and I understood that for students to write a reflection-in-presentation that satisfied, they would have to write more than that single reflective text, on the quick, at the end of the term. In other words, reflection would need to be integrated within the curriculum” (15). It’s not good enough to think of reflective writing in an after-thought kind of way; there needs to be thoughtful integration throughout the semester. Reflection needs to feel comfortable and commonplace as opposed to forced and out-of-the-blue, otherwise it’s ineffective as a practice.
Works Cited


