

In fact, I don't know if it's *ever* possible to quit looking for that day in the sun, and I'm not so sure I know much about cool breezes or freshly mown grass. You should see my own lawn. And I know nothing about Edwin Arlington Robinson. (Deep inside, I suspect everything we do as teachers is somehow inadequate or incomplete or overly simplistic and overly ambitious. In fact, I suspect we sometimes underestimate how much our students can learn without us and our great ideas and new textbooks.)

And while I can't give some formula or offer a new brand of thinking to replace whatever was out there last, I *do* think I can exhort us all to pare down on the nonsense, remain skeptical—perhaps even a little cynical—and keep asking ourselves simple, basic questions about our hype, our exhortations, and our faith in tradition and our methods:

- ▶ Do we actually know what we're talking about? (or have we made it up?)
- ▶ Is it good simply because we know what it is?
- ▶ How long will it take to talk about in class and is it worth the effort?
- ▶ Are we simply borrowing other people's hype? and is that hype simply *traditional*?
- ▶ Does it appear so neatly only in handbooks and workbooks?
- ▶ Is it just one more glamorized exhortation to be good and nice and polite and read books and learn a word a day and be intelligent and thoughtful and responsible?
- ▶ Do we like it because we're English professors dying to teach literature in the first place?
- ▶ Will our students be able to use this advice without our help next year after they've sold their book back to the bookstore?
- ▶ Does it sound so good simply because it's French or German or because it comes from the Latin and we know its etymology?

Who knows where all this will lead? Stripped of all the baloney, all the hype, all the promises of better writing through better technology and better critical conditioning, I suspect that we'll be left with basic humdrum stuff: setting simple, limited goals, creating some simple, basic methods and developing our own materials free from mystery and duct tape—and free from all the contrived busy work that we don't believe in ourselves. And we might, in fact, begin to admit that there's not a hell of a lot we know about the teaching of writing that goes beyond what good teachers have always known: that some students—especially our best students—learn without us or in spite of us; and that some students learn if we give them simple assignments, read their papers with a certain amount of respect, set modest goals, talk to them, allow them to make mistakes, and, most of all, try to teach the *few* simple things that we can actually demonstrate without the help of tape recorders, workbooks, fly paper, paper hats, tachistoscopes, invitations, Jonathan Swift, and taxonomies.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As quoted by Paul Northam in "Heuristics and Beyond," *Writing and Reading Differently*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson (Lawrence, Kansas: U. of Kansas, 1985), p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>For what it's worth, I only made up one of these terms myself.

## GENDER AND "WRITING FORMATIONS" IN FIRST-YEAR NARRATIVES

Geoffrey Sirc  
University of Minnesota

"Woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as men's desire."

—Luce Irigaray

Recently there has been an emphasis on determining the constraints regarding gender that are thought to be inscribed in our language and its forms.<sup>1</sup> The discussion prompted by this emphasis takes as a given that our language reflects the concerns and values of our society's dominant (male) group. Hence, such discussion centers around the attempts to refine a picture of the way those constraints operate on women and, by so doing, to give voice to the non-dominant group's concerns. So Flynn (1988), for example, writes on "Composing as a Woman," and Schweickart (1986) urges a new feminist story of reading, one that "will speak of the difference between men and women, of the way the experience and perspective of women have been systematically and fallaciously assimilated into the generic masculine, and of the need to correct this error" (p. 39). If, as this literature suggests, our very language institutionalizes a bias, then the forms used to teach that language must fall under suspicion. In bemoaning feminism's relatively slight impact on composition studies, Flynn specifically mentions the way it has not called writing samples into question for possible gender bias:

[T]he parallels between feminist studies and composition studies have not been delineated, and the feminist critique that has enriched such diverse fields as linguistics, reading, literary criticism, psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, and science has had little impact on our models of the composing process or on our understanding of how written language abilities are acquired. We have not examined our research methods or research samples to see if they are androcentric. Nor have we attempted to determine just what it means to compose as a woman. (p. 425)

Ignoring the difference, she states, can only come at our women writers' expense, resulting in "a suppression of women's separate ways of thinking and writing. Our models of the composing process are quite possibly better suited to describing men's ways of composing than to describing women's" (p. 432). Flynn, however, may be even too cautious in speculating on a possible bias in our writing tasks and models, for if men and women do write differently—if they, for example, interpret a common writing task in very marked, distinctive ways—there can be no argument about whether an assignment is either gender-neutral or andro- or gynocentric by definition; rather, there is always already a built-in gender bias in any writing sample (or even paradigmatic conceptualization of the writing process)—any occasion for the actual production of written discourse is going to reflect the way that the writer (as well as the text) has been inscribed into the forms of gender's discourse.

I should state now that I do indeed feel that men and women write differently, and, hence, I feel there is a corresponding need to attend more closely to the forms we use to teach text produc-

tion. I am drawn to that conclusion not just on the basis of compelling theoretical reasons, but because of a close reading I did on some recent student narratives. My reading grew out of an interest in seeing what my first-year writing students were writing about, their occupational ideologies. So I decided simply to look at the topics they chose when given a narrative assignment. Topic choice seemed a significant variable to study in terms of discovering what was on students' minds, what they deemed as being worth writing about, what they saw writing as being useful for saying about themselves and their world view. Loosely transferring Aries' (1976) small-group interaction studies to individual writing, I expected that gender would indeed be a variable: that men would choose topics (as Aries discovered in her study) concerned with competition, aggression, and a fear of loss of masculinity, and that women would write more about their feelings, homes, and relationships. Such expectations were borne out in interesting ways that tell us much about gender and writing.

My writers (20 women, 21 men) were white, middle class eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who, for their essay assignment, were asked to "recreate for me in words a single incident in which you were involved or which you witnessed." This assignment, apparently unmarked as to gender and uncued as to provoking any desired response, seemed an acceptable one for studying possible male/female distinctions in topic choice. And its relatively open-ended aspect, ostensibly affording students great liberty as writers, might be expected to offer significant information in terms of which incidents they decided were worth relating. To evaluate my sample, I read each essay and summarized the topic in a sentence or two (the complete list of topics can be found in the appendix), trying to be as objective as possible in my summaries. It became apparent that I would also have to consider the ways in which these topics were developed in the writing: often the diction, similes, and imagery became inseparable from the essay's topic, as well as important in revealing the implications behind that topic.

Upon analysis of my students' topics, I found that pronounced, gender-based patterns influence their production of texts. There are some subjects that can be called, typically, "male" or "female" topics, along with corresponding strategies to develop those topics. And what is the aggregate of factors that constitute a given gender's topic choice? Seven features seem endemic to analyzing a writer's narrative in terms of gender. These representative characteristics do not, of course, always occur contemporaneously within a given text, but quite often they do. And it is rare when a majority of them do not surface in any given essay. (The reader should bear in mind that these features are based only on narrative texts; whether they can be transferred to other genres of writing is material for another study.) These distinctions, it will be noticed, are in most cases diametrically opposed to one another.

I offer this reading of students' papers, then, as site work toward determining the constraints of gender as a factor in student writing, how the writer's gender inflects or accentuates written production. It may be helpful to think of my work as an attempt to analyze the determinations of gender from the perspective of what might be called a student's "writing formation." The notion is an adaptation of Bennett's (1983) concept of a "reading formation." Influenced by the passage in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which Foucault makes reference to a book as "caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences," Bennett attempts to analyze the way those intertextual references work to determine the reading a particu-

lar reader gives to a particular work. To explain this attempt, Bennett cites the story of Menocchio, a sixteenth-century miller, who was tried before the Inquisition for his heretical views on God and creation. Bennett relates the way the critic Ginzburg used Menocchio's history – trying to determine what the miller read, how he read it, and how that reading resulted in his aberrant religious views – to show that we don't read *directly*, as it were, but through screens, determined by such factors as class and previous reading. The actual construction of those interpretive screens for a given individual forms one's reading formation:

This, then, is what I mean by a "reading formation": a set of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way. Menocchio's reading – his "productive activation" of the Bible and of the texts of Renaissance humanism into a "teeth-gritting harmony" – is the result of his installation within a network of intersecting but contradictory cultures, each with its own rules and procedures, and for which his native peasant culture serves as the dominant ingredient. (p. 5)

I feel strongly that our writing, like our reading, is not a pure, unacculturated activity; we similarly write through screens, and gender, like race, seems an almost impossible screen to abandon or write around. To get at my students' writing formations as regards gender, I have not so much attempted to trace actual textual determinants, as Bennett and Ginzburg have, but rather the more general cultural determinants that may be writing themselves through our students. I have sifted through lexical and conceptual traces, listening for the echoes of gender, to begin to establish what it means for our students to write as men or women. I'm attempting, then, to chart the "rules and procedures" for the operation of gender as a "dominant ingredient" in student narratives. To do so, perhaps, forces a reading – after all, a similar case, with a corresponding taxonomy of the kind I've established for gender, could be made around variables such as race, class, or sexuality – but I feel the reading is worth forcing, as the textual results of gender show its mechanisms to be a primary, systematic determinant in the student writing I observed.

#### Male Topic Features

1. Authorial Stance: Exclusive, Exaggerated Agency
2. Nature of Incident: Epic
3. Tone: Apocalyptic
4. Major Frame: The Quest or "Mission"
5. Linguistic Code: Pulp
6. Locus: Control (Including a Proclivity for Facts)
7. No Mention of the Opposite Sex

#### Female Topic Features

1. Authorial Stance: "Realistic" Agency and/or Reportage
2. Nature of Incident: Banal/Anticlimactic
3. Tone: Care/Nurturing
4. Major Frame: The Anecdote
5. Linguistic Code: Non-Pulp/Some Stereotypical Women's Language
6. Locus: Confusion (Detail Rather than Fact)
7. Frequent Mention of the Opposite Sex

The differences in agency and nature of incident were, for me, the most telling distinctions between genders. The male writers (20 out of 21) wrote scenarios featuring themselves as the dramatic star of their incidents. Clearly there is some degree of ego-

centricity in the world-view they manifested in their writing, since they were free to choose incidents they merely "witnessed" as opposed to those in which they were "involved." And the plot lines of those scenarios in which they took the leading roles revolved around topics that concerned larger-than-life occurrences: having car accidents (6), surviving a tornado (3), encountering a grizzly bear on a hunting trip, carrying a brother with a broken leg home through the snow, being arrested, piloting a helicopter through fog. This is what I mean by the "epic" nature of the male writers' incidents: they mostly (15 out of 21) chose incidents in which their lives (or something close to it) were at stake. Their topics are the stuff of a gripping adventure series.

And when the male writers did choose a more quotidian topic, I noted how they often used strategies that attempted to elevate that topic onto a more grandiose scale. One male, for example, wrote about heating up some frozen food but then forgetting about it and leaving it in a hot oven all day. When he finally discovered his error, the kitchen was unbelievably hot ("about 120 degrees"), filled with smoke, and the baking pan had melted onto the oven rack. So what should have been a commonplace topic—food preparation—became fit for recording in print only because it turned out to involve freakish disaster. Another student wrote about going to his first frat party. Again, this would seem to be a fairly ordinary topic, one of low-key dimensions, but witness the extraordinary diction used to describe his walk to the frat house<sup>2</sup>:

The campus was dark and desolate there wasn't another student in sight. Street lights caste ghostly shadows upon the lifeless buildings. The cold wind bit at our face and hands as we push onward. We keep talking in order to forget the cold and remind us that it's a Friday night. College life was finally here, no more listening to our parents, and no more going to bed early. . . . Our walking pace quickens as we become closer and closer to our destination. We start glancing at all the signs knowing that if we passed it by we would miss some of the excitement.

All of a sudden it was just as I pitched it. And enormous old house that looks as though it belongs in a mystery movie.

A party is only worthy subject matter when it is a landmark party, the first college fraternity party—a party, in fact, which signifies a rite-of-passage for the freshman: "no more listening to our parents." Indeed, later on at that party, the writer sees a guest vomiting from too much alcohol and notes: "For some these nights are like heaven others turn it into hell." What I find interesting about that phrase is not so much the implication that he has passed from novice to veteran in one evening, but rather how it shows that male-marked events have this absolute, all-or-nothing nature.

The women's topics did not reflect such a degree of egocentricity in the authorial stance. The assignment asked for "a single incident in which you were involved or which you witnessed," and the women were split down the middle (10 out of 20) in terms of direct involvement as opposed to a more indirect participation ("reportage," as I have labelled it). It is not so much the function of the written word for them, apparently, to chronicle their own exploits. I had papers from female writers describing a campfire burning, discussing a film on Dachau, praising the courage of a man who drove through a snowstorm to get his family and friends home from a basketball game, narrating how two other people rescued a pregnant, abandoned puppy, and telling how a waitress friend spilled sundaes on some cus-

tomers. They were participating in these events the way we participate in the great majority of our lives—simply being there and observing the passing parade. The desire to situate themselves at the head of that parade was absent. And in the papers in which women writers *were* the central agents in their incidents, the topics were not those of inflated, life-or-death adventure tales but rather more banal topics such as making popcorn, getting on the wrong bus, going to the wrong restroom in Germany, having a premonition that a sister would sprain her ankle, doing a gymnastic stunt well, or nursing a wounded rabbit. The commonplace incident outnumbered the epic in women's writing by a 12-8 margin. Of the eight women who did choose epic topics, three concerned what I'll call male-identified topics (two car crashes and one robbery); of the others, three were especially noteworthy because not only were they all written in the style of reportage (i.e., relinquishing the opportunity to identify themselves with a great subject), but they concerned genuinely epic subjects: a man is witnessed falling to his death from a stadium bleacher, a student responds to Dachau, a woman learns of a young friend's suicide. These were actual, historical, once-in-a-lifetime occurrences with serious consequences. Somehow, the typical male car crash (in which, it is important to note, no one ever gets seriously injured), though significant, seems humbled by comparison.

The men's aversion to writing on banal subjects has important implications. The man who wrote on piloting a helicopter through a fog ended his paper by saying, "The remainder of the flight, which lasted about one-half hour, was uneventful." A woman, I would offer, might be more likely to write on that "uneventful" half-hour: if it is possible for my women writers to see Zion in a bead of water (or a bowl of popcorn or a campfire), a pleasant, safe half-hour in a helicopter would certainly seem to have enough substance to qualify as an "incident." It was typical of women writers to feel that more life-size incidents should be attempted. And the frame they used to cast their narratives was the simple, personal relation of an anecdote.

Not only did my male writers tend to concentrate on epic themes, but the topics themselves were strongly tinged with a sense of the apocalyptic. By this I mean a pre-occupation with the fact that doom could strike at any time and that a man must be able to face this ultimate test:

All was silent, almost too silent. It was as if life was at a standstill.

Who was to know an enormous glove-like hand [i.e. a tornado] would touch down on E. Mpls?

. . . seconds before Joe made a fatal mistake worse than playing baseball on a highway.

This seemingly placid activity could turn into a life-or-death experience.

So as I drove I wished I would never have such a twist of fate again.

Little did I know as I paddled through the calm, clear water that in a few minutes my heart would be racing at almost twice its normal rate.

The sense in these writers of themselves as cosmic victims was striking enough to lead me to think (only half-jokingly) that if men are not found to be writing about the simple act of making popcorn, it might be because they are too busy grimly awaiting Armageddon.

Along the same line, I also noticed a tendency in the men's writing to look at their incident as a quest or mission (e.g., "But my lust for adventure overpowered my doubts, and I proceeded to carry out my mission"). The person who stares down the bear, having conquered nature, is free to go back to his "task" of portaging. The person who works as a clerk in a store where a tornado hits writes of his "job" of keeping the panicking customers calm. The man who went on a panty raid relates that his "mission was successfully completed." Even a drive to one's brother's house, because the driver became lost the last time, becomes an ultimate quest: "For the last time I went to my brother's house in Lincoln, Neb, I got lost and he won't soon let me forget it. 'But this time it will be different,' I said to myself." Such marks a tendency, I believe, toward romanticizing one's self and one's place in the world. Clearly there is a cultural basis for such a view of the (male) self. Chodorow (1978), for example, has observed that, "A boy, in order to feel himself adequately masculine, must distinguish and differentiate himself from others in a way that a girl need not – must categorize himself as someone apart" (p. 174).

These male students may be writing about life-on-the-line, twist-of-fate topics because their world view has been formally reinforced through such textual sources as comics, cartoons, fantasy books and films, TV shows, and role-playing games that depict a male hero battling all odds to complete his quest. One of the current video games places its player in the position of being the last (male) earthling alive to hold off an alien attack force bent on world domination. It would follow, if these are indeed the relevant influences to this aspect of the male writing formation, that writers would use the language corresponding to such sources in order to present their topics:

I was like a marionette being controlled by the force of gravity and every obstacle of the mountain. I was at the complete mercy of the road.

. . . with the screech of wheels and the scream of tortured metal we slid across the intersection.

The beast stood facing us with his intimidating body.

My heart beating like a jackhammer, my hands trembling.

Wham! My head snapped back as the car was violently shoved forward by the eighteen wheeler.

But then it struck, pain all over.

Deathly screams and crying children were heard throughout the building. . . . The swinging doors rapidly opened and closed like machine gun fire.

In fact, I found only three male papers that did not contain at least one example of this kind of lurid writing. One can only assume that these writers have internalized the stylistic features of the texts that have influenced their choice of topic, along with their political content. An archetypal version of such a text is the James Bond thriller, described by Bennett & Woollacott (1987) in a way that immediately captures the workings of the code in my male students' writing formations:

In these novels – *Thunderball*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963) and *You Only Live Twice* (1964) – Bond's mission involves him in a contest with SPECTRE – the Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terror, Revenge and Extortion – Headed by the mad but diabolically clever Ernst Stavro Blofeld, SPECTRE is an international crimi-

nal organization, an assembly of free-lance villains, which seeks to exploit the fragility of the relations between East and West, holding one or the other or sometimes both to ransom, for the purpose of private gain. Typically, the threat which Bond thus averts in these novels is that Blofeld's machinations, in sowing the seeds of misunderstanding between Russia and the West, might result in a global conflagration. (p. 33)

Selections from some current feminist theorists might be helpful here to show how this determinant works differently in a woman's writing formation. Leclerc (1981), for example, discusses the inflated egocentric grandiosity of male adventure fantasies, noting how the hero is always "on the trail of all human villainy, treachery, ferocity, and baseness. No one's going to put anything over on him" (p. 80). Such fantasies, she suggests, reflect a male world in which force is the underlying virtue:

The force of force going beyond peril. And the man uncertain of his strength plumbs with manic rage the force of the force of his force. Finally, it's always death that he must brave; death obsesses him. But if the death which finally catches up with him can teach him nothing, the triumph of life, which he is unsure whether to attribute to destiny, to chance, or to himself, always leaves him in uncertainty. (p. 82)

She adds, in an observation that neatly points out the epic/banal distinction I found in my students' writing formations: "It is death that raises the hero's temperature. Not life; that leaves him cold" (p. 82). And Cixous notes: "Man's dream is the face of death. Which always threatens him differently than it threatens woman" (1981, p. 92).

Among the women's topics there was a high degree (45%) of incidents that concerned care and nurturing: an abandoned pregnant puppy, a sick rabbit, mention of babysitting, a man who plummets to his death, a suicide, friends' minor injuries, food preparation, concern for the Dachau victims. In her surveys on concepts of self and morality, Gilligan (1982) found disparate, gender-marked, recurring themes in statements of men and women on their definitions of morality which doubtless account for the differences in their writing formations on this issue:

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment. Women's insistence on care is at first self-critical rather than self-protective, while men initially conceive obligation to others negatively in terms of non-interference. (p. 100)

Indeed, my writers' topics reflected this basic difference in ethos: women's topics were oriented toward care, men's topics toward self-determination. Herrmann (1981) offers a more critical view of this distinction:

Man prefers himself over all that surrounds him to such a degree that he imposes his mental categories *first, before* those of objective reality. . . . From this first act there follows a world view that distinguishes man from woman. Woman, who is always obliged to take others *into account*, and also to consider a material reality from which she

escapes less easily than man, can only conceptualize a cosmos of which she is not the center. (p. 88)

To illustrate this ideological distinction, which leads to radically different determinants of care, witness the way both genders interpreted the same topic, that of the car crash: When one woman wrote a paper on a crash, she spent a long concluding paragraph describing follow-up care in a hospital emergency room; not one of the six male car crash papers went beyond the crash. In fact, more time was spent in these males' papers describing the effects of the crash on the car than was spent on the injuries sustained by the occupants. Such a phenomenon I would attribute not just, as Gilligan has suggested above, to the male concern for the right to self-fulfillment (a right for which a car seems crucial in our society), but also to another trace I found in male papers, the sense of the apocalyptic, the emphasis on doom and disaster, summed up in the conclusion of one man's crash paper: "What a spectacular ending for an evening." It is reminiscent of what Sontag (1967), in her taxonomy of science fiction films, terms "the aesthetics of destruction" (p. 213).

Also strongly related to this need for noninterference, I found the men to a high degree (15 out of 20) to be concerned in their writing formation with aspects of power and control: control over the cars they were driving (when, for example, those cars would skid or swerve); control over their own emotions when hunting or being arrested; control over their careers or their drinking; and control over the opposite sex (in a panty raid). "'Stay calm,' I thought, pull over fast and get off the bike," stresses the motorcycle-riding writer who was arrested. The clerk who worked in the tornado-damaged store sharply delineates the difference between himself and the panicking customers, presenting himself as perfectly calm even though a tornado is demolishing his store. Not one male writer ever showed himself embarrassed.

The women, on the other hand, were more likely to picture themselves as confused and out-of-control. Nine out of twenty women writers showed themselves as embarrassed, panic-stricken, trembling, even in a trance. Cultural conditioning here seems painfully obvious. One student, who got on the wrong bus and immediately panicked, writes how she tried to solve her dilemma by calling her mother, but "as usual, the line was busy." A quick call to Dad brought immediate results. When her waitress friend spills sundaes on a customer at work, another writer notes, "I was so embarrassed my face turned beat red and it hadn't even been my fault." Another woman describes how she and her friend were "laughing and talking like a couple of babbling turkeys." When a woman was piloting her new boat and a storm arose, she immediately relinquished control of the helm to a male passenger. One cannot help but see women at this young age reinforcing society's view of them as inept and preserving this view, archivally, in their writing.

Another sociological stereotype, the appearance of what Lakoff calls "women's language," was evident in the women's writing to a certain degree. In all twenty-one of the men's essays I found only one exclamation point; in the twenty women's essays I counted eleven. I also found a more emotive word choice (e.g. "giggle," "babbling") as well as a tendency among the women to offer original ("the ping, ping, ping of the hard yellow kernels") description, as opposed to the already-cited stock pulp description of the men ("the scream of tortured metal"). What males often substituted for original, vivid detail was a blunt precision in facts: "Monday, September 21st at dusk," "'77 Monte Carlo," "1970 Plymouth 'Cuda,'" "northbound on Penn avenue in the vicinity of Southtown shopping center," "the 24" fan." Such con-

cern on the men writers' parts with the accrual of informative detail traces back to the code of popular fiction operating in their writing formation. Again in their study of the James Bond thrillers, Bennett & Woollacott discuss the way Kingsley Amis has codified a particular device of Fleming's which "Amis refers to as the 'Fleming effect,' an imaginative use of information which gives realism to the essentially fantastic nature of Bond's world." The authors go on to quote Amis's explanation of and source for the technique, namely boys' books:

It [the information] provides motives and explanations for action and the information itself is valuable, not simply as information, but in the relish and physical quality it lends to the narrative. A gun-boat in a well-written boys' book can't just be a gun-boat, it must be (say) of the *Zulu* class with five 4.7's arranged in two pairs forward and aft and a single one amidships, not, again, just to be believable or because we need to understand about the guns for later or because we like guns, but also so that the gun-boat shall be fully *there*. To mention boys' books doesn't denigrate this interest, it merely helps to define it. (p. 147)

Bennett & Woollacott go beyond tracing the origin for this technique to explore the correlation between the ultra-realistic code associated with things technological and mastery-centered constructions of male sexuality when they speak of:

the part played by the figures of Bond and 'the Bond girl' in the constructions of sexuality in men's magazines. These have exhibited a consistent pattern throughout the various moments of Bond's career, falling into two broad categories. First, articles on the technological gadgetry associated with the Bond films have typically articulated male sexuality to the ability to harness and control the power of machinery. The following commentary on Bond's Aston Martin DBS in *Thunderball*, although taken from a fanzine intended for general circulation, aptly illustrates the ways in which Bondian machinery has thus been 'phallogomorphised': 'A twist of the key sets the motor bursting into powerful throbbing life. It is then that you realise that here is a machine that separates the men from the boys.' (p. 245)

Those last lines further locate operative codes in the male writing formation, both in conceptual locus as well as linguistic expression, in popular media's discourse of advertising hype. The appeal to popular culture as an activating force in textual formations cannot be stressed enough; when Bennett attempts to determine the particular discourse forms and institutional apparatuses through which popular reading is superintended, he looks to "the operation of the star system, and the social production of popular heroes" (1983, p. 16).

The final characteristic in my taxonomy strikes me as truly unfortunate. Of the twenty-one male texts only four mentioned women. Of those, one concerned a deceptively (to the writer, that is) innocent-looking young woman who passed the writer on a highway and made an obscene gesture. Another told of a crowd around a bull moose, the one mention of women in the paper being, "There were ooh's and awh's coming from the females in the crowd." A third made reference to the writer's girlfriend, who never really appeared in the incident. The last mention concerned the panty-raider who did not exactly have women appear in his paper, but rather referred to them while discussing their cabins and panties. Women, on the other hand, tended to include the opposite sex: fourteen papers mentioned men.

Clearly, women do not occupy a significant enough place in the male freshman's world view to be included in a given piece of writing – not as significant, say, as something like a "Kawasaki 550LTD," or some other typically mentioned male artifact. This phenomenon also leads one to believe that men on the whole are writing to an exclusively male readership.

The conclusions I draw from my small study are disheartening indeed. Men dwell on the "great" subjects because they feel they are born for great things. Women have no dreams of glory and therefore are caught up in life's small particulars. Men are more often apt to use this type of writing to express their fantasies than women, who use it to catalogue details, set down small truths, or debase themselves. Men use stock words and topics from media adventure tales to frame their miniature epics. Women do not figure into their world at this stage, just as they do not figure into the tales that act as their sources (Kramerae 82-90). Pulp language is their code, and driving and sports (arenas where mastery is essential and error equals humiliation) their fields. When they enter a kitchen, it is with disastrous, monumentally tragic results. They are meant for more meaningful ways to exercise their birthright. Women are allowed to look on or, if they participate at all, express either care or confusion.

My male writers, to judge by their texts, are waiting for their starring roles, those moments when make-believe displaces reality – the innocent joyride that becomes a nightmare, the simple trip to the movies thrown into chaos by a tornado, the canoe trip threatened by a monstrous bear. In fact, the summaries of their topics, as listed in the appendix, almost sound like the pseudo-dramatic advertising blurbs for the popular films that surely feed their dreams, and probably form more than their writing formations. I am reminded of a confession film critic Roger Ebert (1984) made on an episode of his "At the Movies" which looked at popular teen films: "I got basic attitudes about girls out of these movies." The car crash paper, then, becomes a perfect genre for young male writers because it is the nexus of the factors which constitute their writing formation: they are behind the wheel as Fate steps in and whimsically turns an ordinary road trip into a singular dramatic moment; their drive (in this typically male realm, a realm in which "woman driver" is the ultimate insult) suddenly becomes a trial of their mastery of the idiom, a teeth-clenching quest to maintain control, and, as such, requires ritualistic, heightened language for its codification.

One way to look at the constraints on the male writers' world view is, borrowing Lacan's (1977) notion, to see them as trapped in an eternal mirror stage: that stage, from six to eighteen months, when the child has to deal with the mirror's reflection and does so by transforming that still-nascent reflection into an identification with an "Ideal I . . . by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" (p. 2), a stage prior to the child's socialization, i.e. "the deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*" (p. 5). Male topics that depict life as an arena in which mastery is contested are no accident; such topics fit with male writing as a formal regression to this pre-Oedipal transition stage:

Correlatively, the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium – its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way. Similarly, on the mental plane, we find realized the structures of fortified works,

the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to designate the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis – inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement. (p. 5)

The mirror stage must be resolved in human development, in order to allow the *I* the ability to function in a social world; we should value a corresponding discursive socialization in our male students, a goal that may have them using our writing assignments as something more than fun-house mirrors to reflect their exaggerated ideals. By remaining fixated in their narratives on heightened fantasies of control, power, and self-determination, my men writers used their assignments to write more perfect men; my women writers unfortunately completed the corresponding negative half of that fantasy logic and wrote themselves as more imperfect women – giddy, flustered, and helpless.

If it sounds as if I am endorsing the writing style of the women in my sample, I am not. If I find the values of caring and nurturing and everyday life more appealing than romantic fantasies of self-aggrandizement or apocalyptic fascination with automobile accidents, that is not to ignore the way my women writers appeared as almost exclusively submissive and domestic. Certainly there are times when self-aggrandizement is necessary, when control is essential. And certainly there is something colorful and occasionally appropriate in the use of pulp language. It is not a question of endorsing one gender's writing formation over another; rather it is the need to address the predictable, determined pattern that, as regards cultural power, seems biased against women.

A precedent for my own concern in this article should be mentioned. Emig (1971), too, remarks on disturbing distinctions she found between the male and female writers in her study, with findings that accord with my own. All but one of the "abstract" themes in her study were written by males. Their topics Emig characterizes as not only "extensive" but impersonal as well, noting that they seem "far more fearful" (p. 81) of expressing their feelings than the females she observed. She adds that the males go so far, in their writing behavior, as to block attempts to write in the "reflexive" mode. She explains this difference in her study on the fact that a woman gave the assignments and that males found writing poems and stories "unmanly."

The implications of my small survey for the teacher of composition depend greatly on that teacher's pedagogical philosophy. However, if one feels that the purpose of a class in composition is to foster the moral growth that is the goal of some rhetorics, then that instructor might not want debilitating cultural roles inadvertently strengthened through the writing his or her students do. For this type of teacher, careful selection of assignment might be a way of forcing students to re-think these roles, for it seems obvious that traditional topics such as the personal narrative are not automatically going to bring about the personal growth essential to accompany growth as writers. Myself, I am disturbed that the incident papers my students wrote may have allowed them, even in some small way, to feel more comfortable and settled with these roles. More challenging topics that directly address the gender issue seem beneficial: topics, for example, that force men to consider women in their writing may be a way of getting them to consider women in their daily lives. Men might be more challenged (both rhetorically as well as politically) by having to "describe a moment of weakness." Similarly, women might beneficially be asked to "describe a moment of certainty or mastery." Caywood & Overing (1987) explore the pedagogical implications of gender in the writing classroom, offering a variety of teaching techniques.

Certainly it must be determined whether or not we want to promote a kind of gender-based code-switching in our students, allowing each gender to take the best, most complementary aspects from the other. Cixous sees this as an answer to correct the language's power imbalance. She acknowledges that there are always "men who do not repress their femininity, women who more or less forcefully inscribe their masculinity" (p. 93). Admitting the other component makes one (in Cixous' words) "richer, plural, strong," but also, she adds, "very fragile" (p. 97). In fact, she claims there is "no *invention* possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other." But I doubt the solution – if there is one – is so straightforward. Kaplan (1987), for example, offers an idea of just what Cixous' fragility may entail, and how the resultant invention may simply further repression, when she discusses the implications involved in the way the masculine has pre-empted the feminine in the syntax of rock videos. Her analysis of how male rock stars in certain heavy metal music videos (those that she terms "nihilist") have appropriated the "look" of women – in their hairstyles, make-up, clothes, and accessories – provides a telling pop culture metonym for the problematic involved in this kind of gender-based code-switching:

Instead of seeking to find the phallus in the woman, the nihilist video seeks to appropriate the feminine to the phallus through the device of the masquerade. . . . This form of masquerade, often accompanying the parade of virility (cf. the Brazilian Festival where men routinely dress up as women) seeks to control the feared feminine, the feared difference, by possessing it, incorporating it within the self. . . . If I possess the feminine myself, it seems to say, then I no longer need to satisfy the desire for woman *outside* myself, thus avoiding the terror of so doing. (p. 93)

Because of who is appropriating from whom, the ultimate effect of this denial of difference reduces woman's status from "Other" to "non-male." Likewise, there seems no question in the reprehensibility of encouraging women to assume men's forms. Schweickart cites the schizophrenic result of one woman reader's attempts to read within the predominantly male forms of literature: "Imagining myself male, I attempted to create myself male. Although I knew the case was otherwise, it seemed I could do nothing to make this other critically real" (p. 41). Again, difference is erased, and the Other, as identity, vanishes, consumed by the very real discourse of the dominant gender.

Or do we even want to address this issue in any way? Perhaps there is a kind of stage-model notion inherent in this question. Should we suspend concern over the political implications of gender-marked writing formations, allowing students to continue to write in these familiar modes, as a way of controlling certain variables (in this case topic and content) so as to work on refining other aspects of their writing, such as syntactic complexity? Might a male freshman's "boys' book" narrative have the same function as an actual boys' book – serving as a literary stepping-stone to facilitate the passage from one textual stage to another? I can in no way answer that, but I can point out similar stage-model research done in the area of schema theory and art education. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1970) divide an individual's artistic evolution into stages, but note evidence to show that children can get stuck in a particular schema, inhibiting their natural growth, by copying stereotyped models (pp. 49-51). I wonder if the unreflective use of received composition assign-

ments, which allow stunted cultural replication, is worth the risk of allowing students to maintain a stereotyped gender schema, leading to a kind of moral and intellectual arterial sclerosis.

Schweickart in no way exaggerates when she deems the activity of writing "an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it" (p. 39). If our writing tasks act to shore up hegemony, then we have to question the way in which the use of even as basic a genre as the narrative in our writing classes may be fraught with possibly debilitating ideological underpinnings: do we want the textual space in which we allow our students to play and grow into writing to become one where male students are allowed to rehearse future notions of mastery and female students learn how they can assist them in reaching that end? And how much do such generalizations hold true for the entire range of school-sponsored writing? Also, what other variables operate as systematically as gender? For a more comprehensive delineation of our students' writing formations, taking into account such factors as race, class, and, as I have tried to do here, gender, can only give us a more refined, encompassing view of the real social constraints responsible for our students' written production. In any event, a satisfying answer to the question of the effect of gender on writing has to be forthcoming; the suspicions of hegemonic re-enforcement must be refuted or proven (and corrected) if our writing classrooms are to become liberating environments in which to learn.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A brief sampling of works that have an emphasis on gender and language with a perspective well-suited for the teacher of first-year writing: feminist linguists (Cameron, 1985) and sociolinguists (e.g. Kramerae, 1981; Lakoff, 1975; and Thorne & Henley, 1975) offer a good starting point, dealing as they do with language in social use; those writing of the sociology of gender (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, et al., 1986) might be consulted next, again for the broader social background; finally one could begin reading in a more exclusively formal, text-oriented vein in both composition (Caywood & Overing, 1987) and literary studies (e.g., Flynn & Schweickart, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>In all passages from student papers, I have preserved the actual writing, errors included.

#### WORKS CITED

- Aries, Elizabeth. "Interaction Patterns and Themes of Male, Female and Mixed Groups." *Small Group Behavior* 7 (Jan. 1976): 7-18.
- At the Movies*. Roger Ebert. September 3, 1984.
- Belenky, Mary Field, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
- Bennett, Tony. "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations." *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 16 (Spring 1983): 3-17.
- Bennett, Tony & Jane Woollacott. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.
- Caywood, Cynthia L. & Gillian R. Overing, eds. *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Cixous, Helene. "Sorties." In Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981. 90-98.
- Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971.
- Flynn, Elizabeth A. & Patrocino P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Flynn, Elizabeth A. "Composing as a Woman." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (December 1988): 423-435.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Hermann, Claudine. "The Virile System." In Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981: 87-89.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Post-modernism, and Consumer Culture*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Kramerae, Cheris. *Women and Men Speaking*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1981.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- Leclerc, Annie. "Woman's Word." In Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981. 79-86.
- Lowenfeld, Viktor & W. Lambert Brittain. *Creative and Mental Growth*. London: The Macmillan Company, 1970.
- Schweickart, Patrocino P. "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading." In Elizabeth A. Flynn & Patrocino P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. 31-62.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967.
- Thorne, Barrie, & Nancy Henley, eds. *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1975.
10. Author is involved in a car accident; car is hit and spins off the road.
  11. Author receives a phone call informing her of a friend's suicide.
  12. Author's class's senior "skip day" is a shambles - rain and physical injuries.
  13. Author witnesses a man fall from stadium bleachers.
  14. Author tours a concentration camp and sees a film on Dachau.
  15. Author tries a new gymnastic stunt for the first time.
  16. Author is a waitress at a restaurant at which her co-worker spills a tray of sundaes on a customer.
  17. Author goes to wrong class on the first day of school.
  18. Author relaxes in front of a campfire, gives a very detailed picture of the flames.
  19. Author details the events leading from a nervous first day of school to relief.
  20. After babysitting a young girl whose pet injured a rabbit, author nurses rabbit back to health and takes it to humane society.

#### Male Topic Summaries

1. Author remembers the time (in kindergarten) he and a young friend did a dangerous stunt: he pushed his friend in a wagon through a glass door.
2. Author is drunk in the back seat of a friend's car when the friend has an accident.
3. Author and friend are on a camping trip; they, along with a large crowd of people, see a great bull moose.
4. Very detailed look at author waking up in the morning for the first day of class.
5. Policeman pulls author over for speeding; lucky break lets him avoid getting the ticket.
6. Author and his friend skid on the way to a ski trip; car flips over into ditch.
7. Author and his brother go to movies and a tornado hits.
8. Author, driving on freeway, has a jockeying-for-position tussle with a young woman in the car next to him. She passes him, makes an obscene gesture, and he's chagrined.
9. Author's pleasant drive in the country on a bike becomes disastrous when the brakes fail.
10. Author tells why he wanted to become an architect and why he chose the University of Minnesota.
11. A tornado strikes while the author is on the golf course; he rushes home.
12. Author's attempt to heat up some frozen food becomes a disaster.
13. Author is driving to his brother's house; sun blinds him and he misses a sign. A truck hits him from behind.
14. Author encounters a bear while portaging in the woods; he just stares it down.
15. Author is working as a clerk in a store when a tornado strikes. He keeps calm.
16. Author describes his first frat party.
17. Author and friends encounter frustrations in planning and executing a camping trip.
18. Author is riding in a helicopter and gets caught in a fog.
19. Author drives during a snowstorm, and car skids out of control.
20. Author and some male friends are involved in a summer-camp party raid.
21. Author's brother's leg breaks while family is out tobogganing, and they must get him home.

#### Appendix

##### Female Topic Summaries

1. Author makes a mistake during a trip to Germany and goes in the wrong rest room. A man enters while she's in a stall; she's very embarrassed.
2. Author hears sounds in the kitchen, investigates, and discovers her friend making popcorn.
3. Four men and the author rob a pizza restaurant and elude the police.
4. Author gets on the wrong bus, panics, and has to call her father to tell her which bus to take home.
5. Author goes sailing with two male friends and the boat capsizes; fishermen save them.
6. Author's pleasant drive with a friend results in a serious rear-end collision. They go to the hospital.
7. Author praises a man who courageously drove a car home from a basketball game through a blizzard.
8. Author has a premonition about her sister, and sure enough her sister sprains her ankle playing volleyball.
9. Author is present as the owners of a grocery store where she works find an abandoned, pregnant young puppy; they watch it deliver.