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The Portrayal of Gender in the Secondary English Texts and its Effects on Students

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: how does the portrayal of gender in secondary English texts and how it effects student's perception of gender? Critical literacy practices used during the instruction of texts provide students with the opportunities to examine how the literature effects their perceptions of gender. Through classroom observations, a teacher interview, and small group sessions, it was found that teaching practices are the primary influence of how students perceive gender, not the texts that they read. As a result, teachers should incorporate a critical literacy pedagogy into their classes to help students understand their gender perceptions.

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The Portrayal of Gender in the Secondary English Texts
and its Effects on Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: how does the portrayal of gender in secondary English texts and how it effects student's perception of gender? Critical literacy practices used during the instruction of texts provide students with the opportunities to examine how the literature effects their perceptions of gender. Through classroom observations, a teacher interview, and small group sessions, it was found that teaching practices are the primary influence of how students perceive gender, not the texts that they read. As a result, teachers should incorporate a critical literacy pedagogy into their classes to help students understand their gender perceptions.

The Portrayal of Gender in the Secondary Texts and its Effects on Students

Gender will always be an important topic in English classrooms that will never go away. Gender conceptions can divide a classroom in seconds and pit boys against girls. However, it need not. The topic I chose to research is the portrayal of gender in the secondary English classroom because, currently, there are limited texts at the secondary level curriculum that include positive representation of genders. Many canonized texts favor the male point-of-view and although may include females, do not necessarily depict strong female characters. Even texts featuring a female point-of-view may not necessarily expose a strong female character. However, the texts taught in secondary English classes are not the only problem. The way the material is presented to students also affects the way genders are viewed. Students need to be instructed using critical literacy practices in order to create and foster a positive learning environment, as well as have the opportunities to critically examine texts through multiple perspectives. The ways in which students respond to texts are important as well. Student responses indicate student beliefs, including how students feel about their own gender, as well as the opposite gender. Critical literacy practices allow students and teachers to deconstruct the societal beliefs and values expressed in the literature. Critical literacy practices provide the opportunity for students and teachers to examine student responses to the text and develop an understanding as to why the beliefs are held and exist and in some instances, promote change. I believe that the current secondary pedagogy does not foster gender development in the classroom, but only teaches students that certain voices are more important than others and reinforces archaic gender stereotypes.

Scholars such as Bender-Slack (2009) and Sadker and Sadker (1994) have repeatedly delved into the issue of marginalized female voices in the secondary classroom. Their research

examines how women are relegated in secondary texts, as well as how the lack of strong female voices in a text can affect both male and female students. It is through their work that many other scholars have investigated how gender can affect the acquisition of literacy. The Sadkers, in particular, are widely known as authorities on the subject of gender bias in a classroom and much of their research inquires as to how far gender bias can infiltrate the growth and development of students. Their work in the 1990's was the basis for an educational shift to incorporate female voices into the classroom, be it from the material taught, or from the girls sitting in the classroom. Bender-Slack (2009), a contemporary of the Sadkers, researched how gender plays an intricate role in secondary curriculums and classrooms. Her work expands on the Sadkers research, discussing how critical literacy practices, particularly the social justice aspect of critical literacy, can result in the changing of students' mindsets about gender. Although Bender-Slack (2009) and Sadker and Sadker (1994) are not the only scholars who have researched gender bias in the secondary classroom, they are three of the leading researchers who have continued to encourage teachers to examine gender roles in their classrooms.

The discussion of the portrayal of gender in the classroom is required to encourage students to equally accept both men and women's viewpoints. By not acknowledging women, educators are silencing their voices both in the classroom and out. At the same time, educators are insinuating that the gender roles expressed for men are acceptable and should not be deviated from. Both genders will continue to believe the societal constructs of gender that has been expressed both in the literature and in the classroom and no change will occur. The subject of gender in literature needs to be addressed. By addressing gender, students can begin to deconstruct the gender roles and stereotypes that are perpetuated by the literature which is included in the standard secondary English curriculum. In addressing current gender roles,

students can examine their preconceptions of gender and societal expectations, effectively resulting in a change of how students view their gender and the world around them. As a result, I examined how the portrayal of gender roles in secondary English texts affects student perceptions of gender.

Research was completed in an urban school in Western, New York, in two classrooms; a ninth grade Regents class and an eleventh grade honors class. Through a teacher interview, classroom observations and two small group sessions, comprised of students from each of the classes, I was able to ascertain that teaching practices are the driving factor that effects student perceptions of gender. Although the curriculum that is taught can affect the students, it is the way the material is taught and presented to the students that aids in determining student perceptions of gender roles. These findings indicate that teachers must include critical literacy practices if students are to address their perceptions of gender.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy is sociocultural in that we acquire literacy through our cultural up-bringing and social practices. Freebody and Luke (1990) explained literacy as “a multifaceted set of social practices (p. 15). Gee (1989) expounded that literacy is control of “secondary language,” in that secondary language is sociocultural constructed language different from the dominant discourse of a person. Similarly, Larson and Marsh (2010) explained that literacy is process that individuals embark on, and is not based on a linear model where students must achieve certain skills at certain ages as many traditional literacy programs once believed. Literacy also includes a technological piece because technology has become such an integral part of the world in which we live. Larson and Marsh suggest that current literacy practices “involve much more than a focus on printed text” (p.69). Thus, any definition of literacy must include a technological piece,

as it is in many ways, a secondary language. As our world continues to change, so must our definition of literacy.

As literacy acquisition is a cultural process, it is important to study certain aspects of a culture that affect literacy. The way gender is viewed is an important aspect of literacy and therefore it must be considered when examining the literacy practices of a student. The role of gender in any classroom at any level is always an important issue. Females and males will always be different, but culturally, our society has imprinted these differences on our youth, in such a way, that it marginalizes anyone that does not fall into the stereotypes society has created. Sexism affects both genders (Schneidewind & Davidson, 2006). Preferring one gender over another hurts both genders. The theory that will guide my study is feminist theory. First, feminist criticism, as defined by Wright (2008), examines a text in terms of gender roles that have been socially and culturally constructed. According to Wright, feminist criticism examines gender roles, stereotypes regarding gender, and how power plays a part within socially and culturally composed gender roles. Society has indoctrinated acceptable behaviors for woman and men into the curriculum, and therefore students develop preconceived notions about how both genders should behave. In the way that students are instructed, these societal gender roles are often reinforced. Lynn (2011) explained that the purpose of feminist criticism is “that our comfortable assumptions ought to be destabilized, opening up our thinking” (p. 222). Students enter the classroom with assumptions about gender roles and those assumptions need to be addressed. Feminist criticism provides teachers the opportunity and the lens to examine a text through an alternative perspective, and open students’ minds and examine how students are being positioned. Through a feminist lens, students analyze how gender plays a part in a text, how certain genders are perceived to have more power, stereotypes regarding gender and how culture

influences gender construction. Feminist criticism is typically employed through a series of questions. Teachers ask students to consider whether or not the text promotes or undermines gender stereotypes, and also ask students to consider which gender is being silenced. Is the character being silenced by other characters, meaning that the character's thoughts and views are ignored by other characters in the text, or is that character simply not even heard by the reader? Teachers might also ask how the story would change if the character was a different gender. From these questions, teachers then ask students to apply these thoughts to the world we live in. By ignoring one character, what does that say about the way society values that type of person or that particular gender? These questions enlighten students and allow them to view the world through an alternative lens. Feminist criticism can be applied to any form of media, which is why it is a valuable theory for teachers to employ in their classrooms. The theory can be applied to any type of text, be it fiction or non-fiction, as well as films, television shows, advertisements and even political speeches. Feminist criticism is meant to disrupt the way we look at the world. Every aspect of society attempts to sway and position our thinking. It is important to make students aware of this subtle positioning so that they may move forward in life with open minds, ready to deconstruct the constructs around them. In teaching using feminist criticism, teachers and student deconstruct gender roles and students address the stereotypic beliefs they might hold.

Research Question

Gender roles are an important part of society. Students develop their own views on gender as they develop their own identities as gender roles are a part of one's identity. Given that literacy is defined as a sociocultural process, which includes the development of gender roles, the action research project examines the following question: How does the portrayal of gender roles in secondary English classrooms affect student perceptions about gender?

Literature Review

In order to effectively pose and interpret data of a successful action research project, reviewing previous studies completed on the topic in question is crucial. The following literature review synthesizes research involving the role of males and females in the classroom and how they are affected by the way the literature is portrayed. Throughout the course of the literature review I will discuss three themes that are prevalent throughout the research. The first section will discuss how the secondary curriculum is constructed in regards to the type of literature that is read. Understanding the types of literature that is read is vital when assessing how the materials affect the genders that are reading it. The second section will explore how critical literacy practices, including feminist theory, can affect students' learning and literacy practices. The teaching methods of an educator can aid in the understanding of how students perceive a text. The students' awareness of how a text is conveyed can affect how a student identifies with and acts out gender roles. The third section will discuss how males and female respond to the literature and the way it is being taught. Recognizing how students respond to the literature allows educators to determine where an unbalance of power between genders occurs in the classroom while reading a text. The culmination of the review will examine how both male and female roles are established within a classroom setting. Although there is ample research in the areas of student response to the teaching of literature and teaching methods, there lacks research on how students feel about the types of literature taught in the secondary English classroom.

The Power of the Literature Found in the Secondary Curriculum

I will begin by discussing the kind of literature that is currently used in the secondary English classroom. Most course novel selections include few woman writers, and even fewer

texts that include strong female protagonists (Bean & Moni, 2003; Bender-Slack, 2009; Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis; 1998, Bruce, Brown, McCracken and Bell-Nolan, 2008; Garner, 1999; Glenn, 2008; O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Sanford, 2006; Wallowitz, 2004 & Wissman, 2008). Much of what secondary students read in English class are written by males and follow a male protagonist. The female experience has been, and still is, being disregarded for the traditional male bildungsroman novel. As a result, teachers are calling for more modern texts to be infused into a predominately male curriculum (Bender-Slack, 2009; Glenn, 2008; Johnson, Peer and Baldwin, 1984; Lopez, 2011 & Wissman, 2008). Newer texts provide insights to the 21st century conflicts of our youth and scaffold upon the issues discussed in older texts. Lopez (2011) argued that “we cannot continue to argue for more equitable teaching practices without looking at each curriculum area and examining how changes might be made” (p. 90). In order to create change in the ways texts are taught, the curriculum must be changed. Garner (1999) completed a study in which she surveyed 84 women and asked them to examine the female characters that they viewed as literary role models. She found that girls seek agency through the texts they read, and as a result, it is important for adolescent girls to read about female protagonists who positively influence readers. Garner argued that the female character need not be “perfect” but exemplify characteristics that embolden young girls to step outside of the tight constructs that gender can employ, as well as illustrate to male readers the strength and prowess of women. In order to procure a more well-balanced curriculum as well as gender equity in the classroom, there must be more positive female characters highlighted. Wallowitz (2004) questioned how females feel as they are continuously forced to read male domineered texts, asking “what do you think happens to female readers as a result of donning a male mask in order to experience a text” (p. 29)? Thus, it is important to question how literature affects student

learning. Likewise, Wang, Chao and Liao (2010) emphasize the necessity to incorporate issues of gender and diversity when planning a curriculum because classrooms need to change the “negative effects of power and imbalances in the hierarchical class structure” (p. 111). The design of a curriculum determines who has power in classroom and who does not.

Even as male dominant texts monopolize adolescent English classes throughout the country, scholars argue that males are not necessarily benefiting either (Bean & Moni, 2003; Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis, 1998; Bruce et al., 2008; Locke & Cleary, 2011; Sanford, 2006; Sheehy, 2002; Wissman, 2008 & Young, 2001). By solely featuring male centered texts, male students begin to accept the stereotypes that literature places upon them. Young (2001) completed a study in which she had four boys read and examine different texts. After reading the material, she would prompt the boys to consider how the text tells the boys about how boys should act and behave. After reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*, Young asked the boys questions concerning bravery. She inquired if they could be as brave as the protagonist, Billy, because he camped outside in the woods alone. Young then encouraged the boys to discuss what it means to be brave. She noted that the older boys refused to admit that they might be scared by the act of camping in the woods alone, remarking that it was hard for the older boys, ages 12 and 13, to “denounce the masculine practice of bravery in the face of his friend,” whereas the younger boys, ages 10 and 11, were very forthright in their admission that they would be too scared to sleep alone in the woods (p. 6). At some point, a change occurred and the older boys began to fear how it would look to others if they were not perceived as brave, whereas the notion of looking weak to others had not occurred to younger boys. Comparably, Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis (1998) argued that both male and female students “become convinced that they are lacking and unworthy because they do not measure up to the impossible ideal” (p. 67). By

exclusively teaching male oriented texts, males adhere to preconceived gender roles because those roles are reinforced by the literature that is taught in school.

Gender stereotypes are inhibiting the growth of student identities (Bean & Moni, 2003; Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis, 1998; Bruce et al., 2008; Sanford, 2006; Sheehy, 2002; Wissman, 2008 & Young, 2001). Students feel pressure to fit into stereotypes instead of being individuals. Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis (1998) expounded on gender stereotypes and how they are a detriment to both male and female students. Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis stated that “girls are expected to sacrifice their interests, their fair share of teacher attention, and their right to a curriculum that awards their interests and talent on a parity with those of boys” (p. 64). In a study, they found that students prefer male characters to female characters because male characters are characteristically described as “brave, independent and strong,” as opposed to female characters who are customarily “nurturing and self-sacrificing” (p. 65). The texts read by the students were primarily chosen by students as independent reading novels, however fact remains that both male and female students alike preferred male characters because they are portrayed as more interesting. As part of their study, Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis observed a tenth grade classroom that was reading Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. While discussing the novel, a female student questioned why the book had to be about a group of boys, instead of a group of girls or a mixed gender group, and then questioned why all the books read in high school are all boy books. Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis remarked that the male students in the classroom, as well as the male teacher, proceeded to justify the texts read, such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Of Mice and Men* as texts that also included women. It was noted that the males in the group join forces to “explain away the imbalance” by pointing out that the previously read texts did indeed include women, ignoring the fact that the women in those texts are weak, flippant characters in an

attempt to placate the girls in the class. The teacher in the study only reinforces the male ideals and effectively silences the girls in the class through the use of the curriculum. Similarly, Sanford (2006) stated that “school expectations tend to draw on (often stereotypical) generalizations about the interest of boys and girls and how they learn” (p. 306). By only choosing texts that are canonized, educators are not only emphasizing stereotypic gender roles, but a misbalance of power within the classroom. Simmons (1998) espoused that “gender stereotyping may not be born in the classroom; however, that is where it is certainly reinforced” (p. 38). Essentially, the texts we teach only bolster the gender roles that students have emphasized outside of school. Yosso (1998) expounded that the school system and society “continually transmit their delusional ideas” which is enforced by the curriculum, harming students in the process (p. 53). Students are shaped by the ideals held by those around them. The school chooses the curriculum and what students are to read inside the classroom, however they have little choice over what students read outside the classroom. Johnson, Peer and Baldwin (1984) explained in their study that if left to their own devices, students typically choose texts with protagonists that are the same gender of the reader. Johnson, et al. investigated protagonist preferences of juvenile and adolescent readers. Using a survey that they distributed to students in grades five through 10, across 20 states and the District of Columbia, Johnson, et al. determined that the age of a protagonist does not particularly matter to adolescents, however gender does (Johnson, et al. 1984). Due to the fact that the typical high school curriculum does not include many female protagonists, most students read mainly about the male point-of-view. If students are reading mainly about the male point-of-view, they are not reading about the female point-of-view. Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis (1998) argued that teachers must push to create a more balanced curriculum in schools where both male and female characters are represented so that

neither males nor females are silenced. Essentially, teachers need to find ways to deconstruct the roles of men and women in canonized texts. If the curriculum does not change, both male and female students will be limited not only by their understanding of literature, but by their gender roles as well.

As a result of not having enough women voices in the curriculum, the canon should be either avoided or adapted (Bender-Slack, 2010; Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis, 1998; Glenn, 2008; Wissman, 2008 & Wallowitz, 2004). The canon exists for a reason; the literature it is comprised of is well-written and provides ample opportunities for students to not only critically examine the literature, but to analyze the world around them. However the canon is exceptionally male which is limiting. In Glenn's (2008) document analysis of three popular young adult series, she examines the proclivity of teenage readers to prescribe to such provocative texts. Glenn examines the *Gossip Girl* series, *The Insiders*, and *The A-List* in a quest to understand the draw these texts have on adolescent readers. Glenn concluded that the motifs of absent/neglectful parents, parties with excessive drinking and having insurmountable money entice readers even as young as middle school. However, her conclusion was not to disregard such texts in the classroom, but to incorporate them because the ideals and themes these texts convey are similar to many texts in the canon. She argued that by pairing current young adult fiction with canonized texts such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* might "yield a rich comparison relative to the time and place in which the novels are set" (p. 41). In comparing the two texts, readers might begin to examine the culture around them. Analogously, Wissman (2008) argued that in order to examine the world around students and relate it to the literature at hand "we need to begin by acknowledging the critical capacities that students bring with them to schools" (p.

348). If teachers are to use the canon successfully they must incorporate students' ideas and conceptions about the world in which they live.

Teaching Methods and Their Effects on Students

In this section of the literature review, I will discuss how critical literacy practices, which encompass a feminist pedagogy, can affect students in the classroom. Teachers must make it their responsibility to instruct students about gender where literature does not (Sanford, 2006 & Young, 2001). Teachers can use critical literacy to push students to break the conceptions they have about men and women. Wallowitz (2004) conducted study in which she had seniors in high school examine multiple texts using a critical lens. She explained that her goal was to "provide students with knowledge to analyze the ways in which social constructions of gender shape the experiences of both men and women" (p. 26). Students were given the tools to reevaluate the texts they were reading. Wallowitz examined students' verbal and written responses to the literature in which they read, as well as different forms of media that were introduced to the students as means to challenge their views on how gender "norms" are constructed. The literature and media the students were exposed to was designed to assist students in investigating how males and females are dichotomized. As the study progressed, students began to see how gender stereotypes present in old texts are still present today. One student noted that "Hawthorne signals to female readers that they must please men with [their] appearance. They are to be showcased" (p. 29). Students began to identify the expectations of gender roles. Wallowitz concludes that by having students examine the world in which they live in, including the literature they read in school, through a critical lens, they will be able to negotiate the world more successfully. Correspondingly, Bruce, Brown, McCracken and Bell-Nolan (2008) argued that teachers must use feminist theory to examine texts so that students understand what

characters are being silenced in a text, as well as understand that silencing occurs outside the literature as well. Bruce et al. contended that by pairing non-fiction texts with the mandatory curriculum texts, students can perceive how even in the real world characters are suppressed. By highlighting the silencing of both male and female characters in texts teachers “make more visible the invisible workings of gendered power and give students tools for change” (p. 88). The only way to create gender equity in the classroom is by stressing the instances where gender is not equal and giving students the means to change the world around them.

Oftentimes, students are not even aware they are being positioned by the literature that they read. In 2003, Bean and Moni lead a study in which they examined the discussions students have about the literature they read. Initially the students were asked to discuss the text *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* without prompting. Many students did not have any issues with the way the girls in the text were portrayed, but some females in the group expressed distaste for the way the girls in the novel acted like groupies. Bean and Moni noted that indeed the female characters in the novel are “largely faceless characters in a masculine novel” (p. 644). However, after prompting the students to discuss gender, there was more feedback from both female and male students. Overall, the females seemed more concerned with the roles of the female characters in the texts than the males. One female commented that if she could change the novel, she would give more power to the women, arguing that the portrayal of the women in the text was not in accordance to the way women are portrayed currently. Bean and Moni argued that by allowing students to modify the book in some way the students begin to see how other perspectives can influence and change the outcome of a text. Students begin to make meaning from the text and internalize their discoveries (Bean and Moni, 2003). Oftentimes students, both male and female, refuse to acknowledge that there are still considerable gaps in gender equality. Students argue that gender

inequality is a thing of the past and that currently the world is equal (Harper, 1998). Harper's study included six, 17 year-old girls and examined how the girls responded to feminist writings and if by critically examining the feminist writings if they would be able to improve their own writing. The girls initially denounced the feminist writing because they claimed that if they liked feminist writing it would imply that they hated men, which was not true. Harper encouraged the girls to examine the writing and internalize it, asking the girls to make connections with the women in the poems and short stories. Originally the girls did not sympathize with any of the texts because they felt the women had the ability to change their lives and improve their situations; the women were being victims when they did not need to be. However, as the girls began to observe the writing more closely, the girls were not only able to find patterns of "good writing" that they felt all good writing should include, but they were able to see the imperfections in their own thinking; they could see the power in their abilities to make their own decisions unlike some of the women in the writing. Harper resolved that by examining subversive writing the girls were able to realize "their power in their ability to disrupt and ... expose the premises, practices, and pleasures" through participating in critically examining the literature, as well as trying to imitate the writing styles of the women (Harper, 1998). Critically examining a text provides new insight to students. In comparison, Young (2001) explained that through writing, boys and girls are able to compare their gendered experiences to each other and to the characters in a text. By using writing to examine gendered biases students can both reflect and critically examine the characters and their roles in a text. Similarly, O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky (1999) found that when students critically scrutinize a character from a text, even a weak character, the students find ways to make connections to the character and perceive the character differently. O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky observed a group of girls who were

creating a body biography for *Hamlet's* Ophelia. In their observations, O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky noted that the girls initially saw Ophelia as a weak-minded character that eventually goes mad due to her unrequited love for Hamlet. However, because the assignment was to break down and analyze the character, the girls began to see similarities in Ophelia that they saw in other girls they knew, and themselves. Through the act of creating a body biography, the girls began to see that although Ophelia is a weak character, she is weak for a reason; low self-esteem, a domineering father and lack of friends. The body biography gave the girls the opportunity to critically analyze a character using art and writing. O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky argue that although Ophelia is not a great literary character and is in fact "the most isolated character in the play and one whose welfare is most routinely abused or disregarded," analyzing her provides opportunities for students to question their own insecurities (O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky, 1999). So although she is hardly a role model for students, Ophelia does offer a cautionary tale to students, even if it is a hyperbolic one. In comparison to O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky's (1999) study, Spector and Jones's (2007) study used critical literacy to allow students to break the conceptions they already have about notorious characters in literature. The purpose in their study was to disrupt and challenge "the familiar relational backdrops that they had formerly associated with Anne Frank" by "actively constructing meaning from several texts" (p. 45). Spector and Jones knew that most students characterized Anne Frank as kind, thoughtful and intelligent. Although this may have been true, Spector and Jones wanted students to distort student impressions and realize that Anne Frank was a complex person/character. Spector and Jones exposed the students to multiple viewpoints of Anne Frank using text and media alike. They employed the graphic novels *Maus I and Maus II* to present a male point of view of the Holocaust as well as showed documentaries expressing other male and female

survival stories. Students also examined Anne's diary and two different play versions of Anne's plight. Spector and Jones then encouraged students to discuss Anne supporting their thoughts using the texts and media. Spector and Jones found that by exposing the students to multiple perceptions of Anne, as well as providing male experiences, both historical fiction, like Anne's diary, as well as documentaries, students not only has a better understanding of the complexity of Anne Frank, but also appeared to comprehend the depravity and trepidation that embodies the Holocaust. Spector and Jones noted that students no longer viewed Anne as lively and optimistic, they viewed her as strong but fake; no one could be that optimistic in the face of the extermination of their race. Students began to see that the text they were reading, although about a strong female, was not what it appeared to be, as it masked the abhorrent crimes being committed in the backdrop of the play about Anne. Spector and Jones conclude that teachers must teach texts critically; examining gender and race, or students will stay innocent about socially constructed practices (Spector and Jones, 2007).

Educators need to break perpetually reinforced societal constructs by showing multiple viewpoints of texts or students will be robbed of the tools to change the world around them. Locke and Cleary (2011) concluded similar findings in their study, which also examined students employing critical literacy practices. Locke and Cleary observed seven teachers from seven different schools, all who had culturally diverse classrooms. Locke and Cleary led lessons in the classrooms occasionally over the course of two years. In their lessons, Locke and Cleary's goals were to alert students to the gaps and silences that many texts encouraged, as well as educate students in how to identify the gaps and silences themselves, without prompting or guidance. Parallel to Spector and Jones (2007), Locke and Cleary (2011) utilized critical literacy practices with feminist theory to have students examine the multiple viewpoints each text bears. Students

examined how characters and readers are positioned, as well as how characters are represented. In the end, after students had attempted to employ critical literacy by themselves, Locke and Cleary noted that many students asked why female characters are often portrayed as weak, as well as why there is such emphasis on the physical appearance of female characters. Locke and Cleary concluded that the close examination of texts allowed students to realize the implications of literature about gender and race through the representation of gender roles, as well as other societal impacts. If students can utilize the knowledge they gain through examining texts using a critical lens, they might begin to change the world around them. Similarly, O'Donnell and Smagorinsky (1999) explicated that by offering students the opportunity to examine multiple viewpoints, it creates the chance for students to present multiple viewpoints. Students offer diverse responses to text that may not be shared if students do not examine a text from an alternative perspective. Alternative perspectives enlighten students and open their minds to new ways of thinking. Lopez (2011) acknowledged the need for multiple perspectives in the classroom as well. She elucidated that if teachers change the way in which they present and teach a text, change will eventually ensue. By presenting a text in a different matter, opportunities arise for students to change the way in which they see the world around them.

Many scholars argue that pure discussion of gender biases and differences can begin to bridge the gap between the two genders (Bender-Slack, 2009; Locke & Cleary, 2011; & Sanford, 2006). Students need to be provided with the opportunity to discuss gender. Sanford (2006) explained that “gendered perspectives of students affect not only their developing self-identity but also the expectations placed on them and their opportunities to engage in various literacy activities” (p. 303). By incorporating a feminist pedagogy into the English classroom, students begin to examine their own experiences and how they are shaped. Sanford’s study followed two

middle school classrooms where she observed and interviewed both teachers and students. What Sanford found is that most students, without prompting, could not find any differences between the two genders. However when discussing what roles males and females had in the world, they were more attracted to the activities that males traditionally complete than what females typically complete. Sanford concludes that the only way to deconstruct hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity is to encourage discussion about gender in relation to the real world, and not just focus on texts. Students need to understand how the world around them shapes them as well.

Relatedly, Bender-Slack (2009) examined a high school classroom where different texts were read that were meant for students to focus on the women perspective. The students resisted the topics of the literature for the majority of the study and repudiated the differences in gender represented in the texts, as well as in the classroom. Eventually the students began to see the discourse Bender-Slack and the classroom teacher were alluding to and discussion regarding gender roles emerged. Bender-Slack expounded that through examining multiple perspectives of a text and observing how the language positions the reader, topics will arise that provide ample opportunity to discuss how gender is perceived. Teachers can guide discussion so that gender is addressed or find other ways to include gender. Young (2001) stated that it is important to choose texts that already question the practices of gender so that students are not forced to try and read in resistance to the text. The students will resist the text because it defies the stereotypes and constructs that society has put in place. In agreement, Pace (2003) found that too much resistance to a text that challenges gender stereotypes can result in no literacy acquisition. That is to say that the resistance is too much to overcome and student perceptions are not changed. Educators must use texts that challenge student perceptions to a point, but also encourage learning. Comparably, Johnson's (2011) study stated that in order for discussion to take place,

the classroom teacher must be open to it, as the classroom literacy practices are positioned primarily by the teacher and only when the teacher provides a neutral environment, can authentic discussion occur. Too often do teachers intimidate students into not talking because they do not create a positive learning environment for students to question the world around them. Young (2001) espoused that “a student should feel like her or his opinions are respected, but also be prepared for and opened to critique” (p. 13). Students and teachers must have an open but respected relationship in order to create a space for both students and teachers to be heard. Similarly, Lopez (2011) explained in her study about using critical literacy in diverse English classrooms that teachers cannot view their students as “empty vessels that need to be filled,” but as people who need experiences to construct knowledge about themselves and the world (p. 78). In Lopez’s study, students discussed how they related to characters in texts and how they felt the characters were represented; were the characters accurate representatives of real people? Lopez commented that “students could not ‘relate from their only body of lived experiences’” because they “wrestled with assumptions and stereotypes they held” (p. 83). While students deconstructed their biases and assumptions about society, gender and race, Lopez noted that the teacher that was observed throughout the study, made a careful, conscious decision to aid students in reconstructing their beliefs. The teacher desired for students to acknowledge that they were being positioned by the author and by the characters, but also acknowledge that students could change and modify their beliefs based on the texts. Throughout the course of the study, students became more comfortable in sharing their experiences and relating their assumptions and conceptions about gender and race to the text (Lopez, 2011). The more comfortable students became with the material, the more open students were to acknowledging how they were being positioned. Comparably, Wang, Chao, and Liao (2010) found in their study of using feminist

theory in English instruction for secondary learners of English that students were able to share their insecurities about not only understanding the literature, but also about analyzing the literature. Wang et al. determined that by instructing through a feminist lens, students were able to critically examine texts better than students who were not using critical literacy practices. Wang et al. found that both male and female students were able to not only critically examine the texts, but also reflect on their own biases and conceptions of gender and power. Through their discussions as a class and in small group, students fostered their literacy development and acquisition of another language. The students who learned through exploring texts under the guise of a feminist lens, expressed more satisfaction in their learning and understanding of the text opposed to the students who were considered the control group, who did not learn through the use of any critical literacy practices, including feminist theory. Wang et al. also ascertained that the students studying under a feminist pedagogy expressed that they felt the classroom was a safer environment opposed to classrooms they had learned in previously. The students felt safe enough to share their thoughts and opinions without ridicule or backlash (Wang, et al., 2010). Therefore it is through discussion and a positive learning environment that students can unpack, question and explore their own identities and development.

Many scholars argue that the key to disrupting students' conceptions about gender is to examine the cultural influences of gender (Harper, 1998 & Yosso, 2002). Culture is a part of everyday life and therefore important to consider when examining gender. Harper (1998) elucidated that "gender relations are interlocked with other forms of social difference (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation)..." (p. 220). Gender is cultural and therefore there are multiple ways in which teachers can ensure that students examine how their gender binaries are formed. In an ever adapting technological world, media is a vital aspect of gender construction

(Kirkland, 2009 & Yosso, 2002). The media must be examined when looking at gender development. Yosso's (2002) study examining identity development of Chicano and Chicanos, determined that the way the media portrays a race, gender or class can determine what kinds of stereotypes and assumptions that are made throughout societies. Yosso had students examine different films and advertisements that included multiple perspectives of both men and women. She then recorded their observations. The students observed that men were typically portrayed as strong and powerful, where women were rarely portrayed positively; promiscuous, weak or unintelligent. After realizing how their race and genders were being conveyed in the media, the students expressed a desire to tell their families to be aware of their behaviors in an attempt to change the stereotypes that exist. At the conclusion of the study, Yosso noted that "media images must be contextualized within power relationships and therefore, must focus on racism, sexism and classism" (p. 59). By making students aware of how media positions students, the students can be aware of their behaviors and conceptions on gender. Analogously, Kirkland (2009) noted in his study of the digital dimension and the teaching of English that media and technological prevalence is shaping our culture and thus our views on life. Kirkland observed how students use social networking sites to develop outside of classroom literacy practices. What he found was that students were not only using social media sites to keep in touch with friends, but to break out of their societal constructed identities. One student, Raymond, used the social networking site SecondLife to become Raymona, his social alter ego. In an interview Raymond/Raymona explained that he felt that the digital world freed him of the masculine constraints society impressed upon him and his family. Kirkland indicated that by incorporating social media and the digital dimension into the classroom, teachers can free students of the limitations and restrictions they may feel in the classroom. Kirkland does note that teachers should not merely

allow students escape into the digital world and not address the issues in and out of the classroom in regards to gender inequality, he does note that the digital world provides and alternate space for students to interact and develop (Kirkland, 2009). With a new space for students to develop come new conflicts in teaching students. Thus, a problem has come to exist where if students cannot make a connection to a text from the media, they struggle to understand what information is being presented (Lesley, 2008, p. 187). It is imperative for students to realize that they must question and explore why the media is such an important aspect of their lives and how it shapes them. Pace's (2003) study asked students to unpack and investigate their own biases and asked students to question why the students have said biases. The students in the study were asked to participate by writing small reflections which examined the texts being read in class, but also question why and how the students perceive gender. Pace warned that if teachers become too involved in their own conceptions and perceptions of gender, they will inherently hurt their students by imposing his or her beliefs on the students, not allowing them to create and undermine their previous conceptions (Pace, 2003). Teachers need to leave their feelings about gender outside of the classroom and present as much of an unbiased approach to literature as possible. Similarly, Wang, et al. (2010) argued that teachers need to include a feminist pedagogy in the classroom in order to "interrupt the reinforced patriarchal dominance in the classroom, giving power to all students, especially female and marginalized students" (p. 111). It is essential for student learning and development that the structural relationships that are emphasized by society are deconstructed as a means to improve students' educations.

Gender Differences and Student Reactions

In this section of the literature review, I will discuss how students react to the texts in which they are taught. Many scholars believe that through examining the discourse of students

there is an insight as to why there subsists gender inequity (Bender-Slack, 2009 & Pace, 2003). The studying of language is indicative of student reactions to a text. Pace (2003) argued that “language is an authoritative element that shapes experiences and sets the standards for the possibilities of living among others” (p. 409). By surveying language in classrooms, teachers can begin to understand how students internalize the material presented to them. Comparably, Wissman (2008) argued that students literacy practices are linked to the language and discourse that surrounds them. Language can provide insight as to how students learn. In 1998, Simmons enacted a study in which she observed the way teachers and students interact. She observed an eighth grade interdisciplinary classroom in Fargo, North Dakota. Her purpose for the study was to examine how the interactions and multiple forms of communication in the classroom effect the way gender roles exist in the classroom, but also drew other conclusions. Simmons concluded that females tend to respond more strongly to texts than males, often blurting out answers instead of raising hands or waiting their turn to speak. She also noted that male discourse is generally the preferred discourse of the classroom, which may have further implications, which were not researched in her study. Language used in classrooms can affect the way students respond to what they read.

In Sheehy’s (2002) study she examined the positions and social practices of a middle school classroom in an attempt to examine how students’ discourse affects their learning and literacy development. Sheehy observed whole group instruction and small group instruction and compared student interactions, discourse and overall literacy practices. For the whole group instruction, it was observed that the teacher took a step back from the discussion about a non-fiction text, and allowed students to drive where the discussion would go. She asserts that the teacher had an outline of topics to be discussed after reading the material, but allowed the

students to bring up whatever they wanted to discuss first, before addressing what she had planned. The students comment on one another's thoughts and move the discussion from purely plot based responses to questions on race and gender. Sheehy noted that the students evaluate each other's comments instead of relying on the teacher. Due to the open environment of the classroom, the students are able to openly respond to the literature. Sheehy noted that "power in a classroom, understood within the habitus framework, would be overly structural: Teachers and students may seem locked into stable, hierarchical positions and thus unable to act outside those positions" (p. 282). In creating an open learning environment students can react and interact to a text openly. The teaching methods of a teacher can create such open spaces and allow for students to react openly to a text. In 2011, Johnson studied the critical literacy practices of a high school English classroom. The relationship between the students and teacher were much like that of Sheehy's (2002) study in that students were able to react to a text openly and discuss their thoughts with minimal guiding from the teacher. A positive learning environment encourages student responses to a text. Johnson (2011) explicated that when students are able to respond to a text without fear of being criticized by a teacher, their responses are more honest. In small group discussion of a newspaper article, students responded to the text. They noted the figurative language of the text, how the author was able to portray his or her point and discussed the possible motive for writing the article. Johnson observed that both male and female students were equally involved in small group discussion. While the students were not necessarily able to answer some of the critical questions the teacher instructed them to consider, they were able to interact with the text in a way that allowed them to have a better understanding of the text.

In Stysliger's (2008) study, she argued that by closely analyzing the language that both male and female students use when communicating with one another, teachers can better

understand the social constructs and use the knowledge to inform instruction. Styslinger conducted her research in eleventh and twelfth grade English classes in a suburban high school in a Midwestern city. The students in the study were not racially diverse as they were all white except for one black female student. Her purpose for the study was to determine the differences in discourse between students as well as examine and compare the literacy practices. The students in the study were paired off in male-male, female-female and female-male partnerships. In observing male-male partnerships, Styslinger discerned that the males used many non-verbal cues and are primarily blunt with their criticisms literature and written work. Instead of trying to cushion the blow of criticism, the male-male dyads relied on making comments like “this sucks” or “you are a moron” (p. 220). Yet in the eight male-male dyads the insults were not perceived as insults and resulted in positive literacy practices; editing papers, acknowledging areas of writing that needed improvement and asking for help/asking for advice. In the female-female dyads, empathy is a consistent characteristic in the partnerships. Styslinger observed that the female-female partnerships evaded direct critique for fear of offending the other person. Styslinger commented that in the female-female dyads the interpersonal relationship was more important than the editing; the girls were concerned more with their friendship and keeping the peace than critically examining the material at hand. The female-female pairs also were off topic more than the male-male pairs. Similarly, O’Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky (1999) had similar findings in their study involving a group of girls working on a body biography. They noted that the females’ conversations were tentative and not overly forceful in nature, as well as non-competitive; the girls were not attempting to outdo one another, but cohesively create a project. The comments made regarding Ophelia were not overly critical. The girls wanted to represent Ophelia symbolically so that they did not need to focus on the literal aspects of Ophelia. At one point the

girls wanted the main focus of their drawing of Ophelia to be her spine, but would not explicitly state that they believed her to be powerless and spineless, just that she was indecisive. The girls were not forthright in their critique of Ophelia; tiptoeing around being direct. Finally, Styslinger (2008) examined the female-male pairs. With the female-male pairs she found that males responded decisively to the literature, whereas females glazed over the material, making superficial comments, effectively evading critiquing the material. Females and males respond differently to literature and have different processes when it comes to analyzing literature. Similarly, Locke and Cleary (2011) elucidated that investigating how language works in and out of the classroom can indicate how students understand and make meaning from a text as well as the world around them. Language plays a part in student understanding and reaction to a text.

Historically women have been considered a more silent gender, and as society continues to attempt to move towards gender equity, it is imperative that educators examine instances where girls are silent and males are not. Oftentimes teachers assume that because girls do not ask for help, they understand the material. Sanford (2006) elucidates that girls oftentimes do not feel comfortable asking for additional understanding. Analogously, Benjamin and Irwin- DeVitis (1998) expressed similar findings in their study as well, explaining that “considerable evidence remains that American classrooms convey the weighty expectation that girls accept as their preeminent destiny” (p. 64). Many educators do not even realize that female voices are being silenced. They view the silence as participation and compliance. Wang et al. (2010) elucidated that in a traditional classroom setting “students’ voices are often silenced or trivialized (p. 111). By incorporating feminist theory into the classroom, students are provided with opportunities to express themselves more freely. Wissman (2008) completed a study that examined an elective group to work with female students on their writing using feminist theory to guide the course.

During the course of the study, there was a protest in the cafeteria about the Iraq war. When the group of women met, they expressed a distaste for how the administration handled the situation; the girls felt the administration had inhibited students from voicing their opinions about the war and eliminated the prospect of students expressing their opinions. Instead of continuing on with the planned lesson for the day, Wissman asked the girls to express their thoughts about the day's events through discussion with the group and writing personal narratives. Wissman concluded that because the girls were able to express themselves in a safe space, the girls felt empowered by their gender and their ideals. She notes that:

As young women both in and outside of school navigate a variety of oppressive social discourses and practices in their journeys toward adulthood, the crafting of educational arenas responsive to their desires and needs to “make a way” within critical and supportive communities therefore seem even more essential. (p. 348)

Wissman argued that by incorporating student thoughts and values into every day curriculum, voices are not silenced and instead celebrated, proving to students that their voices do indeed matter. Encouraging students to share their thoughts validates student reactions and beliefs.

Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis (1998) found similar findings in their study explaining the silencing of females in the classroom has serious consequences for female identity development. Females must feel as equals in the classroom or it only supports the archetypes of years past where the male voice is the only voice that holds value and the female voice holds little weight. Educators must make it their goal to impress upon their students that both male and female voices are equal in and outside the classroom.

Thus, the portrayal of gender in the secondary English classroom is an integral aspect of students' identity development. The texts that make up the curriculum, the ways in which teachers instruct and the way students respond to a text all are integral aspects of gender portrayal in the secondary English classroom. If changes can be made in the secondary English classroom, students will then begin to deconstruct stereotypic gender roles, creating new societal constructs in regards to gender norms and expectations, providing the opportunity for students be more open-minded learners. It is teachers' responsibility to attempt to create change in the classroom and portray women in an equal fashion so that genders may continue to work to being equal.

Method

Context

I will be conducting my research in an urban school located in Western, New York. According to the 2010-2011 New York State School Report Card, the urban school had 4,435 students enrolled in the district from kindergarten to 12th grade. Of the school population, 16% were African-American, 6% were Hispanic or Latino, 5% were Asian or Native Hawaiian, 3% were multiracial and 70% were White. Overall, 27% of students were eligible for free lunch and 13% received reduced lunch pricing. Due to the vastness of the district, there are currently four, running elementary schools, though in previous years there have been as many as six. The elementary schools are Kindergarten through fifth grade and are sporadically placed throughout the district. The middle school is a 6-8 building which is located across the street from the high school, which are both centrally located in the district. The high school, which will be the setting of the study, had 1,605 total students enrolled during the 2010-2011 school year. That year, there were 430 students enrolled in the eleventh grade, and 374 enrolled in the ninth grade. The two

classrooms that will be focused on during the course of this study are an eleventh grade honors class and a ninth grade Regents class. The eleventh grade classroom includes 21 students, nine of whom are male and 12 of whom are female, as well as a female teacher. The demographic breakdown includes one Indian female, two Asian males and one male of mixed background. In the ninth grade classroom there are 10 male students and 10 female students. The demographic breakdown includes three male Asian students and one female Asian student, one African-American male student and one male of mixed background.

Participants

All participant names in the study are pseudonyms. I included student responses in class, as well as small group discussion. In the small group discussions, I used one male and one female dyad in one group and three males and three females in the other. I also included one teacher.

Kristen is a secondary English teacher who has been teaching for 13 years, three years in Vermont and 10 years in the urban school. She is certified in secondary English from the University of Vermont, and has a Master's degree in Literacy, birth through twelfth, from St. John Fisher College. She has taught freshman for nine years, and honors eleventh grade for nine as well. She taught honors tenth grade for a few years, and transitioned into teaching honors eleventh grade.

Ralph is a ninth grade Asian boy in Kristen's class. He is an English language learner who actively participates in class. He is very high energy and admits to enjoying English class a lot. He is very positive about school and his learning, always trying to improve his knowledge.

Roxie is a ninth grade Asian girl in Kristen's class. She is an English language learner. Roxie is timid and quiet, but often responds in class. Her comments hold a lot of insight. She is

fairly reserved even in small group discussion. Roxie enjoys school and explains that she enjoys the texts that she has read in English class.

Cindy is a female, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors class. She is soft-spoken in class, unless she wants her opinions known. Cindy is currently working on the school musical and participates in National Honor Society. She is currently taking an Advanced Placement science class and is planning on going to college when she graduates high school.

Ted is a male, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors class. He is reserved and rarely participates in class. When he does participate his thoughts are often jumbled and his point is not necessarily made. However, Ted's written work is well thought out and expresses Ted's thoughts in a concise manner. Ted is enrolled in a few Advanced Placement classes, as well as National Honor Society and plans to go to college when he graduates.

Madison is a female, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors classroom. She well-spoken and an active participant in class. She is very social in class as well; she and Cindy sit together and work on most group activities together unless broken up by the teacher. Madison is currently working on the school play. Madison is also active in National Honor Society. She is taking Advanced Placement classes and plans to go to college after she graduates but is unsure of what she wants to do.

Cooper is a male, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors classroom. At home, his mother is deaf so Cooper is fluent in sign language. Cooper is a member of the National Honor Society and takes other honors classes. He is an active participant in class, but does not always raise his hand; often shouting out over others. He and Alvin work together whenever possible, but are often split up because they get off task. Cooper plans to attend college after graduating next year.

Natalie is a female, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors classroom. She is relatively vocal in class, volunteering to read and assist in analyzing the text at hand. Natalie is involved in numerous sports. She is the schools keeper for soccer, and plays lacrosse as well. She also participates in a school sponsored indoor league, during the winter, where she also plays keeper. Natalie takes other honors courses at school and is involved in National Honor Society. She plans to attend college after graduation.

Alvin is a male, Caucasian junior in Kristen's honors classroom. He participates in class on a regular basis. Alvin is involved in several sports at school, including football and lacrosse. Alvin sits next to his girlfriend in class, but spends more time with his friend Cooper, which often creates an interesting class dynamic. Alvin oftentimes gets off task, which gets him into trouble. Alvin is a big personality in the classroom; he and Cooper tend to get a lot of attention for their antics. However, Alvin usually settles down and offers insightful analysis of texts. Alvin plans to attend college after graduation but is unsure of where or what he will do.

Researcher Stance

I am currently working towards finishing my Master's degree in Literacy Education grades 5-12 at St. John Fisher College. I currently have a Bachelor's degree in English Adolescent Education grades 7-12. As a researcher in this study, I acted as a passive observer and a privileged observer. As a passive observer, I only observed the classroom and the actions occurring around me, focusing only on data collection (Mills, 2011). As a passive observer I "no longer assume the responsibilities of the teacher" and observed the class through a "different lens" (p. 75). I recorded teacher prompts and student responses to the literature and the teacher only. As a privileged observer, I worked with students after class in a small group setting, a time when I was able to observe and interact with students instead of instructing or passively

watching. Mills defined a privileged observer as a time when teachers are not “directly responsible for the teaching of a lesson” (p. 75). While acting as a privileged observer, I observed student responses to literature as well as prompted them about the literature they are reading.

Method

During the study I collected qualitative data. I began the study by interviewing the classroom teacher I was going to observe. The interview occurred during the teacher’s lunch period and the questions revolved around her teaching practices, the curriculum, the portrayal of gender in the classroom and how students respond to the literature.

Next, I observed two of the teacher’s classes, one of her eleventh grade honors classes and one of her ninth grade Regents classes. Each class period was 46 minutes. I took field notes and recorded the session. I was looking for some of the practices Kristen had indicated she does from the interview, as well as how students responded to the literature. I repeated the process the following day.

Finally, the last pieces of data collected were from two focus groups. The first focus group was comprised of two students, a female and a male, from the ninth grade Regents class. The group met after school with me for this portion of the study. The second focus group met after school on a different day and was contained three male students and three female students from the eleventh grade honors class. Students in both sessions read passages provided to them by me, which had all been previously read in class, discussed the literature on their own, and then I provided questions to guide a discussion surrounding gender. These sessions were recorded and each occurred during a 40 minute period.

Quality and Credibility of Research

In completing action research, it is crucial that the data collected is of quality and is credible. The research I collected is qualitative research, and as a result, my data has been evaluated using the work of Guba (1981), which has been expounded upon by Mills (2011). Guba (1981) explained that trustworthiness is vital to qualitative data and must be addressed by examining credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Therefore, my research will be assessed using Guba's four characteristics of trustworthiness.

The credibility of a study, as defined by Mills (2011), refers to the "researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with the patterns that are not easily explained" (p. 104). In addressing the credibility of my study, I practiced triangulation. According to Mills, triangulation is a procedure in which the researcher compares "a variety of data sources and different methods with one another in order to cross-check data" (p. 104). By collecting data through experiencing, enquiring, and examining, I practiced triangulation, ensuring my data to be credible. I interviewed one teacher, passively observed classroom instruction methods and student responses to the teaching as well as to the literature, and acted as a privileged observer by working with small groups of students, asking them to read and react to texts, as well as prompting them for further discussion.

I also addressed transferability in my study. Mills (2011) defined transferability as the researchers' belief that "everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop 'truth' statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people" (p. 104). In guaranteeing that transferability is achieved in my study, I collected detailed descriptive data about both 9th grade and 11th honors classrooms. By including as much as I can, others will be able to determine whether my study pertains to other contexts as well.

The third characteristic of trustworthiness is dependability. Simply stated, dependability is “the stability of the data” (Mills, 2011, p. 104). As previously stated, I used triangulation as my data collection method. By using triangulation I am ensuring that my data overlaps and that each portion is not an entity of its own. I interviewed one teacher on her teaching methods, then observed her teaching, as well as observed students discuss the literature which has been previously taught to them in small groups after class instruction. In overlapping my methods I am ensured the dependability of my data.

Finally, the fourth piece of a trustworthy study is confirmability. Mills (2011) defines confirmability as “the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p. 105). In order to address confirmability, I cross-checked my data using triangulation. In collecting data through multiple methods, I ensured that each part of my data is valid. I also practiced reflexivity, meaning that I reflected on my observations through writing so that I might “intentionally reveal underlying assumptions or biases” (p. 105). In collecting my data using all four characteristics of trustworthiness I believe my data is both of quality and credible.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants

Before beginning my study, I needed to obtain both parental permission and student assent, the teacher’s informed consent, as well as district approval. I presented my study to the school internal review board and received written approval. I then met with both the 9th grade and 11th grade honors classes that I would be focusing on in my study and presented to them what I would be doing. I then provided each student with a permission slip which needed to be signed by their parent in order to participate in the study. Then, asked the students to sign an assent form which permits their participation in the study as well. Both parents and students were

notified that only pseudonyms are to be used in the study. Any information that might indicate the identity of any participants in the study was changed as to ensure anonymity.

Data Collection

As previously stated, I used the method of triangulation to certify that my study falls into the category of trustworthiness. One form of data collection was through enquiry in which I interviewed a teacher, individually, once, for thirty minutes. I asked a series of questions which focused primarily on teaching methods in regards to gender; specifically how students respond to the literature in which they are taught.

My second form of data collection was through observation of the class. I experienced the classroom by taking field notes. I recorded how the teacher teaches, as well as how students reacted to the style of teaching, and to the literature itself. I recorded the happenings of the classroom using a recording device, as well as taking notes.

The third form of data collection to be used in the study was enquiry based. I held two after school sessions; one with two ninth grade students, and one with a group of six eleventh grade students, both for a period of forty minutes. For the ninth grade students, a boy and a girl, I began by asking the students to read a passage I selected from "The Scarlet Ibis." I asked the students to read and respond to the passage. Then, after they responded to the text, I asked a series of questions relating to the passage and gender (Appendix B). I repeated the process with another passage from Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (Appendix C). I recorded the discussion with the two students and transcribed the conversation. At the second after school session, I met with six juniors, three males and three females. The session ran exactly like the first. First, I asked the students to read an excerpt from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and respond to the

text (Appendix D). Then, I guided a discussion using questions I had developed that pertained to gender. Then, I repeated the process using an excerpt from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Appendix E). The second session was also transcribed.

The data collected will be used to analyze how students are affected by the portrayal of gender in the classroom. The types of literature that is read, the teaching methods employed by the teacher and the reactions of the students are all factors in the students' acquisition of literacy. The data analysis of the data will indicate the effects on students due to the portrayal of gender in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Soon after my data was collected, I analyzed the collected data. I began analyzing by coding each piece of data. I read through both transcribed after-school group sessions, the teacher interview, and examined my field notes from the four classroom observations using a blue pen. After coding each type of data, I went back and reviewed the coding I had used throughout all of my data. I found that I had used similar terms in each type of data that revolved around gender representation in texts, student responses to the texts discussed and teaching practices. I then began to code again.

I re-examined my data for a second time, this time using an orange pen so that I could differentiate between the two coding sessions. As I coded, I read the original data, as well as reviewed my first coding words. I found that some of the words I had used to code with initially still fit, but I also found new ways to code the data. After reviewing the data after my second time coding, I found that the terms "gender representation, teaching styles and student responses to gender" began to repeat across the data.

After the second time of coding, I reviewed what words I had used to code each section for both times. I made a list of the phrases I had used on a separate sheet of paper and began to categorize the coded words into three sections, or themes. After I had developed three loose themes, I labeled them one, two and three. I then went back to the data.

For the third time, I reviewed what I had coded. This time, I used a green pen, and instead of developing new codes, I labeled what I had already coded. I reviewed the student after school sessions, the teacher interview and the field notes, labeling one, two or three depending on how I had previously coded, using my list of codes on the separate sheet of paper for guidance.

When I finished, I reexamined each piece of data, looking to make sure that triangulation had occurred, meaning that each piece of data should include some sort of data that coincided from one of the other pieces of data. After the third coding session, the data lent itself to the following three themes: gender representation in texts and how it affects student responses, how teaching practices affect student perceptions of gender in a text and gender conceptions and how they are revealed through text analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The following is discussion of the findings from the action research project that was completed. First, the representation of gender in secondary texts and how it affects student responses will be discussed. There is no equality in gender representation in secondary texts and therefore student responses vary. Second, I will consider how teaching practices affect student perceptions of gender in a text. Depending on how a text is presented can determine how it is perceived. Critical teaching practices aid in guiding students to address gender in a text. Finally, I will discuss how gender conceptions are revealed through text analysis. In decoding and deconstructing a text, students express their own insights on gender.

Gender Representation in Texts and How it Affects Student Response

Gender representations in secondary texts varies depending on the curriculum. Because each gender is represented differently depending on the text, it is important to examine how that representation affects student responses. In examining the data, the topic of gender representation within the secondary texts discussed in the two classes repeatedly arose. Kristen, the classroom teacher, noted that

I think they [students] would like to see stronger female characters in their literature, and the sad thing is we don't have a lot of strong female characters in our literature...I'm just thinking of the freshman literature alone...They don't always get the best portrayal in literature. (Personal Interview, March 13, 2013)

Kristen is commenting on the lack of strong female characters that are represented in the texts that she teaches, particularly the ninth graders. Some of her students who participated in the small after school group sessions expressed the same sentiments. One student, Ralph, even went as far as to say that the passage from "Cask of Amontillado," "doesn't really show good gender in here" (9th Grade Group Session, March 13, 2013). Ralph's remark indicates that he understands there is not an equal representation of both male and females in the passage that was read. When asked the same question as Ralph, the other student in the after school dyad, Roxie, commented in regards to women in the short story "Cask of Amontillado," that "I don't think they're addressed" (9th Grade Group Session, March 13, 2013). Roxie illustrates her awareness that women are not addressed in the passage. Research corroborates Kristen, Ralph and Roxie's observations about gender representation in secondary texts in that there is a misbalance in most secondary curriculums in which males dominate the literature (Bean & Moni, 2003; Bender-Slack, 2009 & Wallowitz 2004). In the ninth grade classroom, students discussed the actions of

Anja from *Maus*. Anja committed suicide after surviving the German invasion of Poland and a few years in Auschwitz. The students were analyzing the short comic “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” which was published years before *Maus* in an obscure literary magazine, but was discovered by Art Spiegelman’s step-mother Mala. Students commented on Anja’s death, noting that she was weak (Field Notes, March 14, 2013). Kristen agreed with her freshmen’s characterization of Anja, and remarked “Anja, weak, Curly’s wife, weak... *Romeo and Juliet*...” when discussing the texts taught in ninth grade (Personal Interview, March 13, 2013). Both students and teacher acknowledge the debility in the characters discussed in the literature taught. By teaching about weak women, students only see weak women. Wallowitz (2004) explains that by teaching only insubstantial female characters, teachers hurt both male and female students. Students begin to see that women are inherently weak.

The eleventh grade texts are slightly different than the ninth grade texts. Literature in the eleventh grade includes more females, but they are not necessarily stronger characters. Yet when examining the texts, the juniors noted the biases of the male characters featured. Cooper explained when discussing Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* that “it’s coming from the point of view of a man – a teenage boy- so it’s kind of biased” (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). Cooper has an adept understanding of the character Holden and that just because Holden expresses an idea, does not mean it should be taken at face value. Similarly, other students in the group came to the same conclusion. Alvin, an eleventh grade boy, commented on Holden saying “demeaning language. And the way he talks about having sex with prostitutes. He like degrades her to like the level of not even being a person; like an opportunity to have sex” (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). His analysis of Holden exemplifies the complexity of the character that is Holden Caulfield, but also exhibits how even though the

text follows a male character, it does not highlight a strong, positive portrayal of men, nor does it provide a positive view of females. In discussing the portrayal of women of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the group sifts through Holden's prejudices. After reading two passages from the novel, the first shows Holden's conflicting thoughts about purchasing a prostitute, and the second is a scene where Holden has a minor breakdown while having a discussion with a friend, Sally, the students compared the two passages and how they represent women. One girl, Madison, commented that "the first one he like lessons their value" (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). Madison is noting that in the first passage, Holden demeans women by talking about how they are "dumb" and that the prostitute he is meeting is "practice." In regards to the second passage, Cooper comments that Holden is "down talking the boys" (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). Cooper points out that Holden does not regard the boys his age highly. The comments made by the students show that students believe that Holden not only views females poorly, but that he does not have a positive view of men either. Research shows that male protagonist driven texts do not necessarily positively influence male students (Bean and Moni, 2003 & Young, 2001). In discussing a passage from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* students had similar responses. They dichotomized gender in how the text represents gender and how the characters represent gender in regards to two passages from the novel. The first passage is a scene from the beginning of the novel where Daisy introduces her daughter to Nick and explains how she hopes her daughter is a fool, and wished that she did not have a daughter. The second passage discussed Jordan Baker and he distaste for honesty. At the end of the passage, Nick comments on his own virtues, reminding the audience that he is not dishonest. When asked how women are portrayed in the two passages, Cindy explained that they "make girls look dumb and men superior" (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). Cindy's perception is that the women are portrayed as dumb

and that men are portrayed as better than women. Alvin had similar thoughts, noting that “I don’t think the second passage is as much like criticizing women in general, it’s more criticizing Jordan Baker as a person cause she’s stupid. But like in the first paragraph it’s more like a general offense to women” (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). His comments align with Cindy’s in that he too saw how the text did not highlight women as being something to be desired. The students were able to determine that women are not positively portrayed and that men are made out to be superior. They analyze the characters of Daisy and Jordon, and note the fragility of the characters. Kristen remarked that the juniors as a whole are able to recognize that although men are portrayed as superior in *The Great Gatsby*, they are not necessarily superior. She expressed that “kids can see that ‘okay, even though he’s rich and he’s got women...’ they quickly realize that this guy’s a punk” (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013). Kristen perceives that her students are able to see past the glamorous perception that is Tom Buchanan, and respond negatively to his actions. From Kristen’s perspective, her students do not view the men from *Gatsby* in a positive light, even though they are the main focus of the text. However, during the time when students were discussing the novel, none of the students made any defamatory remarks against any of the males in the novel, contradicting Kristen’s remarks. Research suggests that by examining both male and female characters in depth, students will gain a better understanding of how gender is represented in a text (Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis, 1998). In critically analyzing at how characters are conveyed students can have better informed reactions to a text and its portrayal of gender. In the case of Kristen’s class, it appears that students need to examine the male role in more depth in order to definitively understand how both males and females are being represented in a text.

How Teaching Practices Affect Student Perceptions of Gender in a Text

The way in which material is presented and taught can determine how students perceive gender in a text. Student perception of gender can be altered through different teaching practices. Kristen explained that she uses a style of teaching in which she acts as a “facilitator, or teacher, depending on what role I play in the classroom” (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013). In order to provide students with the necessary tools needed to decode and explore a text, Kristen must either guide or instruct students, depending on their needs. In order to evoke critical thinking among her students, Kristen explains that “you have to have the questions there to probe them to be able to think deeper” (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013). By asking certain questions, students are steered towards a critical mindset. Spector and Jones (2007) conclude that teachers must teach texts critically; posing questions and disrupting how students typically view texts. In asking certain questions, students begin to search through the layers of a text, and create new meaning and have a greater understanding for a piece of literature.

Kristen exemplifies her use of questioning in both the ninth grade and eleventh grade classrooms. Kristen encourages critical analysis of a text by first having students examine, analyze and question a text with peers. For the eleventh graders, she has the students get into small groups with a copy of the text on large paper. Students are instructed to respond and analyze the literature in parts by silently breaking down the piece by writing on the paper. They will make comments about the piece, as well as comment on what their group members have written on the paper as well. The activity lasts 20 minutes. During the course of the activity, Kristen circulates, adding comments and questions to each group’s paper. The students actively respond to the activity; diligently working for the entirety of the activity (Field Notes, March 13, 2013). Students are accustomed to critically responding and examining a text and the silent, but

group activity is structured, but provides students with freedom to write their responses instead of orally providing them in class discussion. Although the activity does not center around disrupting gender perceptions addressed in the text, it allows for the opportunity to discuss gender in the text. The students guide the silent discussion among themselves, and Kristen intermittently adds comments, guiding the discussions in a direction that further addresses topics that are pertinent, such as gender. For the freshmen, Kristen provides a similar activity, but because the freshmen require more guidance and assistance, she structures the activity in a way that allows her to provide more instruction. Students are asked to create small groups of no more than four. Then, they are to pick three frames from the comic “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” which is featured in the graphic novel *Maus*, that the students believe best represent the purpose of the comic strip. After cutting out the strips and taping them to a small poster, students are asked to analyze how each frame reflects the purpose of the strip, then connect the three frames to *Maus*. Kristen gives students 30 minutes to complete the task. She circulates the class to ensure that students are remaining on task, while also asking questions about why students chose particular frames. The freshmen get off task quickly, and bicker about who gets to complete what task. However, as they complete the task, they respond positively to the activity, and the text, everyone finishing before the 30 minute mark (Field Notes, March 13, 2013). Kristen uses her understanding of her students’ needs to create an activity that fosters critical thinking, as well as provides students an opportunity to examine a text using the help of their peers. Wang et. al (2011) expressed that through small group activities that allow students to critically examine texts students fostered their literacy development. When students explore texts with the help of others, their knowledge of the text is bolstered.

Kristen then scaffolds the lessons by continuing to discuss the material the following day. For the eleventh graders, Kristen brought up a clean copy of the text on the SmartBoard. She then had students share some of the comments their group had made, writing them on the board. The class discussed the literature in terms of how it is presented, what it means, how the character featured feels, how they respond to the world around them and what the title means. Students were able to take the comments they made and share them, as well as pose questions to other students' comments. During the discussion, students repeatedly refer to the speaker of the poem they are analyzing as "he." The inference may have occurred because the poem's author is a male. However, nowhere in the poem is gender addressed (Field Notes, March 14, 2013).

Kristen initially subtly corrects the students by referring to the speaker as "the speaker" or using gender neutral possessive pronouns such as "us" or "we," but never specifically addresses the use of "he" (Field Notes, March 14, 2013). By not addressing gender, she eliminates the possibility for further critical discussion, as well as ignores the gender perceptions of her students, begging the question: why do the students assume the speaker is a male if no pronouns are used to indicate so? Gender assumptions are not being addressed and therefore confirmed (Bruce et. al., 2008). Although Kristen uses a critical pedagogy, in that her lesson provides students with the opportunity to discuss and explore the text in alternative ways, she does not push her students to delve deeper into the text or explore their gender perceptions based on text. Pace (2003) indicated that teachers need to address student perceptions of gender in regards to a text in order to better understand the text. Certain teaching practices may reveal student perceptions of gender when examining a text, but those perceptions need to be addressed. Just noting student perceptions is not enough, they need to be examined.

For the freshman, Kristen has a similar activity for the second day, but she structures it differently. She begins by having a member from each group present what the group had created the previous day. She has the class comment on what they notice about the posters; a lot of the frames are reused and the explanations each group came up with are relatively the same. Then Kristen moves into a discussion of Anja; her character, or motivation for killing herself and how it affects those in her life. Finally, she has students pull out a study guide that discusses the chapter in *Maus* that the students finished the day before they began working on the “Prisoner from the Hell Planet” comic. Kristen and the class complete the study guide together, with Kristen asking additional questions that prompt students to look at the text in a few different ways, including how gender plays a role in the text. Kristen asks questions that guide her students to question the role of Anja and her weakness as a character. The students discuss how Anja is weak for committing suicide and the motives of the author for creating the comic; is he being mean; does he have the right to be mad at his mother (Field Notes, March 14, 2013)? Kristen’s questioning guides the students to a discussion about gender perception in the text. Her activity is geared to create opportunities where critical questions, specifically about gender, can arise naturally, or Kristen can insert them into the discussion so they do not seem out of place. Teachers need to direct students to critically examine texts in a way that allows students to be the main participants (Sanford, 2006). Students need to be guided, not told what to think, developing their own thoughts, not adopting the teacher’s. Kristen noted that “critical thinking is a skill. I mean some kids are better at it, but for the most part, it’s something that needs to be taught, ya know” (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013)? Kristen understands that she must ask the questions that cause students to question the texts that they read because most students do not

possess the skill yet. If students are to examine gender perceptions in a text, they must be taught how to examine the texts and what types of things they are to be looking for. Kristen noted that

The goal is that after time; that eventually they'll [students] be able to do that on their own. They'll be able to have that inner dialogue in their head and ask themselves those questions in order to be good critical thinkers. So I think questioning is what it's all about. (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013)

One of Kristen's goals as a teacher is to have students that are able to critically think as individuals, with limited or no guidance from teachers. Bender-Slack (2009) elucidated that how a text is understood is "determined by who is engaging" in the text and by how much a person is engaged in a text (p.15). Critical thinking skills allow for heightened engagement in a text. Meaning that by being able to critically examine a text, and ask the types of question that address gender perception, a student should be highly engaged in the text so that they may impart an innate interpretation of a text.

Gender Conceptions and How They Are Revealed Through Text Analysis

In exploring a text, students often reveal an array of feelings and preconceptions they have towards a variety of topics, specifically gender. Analyzing a text can provide students the opportunity to examine their self-conceptions and preconceptions towards gender. In the eleventh grade group session, students were asked to read a passage from *The Catcher in the Rye* where Holden explains that he is excited to "practice" with a prostitute. When analyzing Holden Caulfield's view of women, specifically the prostitute, one student, Alvin, explained that "I guess it's better actually better than having him say they're dumb sexually in that perspective. Cause like you'd rather be called dumb than a ho right" (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013)? Alvin points out that it would be better for a girl to be considered intellectually inferior

than to be considered excessively promiscuous. His response indicates that he believes that it is more socially acceptable for girls to be dumb than it is for them to be viewed as “a ho.” In response to Alvin’s comment, Cindy and Madison replied “That’s a really good point” (11th Grade Group Session, March 15, 2013). The girls’ agreement with Alvin’s comment shows that for both girls, they feel that it socially unacceptable to be licentious. Research shows that by critically examining a text students reflect upon their beliefs in comparison to the values of a character from a novel (Locke and Cleary, 2011). The close analysis of a novel allows students to consider their beliefs and values of their gender. Cindy and Madison’s comments support Locke and Cleary’s (2011) research by their indication that they believe it is better to be considered dumb than promiscuous.

While examining the same passage as previously discussed, students were asked to comment about how men are addressed in *The Catcher and the Rye*. The following table depicts how students responded in regards to Holden and the world.

Table 1

Students Response to Men in The Catcher in the Rye

| Student | Response | Line Number |
|---------|---|-------------|
| Madison | All they care about is sex, girls and alcohol. | 1 |
| Alvin | Well that’s kind of cause he’s like a teenager. He just has kind of a skewed perception. | 2 3 |
| Cooper | Biased. | 4 |
| Cindy | Only his opinions. | 5 |
| Alvin | I think that, since he’s, he’s like sort of narrating it, that you | 6 |

| | |
|--|----|
| get to see what's in his head, but I think that like almost | 7 |
| everyone from that time period is probably just restraining | 8 |
| things. Like a lot of their thoughts. Like he does talk a lot, but | 9 |
| I think that if other people were as open as he is to people, they | 10 |
| would be talking a lot too. | 11 |

In line 1, Madison makes the statement that all boys care about is sex, girls and booze. Her statement elucidates that she is bringing her own conceptions of gender into the conversation. In lines 2 and 3, Alvin responds to Madison's remark and defends Holden, saying that it is because of his age that he perceives the world in the way that he does; he has a skewed perception. Alvin's comment implies that he believes Holden's views are the views of a teenager, bringing his conceptions of what teenage boys value to the discussion. In line 4, Cooper notes that he believes Holden's views are biased. Cindy in line 5 agrees with Cooper, saying that Holden's views are his own. Cindy and Cooper's comments show their understanding for Holden as a character, but they do not connect Holden's views to the world around them. In lines 6 through 11, Alvin questions how Holden is portrayed and how there is a contrast in his views compared to those around him. Alvin begins in lines 6 and 7 by acknowledging that because the novel is told from Holden's point of view, the audience has an inside view to Holden's thoughts. However, in lines 8 and 9, Alvin notes that the people of the time period probably were more reserved. In lines 10 and 11, Alvin acknowledges that if others during the time period of the novel were more open, like Holden, they would probably talk more too. Alvin's analysis of Holden and the novel show his understanding for not only the time period of the novel, but the gender roles perceived in the era as well. Alvin does not indicate whether or not he agrees with

how gender roles are conveyed in the novel, but indicates that he understands the conception of the male role. Madison's comment in line 1 indicates that her conceptions of gender guide her analysis of literature because she does not say "Holden believes..." she says "they believe." The other students in the group analyze how men are portrayed in the text in terms of how Holden views things. They note that the text is "biased." Alvin, Cooper and Cindy are able to remove their beliefs about gender and discuss the novel, whereas Madison assesses the novel in terms of her views. In critically analyzing literature, students learn to separate their own assumptions from the texts they are reading (Lopez, 2011). In examining Holden, students see that Holden's views are his own, and do not reflect how others should view the world. In examining Holden, students ascertain that Holden is different from even those in his own time period.

After examining two passages from *The Great Gatsby* and two passages from *The Catcher in the Rye*, students were asked to respond to the statement "women ruin men" in regards to both passages. When asked to respond to the blanket statement, students struggled with separating their own conceptions of gender from how gender roles are presented in the four passages. Table 2 indicates student responses to the statement "women ruin men" and how students first related the statement to the world around them, and then related it to one of the texts that had been previously discussed in the session.

Table 2

Students Response to the Statement "Women Ruin Men"

| Student | Response | Line Number |
|---------|---|-------------|
| Cindy | It has some truth to it | 1 |
| Cooper | It could because like if a man was like infatuated with a | 2 |
| | girl and he would do anything to have her it could like corrupt | 3 |

| | | |
|---------|--|----|
| | him cause everything that he would do in life would be focused | 4 |
| | on her and then he wouldn't have any other values cept her | 5 |
| Madison | When girls wear low-cut shirts and then yell at guys for staring | 6 |
| | because they wore a low-cut shirt | 7 |
| Alvin | It's kinda like with Gatsby and how he took the | 8 |
| Cindy | Like how they all cheated | 9 |
| Alvin | How he got killed by whatever is his name was cause he took | 10 |
| | the rap | 11 |

In line 1 Cindy begins by explaining that she believes the statement could be taken as truth.

Cindy does not indicate whether or not she believes it to be true in life or in literature or both.

However, in lines 2 through 5, Cooper connects the statement to life. He explicates that if a man focused so much on a woman that he could lose his values and become corrupt. Cooper's

statement does not indicate that he necessarily dislikes women, but notes that he does in fact

believe that a woman could ruin a man. In lines 6 and 7, Madison is quick to blame women. She gives the example of when girls where low-cut shirts and then become angered when men ogle.

Madison provides what appears to be a real-life connection. Her statement indicates that she is quick to blame women for the actions of men. In her example, she perceives women to be more at blame than men, implying that the women wearing low-cut shirts are asking for men to stare.

She indicates that she may have a poor view of her own gender. According to Alvin in lines 10 and 11, Gatsby is murdered because he is willing to take the blame for Myrtle's murder, a crime he did not commit, but the woman he loves did. Alvin relates the statement back to the text, noting that in the case of the novel, a woman does ruin Gatsby indefinitely. Alvin relates the

statement only to the novel, and not to the real-world. Research suggests that students need to use the analysis of literature to unpack their own biases (Bender-Slack, 2009). The students featured in the group session are quick to sympathize with men and blame women, but do not acknowledge that they are willing to do so.

In comparison to the 11th grade students, the freshman offer a different perspective. Students were asked to read a passage from *The Scarlet Ibis* which details the narrator and his brother Doodle playing in the swamp near their home. The narrator explains how he and his brother Doodle will live in the swamp and play games. The narrator also explains that he will teach his brother to run, swim, climb trees and to fight. In discussing a passage from *The Scarlet Ibis*, the students were reluctant to indicate whether one gender was preferred over another. When asked if the activities described in the passage (running, swimming, climbing trees and fighting) were ones that only boys or only girls partook in, Roxie replied “It could be for both, you know? It depends on the person. Their personalities” (9th Grade Group Session, March 13, 2013). Roxie denoted that the activities of playing in a swamp were not necessarily indicative of a specific gender. Ralph expressed similar sentiments saying “like girls don’t want to get dirty, but some of them want to get dirty. So like if it was raining some of us would go inside because they don’t want to get their hair wet. But others... so” (9th Grade Group Session, March 13, 2013). Ralph makes the point that all girls are not the same, each person has different preferences. Harper (1998) explains that gender is cultural. Both Ralph and Roxie ascertained that the passage could discuss either gender; the activities discussed by the narrator do not reveal anything about gender. Evidently the culture in which both Ralph and Roxie live in promotes that both girls and boys can participate in the same activities. Therefore, Ralph and Roxie’s conceptions of gender are reflected in their analysis of the text. In analyzing the text, Ralph and

Roxie reveal that they personally feel that girls and boys do not have set activities that only one gender can do while the other cannot. They believe that what a person does depends on personal preference and interest, not on gender.

In the 9th grade classroom, students were analyzing Art Spiegelman's "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" comic, which depicts how Art and his family respond to his mother's suicide. One of the panels depicts Art walking with people around him who appear to be whispering about his mother around him. One says "Hitler did it," another says "depression" and a third says "bitch." Kristen asks the class to discuss why each phrase was used, but focuses primarily on the word "bitch." First, the students are asked to define bitch in how it means to them, not in terms of how it is used in the comic. The students explain bitch to mean selfish and mean and womanly. Then the students are asked to explain how bitch is being used in the comic. They explicate that Anja was mean and selfish for committing suicide; that she gave up when she had so much to live for. They note that bitch is used as an adjective to describe Anja's actions. However, the students do not agree with the adjective "bitch" being used to describe Anja (Field Notes, March 14, 2013). The students elucidate that the word "bitch" is nearly always synonymous with being weak and womanly. Through the act of committing suicide Anja is a bitch, because she gave up. The students defined bitch using their current social constructs and then applied that definition to the character of Anja. Their definition of bitch did not match how they felt about the character; they do not hold Anja's actions against her. They sympathize with the circumstances surrounding her suicide; a past of mental illness, her son being poisoned to death to escape capture by the Nazi's and the terror of living through Auschwitz. Research suggests that students use the world around them to influence their assumptions about gender (Simmons, 1998; Wissman, 2007 & Yosso, 2002). Students consider and evaluate external circumstances and use outside factors in

developing their thoughts and assumptions on a subject. The students see the character of Anja as weak-minded and weak-willed, but take into consideration her horrific past. They sympathize with her and therefore do not associate “bitch” with Anja. In regards as to how students are affected by the stereotypes presented in the literature they read and the preconceptions students enter class with Kristen offers a response. She stated:

We can only hope that they have strong female role models and see the different light outside of literature... fortunately I'm always hammering to them “what'd you read about life, what'd you read about life?” But at the same time, that is how some of them perceive women. (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013)

Kristen recognizes that her students enter the classroom with certain perceptions, but also notes that the world around students also shapes them, not just literature. She establishes that she needs to make the connection for students that literature pertains to life, that there is a connection between the two, and that students need to be shown multiple perspectives. Offering alternative views to literature provides students the chance to examine their own perceptions (Lesley, 2008) Students develop their own thoughts on gender through being exposed to multiple ways of thinking. Kristen's thoughts on teaching students to examine their gender conceptions is exemplified through her teaching. In both her eleventh grade and ninth grade classes she asks students to examine character motivations (Field Notes, March 13-14, 2013). The eleventh grade students examine the speaker from Frost's poem, and the freshman examine Anja from multiple angles. The freshman first look at Anja in terms of how she depicted. Then they look at how Art, the author and son, feels about his mother. Next, the students look at how Vladik, Anja's husband and Art's father viewed Anja and he responds to her death. They question why Vladik reacts the way he does to Anja's death, and how he viewed is wife in life and death. Lastly,

students look at how Mala, Vladik's second wife, responds to constantly hearing about Anja from Vladik and how she views Anja (Field Notes, March 14, 2013). Finally, the way students in the group sessions were able to break down and deconstruct the passages they were asked to read exemplifies that Kristen's students are engaged in the literature she had previously taught them. The students offered their conceptions of gender through their analysis. In teaching students to deconstruct literature they gain a better understanding of their own conceptions of gender as well as a better understanding for the character (O'Donnell & Smagorinsky, 1999). Students respond to literature with more in-depth understanding of a text as well as an increased understanding of how the literature shapes them.

Implications and Conclusions

The portrayal of gender in secondary English texts is not equal. Although both women and men make appearances in texts, oftentimes one gender is preferred over the other. Using Wright's (2008) feminist criticism and the findings from the literature review, which discussed the secondary curriculum, teaching practices and student responses to texts, I investigated how the portrayal of gender in secondary English texts effects student perceptions of gender. Through a teacher interview, classroom observations and group sessions with students from a 9th grade classroom and an 11th grade honors classroom, I gathered research. The research indicates that although the texts taught in secondary English classrooms can affect students' perceptions of gender, students' perceptions of gender are affected more by the teaching practices employed by the teacher.

First, studies show that the standard secondary curriculum is unbalanced (Bean & Moni, 2003; Bender-Slack, 2009; Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis; 1998, Bruce et. al., 2008 & Garner, 1999). Male protagonists monopolize the texts that students read. The texts that include female

characters often show females in unflattering lights. By showcasing texts with more male protagonists and weak female characters, students' conception of gender is influenced (Bean & Moni, 2003). Students believe that one gender holds more value than another because that is what the texts they are exposed to indicate. The curriculum hurts both male and female students. Yosso (1998) expounded that the school system and society "continually transmit their delusional ideas" which is enforced by the curriculum, harming students in the process (p. 53). Students enter school with societal constructs about gender and the school curriculum confirms the stereotypes through the texts taught. The literary canon is continuously blamed for the misbalance of gender representation in the classroom. Studies have investigated whether or not the canon should be disbanded and ignored, or used; either consistently or sparingly (Pace, 2003; Spector & Jones 2007, & Wissman, 2008). As the canon is comprised of classic literary works it is often considered outdated. Some scholars believe the canon should be used sparingly (Spector & Jones, 2007). The canon should be used as supplemental material, not the primary means of teaching. Whereas others believe the canon has its purpose and can be used effectively (Glenn, 2008). The canon exists for a reason and therefore teachers need to find ways to use the texts it contains and find ways for students to relate to it. No matter what texts teachers decide to teach they need to instruct using texts that address the portrayal of gender so that students may begin to deconstruct their biases.

The preceding research also found that teaching methods influence students' conceptions of gender. Researchers argue that in order to address gender constructions critical literacy practices must be employed by educators (Harper, 1998; Johnson, 2011 & O'Donnell & Smagorinsky, 1999) By using a critical lens to examine literature, students are provided with multiple interpretations of texts. O'Donnell and Smagorinsky (1999) espoused that when

students critically examine characters, they are able to dissect not only a character's conceptions, but their own. Students use literature to examine their own beliefs, specifically about gender. Feminist criticism, which is categorized under critical literacy practices, is also indicated as being an effective way of teaching. Wang et al. ascertained that by instructing through a feminist lens, students were able to critically examine texts better than students who were not using critical literacy practices. Analyzing a text using a feminist lens allows both male and female students to view how their gender is perceived through the constructs of the literature being read and society. Other scholars express that pure discussion about gender in classrooms is an effective teaching practice in disrupting gender stereotypes (Bender-Slack, 2009). Addressing the portrayal of gender in the texts read in class creates the chance for students to examine how their literature positions them and influences their thinking. Finally, as technology is an affluent aspect of literacy, scholars suggest that teachers incorporate how technology influences student perceptions of gender (Kirkland, 2009 & Yosso, 2002). Technology is a part of most students' lives and therefore should be considered when addressing gender perceptions. Students need to acknowledge how gender is perceived through the media as well. Regardless what teachers teach, they need to present the material in alternative ways so that students have the opportunity to address how gender is presented and examine their own perceptions of gender.

Finally, the research examines how students react to the texts in which they are taught. Many scholars advise that teachers create a positive learning environment (Johnson, 2011; Sheehy, 2002). If students feel that they are in a safe environment they are more willing to share their thoughts and opinions. Many scholars warn that teachers need to make sure that student voices are heard equally (Benjamin & Irwin-Devitis, 1998, Sanford, 2005; Sheehy, 2002; Sheehy, 2002). Oftentimes girls feel their voices are not as important as male voices.

Comparably, Benjamin and Irwin- DeVitis (1998) expressed that “considerable evidence remains that American classrooms convey the weighty expectation that girls accept as their preeminent destiny” (p. 64). Girls feel more pressure to conform to societal stereotypes because historically girls are viewed as inferior. As society moves to put genders on more equal footing, female voices need to be heard in and out of the classroom. Teachers need to hear and validate both genders’ opinions, so that both genders see how important their perceptions of gender are significant.

In developing the study which was previously discussed, feminist criticism was the theory used to guide the study. Wright (2008) defines feminist theory as examining a text in terms of gender roles that have been socially and culturally constructed. Feminist criticism examines gender roles, stereotypes regarding gender, and how power plays a part within socially and culturally composed gender roles. The study aimed to look at how students examined gender in the texts that they read, as well as how they responded to the literature and how the literature was taught. The ways the students were instructed reflected the principles of feminist criticism in that students examined gender perceptions portrayed in the texts as well as their own gender perceptions.

Although it is important to note that there are not many females taught in the classes that are featured in the study, it appeared to have little effect on the students. Kristen’s teaching methods address gender constructs and therefore the type of literature taught is a non-issue. Kristen uses a combination of canonized texts and non-traditional texts and presents multiple viewpoints to each texts, which the research explains leads to students addressing gender perceptions (O’Donnell & Smagorinsky, 1999 & Spector & Jones, 2007). The teaching practices featured in this study indicate that by using critical literacy practices (questioning the validity of

characters and their motives, looking at a piece through multiple perspectives and using student-centered activities), creating an open dialogue with students and using a feminist lens to examine gender, students are enlightened on their own gender constructs, as well as how aspects of their worlds effect their perceptions of gender. Researchers explain that the more aware students are of the way they are shaped, the more willing they are to acknowledge their perceptions (Wallowitz, 2004 & Wissman, 2007). In understanding their perceptions, students will be able to break some of the stereotypes they hold.

The study completed indicated that critical teaching practices affect student perceptions of gender. Teachers need to use various methods that encourage students to question the motivations of characters, view characters through multiple lenses and incorporate activities where students are provided the opportunity to explore the literature themselves with limited input from the teacher. Students, by nature, do not necessarily possess the skills to critically examine texts by themselves, and therefore need the teacher to act as a facilitator and guide to aid in the deconstruction of a text. Wissman (2008) elucidates that students need practice in critically examining a text before they are able to do it independently. Teachers must help students to look at a text through multiple lenses in order to bring forth the conceptions and perceptions students hold. Harper (1998) found that when students critically examine texts they are not only able to make connections with the text, but students also begin to critically examine the world around them.

The type of literature read had little effect on student perceptions of gender. The majority of texts that Kristen uses in her classes are canonized texts. During the student group sessions students responded to the texts but often did not appear to be swayed by the ideals being presented, but instead brought in their own gender conceptions to the discussion. The students

were able to separate their own conceptions of gender from that represented in the text. Gender is cultural and the texts read reinforce that gender is cultural (Glenn, 2008). Students are able to identify the gender constructs in the text and compare them to their own gender constructs, but do not necessarily do they adapt the constructs depicted in the text.

As often as Kristen's teaching practices provided the students with the tools to examine their own perceptions of gender, she often did not push the students further. There were many instances where a discussion about gender perceptions arose, but Kristen did not directly address them. Locke and Cleary (2011) elucidated that investigating how language is presented can indicate how students understand and make meaning from a text as well as the world around them. When teachers question student choices and thoughts they are creating opportunities to unpack student perceptions.

Limitations of the study were minimal. First, time was an unfortunate factor. It was difficult to get into the school that the research was completed in, as well as obtain volunteers for the group sessions. In the future, more students would be used in the after school sessions, as well as more than one session for each group. There would also be more than two observations of each class.

After the research was complete and the data collected and analyzed, there were a few areas in which I would have liked to delve into deeper. First, I initially wanted to conduct the research between two different districts, one urban and one suburban. I wanted to see if the difference in schools (location, curriculum and demographics), would result in any differences between how gender is portrayed in literature and the effects on student perception. The research I completed indicates that if critical literacy practices are employed the perception of gender should not change; students should still be aware of their own perceptions as well as those

represented in the text being read. Second, I felt that a lot of student responses to gender were very forward-thinking in that most students felt genders are equal, even if they are not portrayed as so. Because the school where the research was conducted is so diverse, I wonder if that has something to do with the responses I received. If I completed the same study in other schools, such as a more urban school, a suburban school and a rural school, would that change the results? Does socioeconomic status play a part in gender perception? How much do demographics influence gender perception? Further research would be required to answer these questions. Because I compared a ninth grade classroom to an eleventh grade classroom, I also wonder how the grade difference affected the findings of the study. If I compared two ninth grade classrooms would the data change? Or if I compared a regular eleventh grade classroom to the honors classroom I used, would that affect the data? There are many factors that could be addressed with further research that might provide more insight as to how the portrayal of gender affects students' gender perceptions.

Overall, it is important for educators to understand how essential gender is in a secondary English classroom. In the secondary years students' identities are formed and gender is an integral part of that identity. It does not matter if teachers choose to teach canonized texts of non-traditional texts, what matters is how the material is taught. If teachers are instructing using a critical literacy pedagogy students will be exposed to various views and opinions. The exposure to multiple viewpoints is what is going to encourage students to address their preconceptions and perceptions of gender. Only then will the portrayal of gender be equal in a classroom. As teachers we must recognize our duty to address the silenced and urge students to break the stereotypes society has thrust upon us. The goal is not to become gender neutral, but to expose the perceptions of gender we have conceived.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you been a teacher?
- 2) How long have you been teaching in the district?
- 3) How long have you been teaching _____ (current grade being taught)?
- 4) What is your educational background?
- 5) What types of literature do you teach?
- 6) How would you describe your grade curriculum?
- 7) How would you describe your teaching style?
- 8) What types of activities do you do to encourage critical thinking?
- 9) Why is critical thinking important for students when reading a text?
- 10) How do you address gender when teaching a text?
- 11) How do you perceive students to react to the texts that you teach? (positively, negatively, etc.)
- 12) How do you think students are affected by the texts which are taught to them?

* These are preliminary questions designed to begin a conversation. During the interviews, I added more questions. Those new questions will be included in the final report of my data.

Appendix B

Scarlet Ibis

Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown we'd live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog-tongue for a living. Beside the stream, he planned, we'd build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens. All day long (when we weren't gathering do-tongue) we'd swing through the cypresses on the rope vines, and if it rained we'd huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of course, I was old enough to know this wouldn't work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and serene that all I could do was whisper Yes, yes.

Once I had succeeded in teaching Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course. I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees, and to fight. He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away, when, it had been decided, Doodle would start to school.

How is gender addressed in the passage?

How are women portrayed in the passage? How about men?

What characteristics would you give to the boys in story? What if there were young girls? Would they share some characteristics?

Describe the language used.

Appendix C

The Cask of Amontillado

I had scarcely laid the first tier of my masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was NOT the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated -- I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I reechoed -- I aided -- I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still.

How is gender addressed in the passage?

How are women portrayed in the passage? How about men?

Characterize the men in the passage. How might women be characterized?

Describe the language used.

Appendix D

Catcher

The thing is, most of the time, when you're coming pretty close to doing it with a girl – a girl that isn't a prostitute or anything, I mean—she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don't. I can't help it. You never know whether they really *want* you to stop, or whether they're just cared as hell, or whether they're just telling you to stop so that if you *do* go through with it, the blame'll be on *you*, not them. Anyway, I keep stopping. The trouble is, I get to feeling sorry for them. I mean most girls are so dumb and all. After you neck them for a while, you can really watch them losing their brains. You take a girl when she really gets passionate, she just hasn't any brains. I don't know. They tell me to stop, so I stop. I always wish I hadn't, after I take them home, but I keep doing it anyway.

Anyway, while I was putting on another clean shirt, I sort of figured this was my big chance, in a way, I figured if she was a prostitute and all, I could get in some practice on her, in case I ever get married or anything. I worry about that stuff sometimes.

Chapter 13 p. 92

“You know something?” I said. “You're probably the only reason I'm in New York right now, or anywhere. If you weren't around, I'd probably be someplace way the hell off. In the woods or some goddam place. You're the only reason I'm around, practically.”

“You're sweet,” she said. But you could tell she wanted me to change the damn subject.

“You ought to go to a boys' school sometime. Try it sometime,” I said. “It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day, and you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques. The guys that are on the basketball team stick together, the Catholics stick together, the goddam intellectuals stick together, the guys that play bridge stick together. Even the guys that belong to the goddam Book-of-the-Month stick together. If you to try to have a little intelligent—“

“Now listen,” old Sally said. “Lots of boys get more out of school than *that*.”

“I agree! I agree they do, some of them! But that's all *I* get out of it. See? That's my point. That's exactly my goddam point,” I said. “I don't get hardly anything out of anything. I'm in bad shape. I'm in *lousy* shape.”

“You certainly are.”

Chapter 17 p. 131

How is gender addressed in the passages?

How are women portrayed in the passages? How about men?

What is Holden's attitude towards women? Towards men?

How do women (Sally in this case) react to Holden?

What does Holden want from women? What does Holden believe women want from men?

What does Sally want from men?

Appendix E

"It'll show you how I've gotten to feel about – things. Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. 'All right,' I said, 'I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.'

"You see I thin everything's terrible anyhow," she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people. And I *know*. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's and she laughed with thrilling scorn. "Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!"

The instant her voice broke off ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort of exact contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged.

Chapter 1 (pp. 16-17)

Jordan Baker instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men, and now I saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body.

It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply – I was casually sorry, and then I forgot. It was on that same house-party that we had a curious conversation about driving a car. It started because she passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man's coat.

"You're a rotten driver," I protested. "Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn't to drive at all."

"I am careful."

"No, you're not."

"Well, other people are," she said lightly.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"They'll keep out of my way," she insisted. "It takes two to make an accident."

"Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself?"

"I hope I never will," she answered. "I hate careless people. That's why I like you."

Her gray, sun strained eyes stared straight ahead, but she had deliberately shifted our relations, and for a moment I thought I loved her. But I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires, and I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home. I'd been writing letters once a week and signing them: "Love, Nick," and all I could think of was how, when that certain girl played tennis, a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. Nevertheless there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free.

Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.

Chapter 3 (pp. 57-59)

How is gender addressed in the passages?

How are women portrayed in the passages? How about men?

Women in passages are mostly there to tempt and sabotage men. Women ruin men.

How does Nick view women? How do women view women? How does Nick view Tom and himself?

What does Daisy want from men? What does Jordan want from men? What does Nick want from women?