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ABSTRACT

The issues of empiricism and theory-building can be used in practical terms to discuss how literary texts can be used to elucidate gender issues in the classroom. For instance, two literary texts written early in this century--Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" and Ernest Hemingway's short story "Up in Michigan"--can illustrate important principles of communication and gender. When, in Act II of "Our Town," Emily decides to "tell the truth and shame the devil," she communicates her perceptions of George by using something like a "clear message format" popularized in interpersonal communication textbooks. George's attempt to establish honest, open communication about their relationship counters current wisdom expressed by Deborah Tannen and Carol Gilligan about male and female patterns of communication. Likewise, Liz's verbal statements in "Up in Michigan" lead students to ask "Was Liz raped?" Does Liz's "no" really mean "yes?" Does she protest verbally simply to maintain some semblance of Victorian feminine decorum in the face of overwhelming sexual desire? This story embodies crippling myths about communication between men and women, and it challenges readers to say what they mean and mean what they say and act upon what is actually said. Thus communication should not be understood as an isolated discipline in the academy.
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Teaching Gender Issues Through Literature

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In recent years, communication scholars have made several interesting forays into literature and literary texts. The theoretical issues involved in these explorations--such as whether or not literary texts yield useful data for empirical studies of actual communicative patterns (see, for example, Hugenberg and Schaefermeyer; VanOosting; and Ulrick)--are certainly provocative and worthwhile. In this paper, though, I would like to sidestep the issues of empiricism and theory building to discuss in very practical terms how literary texts can be used to explore and elucidate gender issues in the communication classroom. I will demonstrate how two specific literary texts written relatively early in this century--Thornton Wilder's drama Our Town and Ernest Hemingway's short story "Up in Michigan"--can serve as vehicles for discussing key communicative issues facing men and women today.¹ In my own experience, this drama and short story help both to illustrate important principles of communication and gender and to establish a fruitful link with another field of scholarly endeavor, namely literary study.

When I assign Our Town, class discussion touches upon many important communication topics such as family dynamics, compliance gaining strategies, stereotypes, and attribution error, but two concepts that are emphasized most frequently are confirmation and self-disclosure. To illustrate, I will feature the long encounter in Act II when George and Emily communicate their true feelings for one another. Emily's initial communicative strategies seem destined to fail. She avoids the

true issues on her mind--her anger about George's apparent change in demeanor, her anxiety about his college plans, and her affection for him--and sends him a mixed or incongruous message by agreeing to let him carry her books with a "cool" tone of voice. When George explicitly asks her to disclose ("Emily, why are you mad at me?"), she defensively denies her feelings. ("I'm not mad at you.") Fortunately, George persists, focusing on her behavior toward him: "You've been treating me so funny lately." My students suggest that he could be significantly more specific, but they can see that his instincts are good. Thus encouraged, Emily decides to "tell the truth and shame the devil." Although her disclosure is somewhat defensive and judgmental, she communicates her perceptions of George using something like the "clear message format" popularized in interpersonal communication textbooks.

What is key to the success of the discussion, though, is not Emily's blunt confession, but George's following technique, his nondefensive responses, and his confirmation of his interlocutor. With an open question ("A change?--Wha--what do you mean?"), he allows her to expand freely upon her initial point. After she declares that George has "got awful conceited and stuck-up," he validates her opinion: "I . . . I'm glad you said it, Emily. I never thought that such a thing was happening to me."

Despite--perhaps because of--George's nondefensive response, Emily backs away from her initial complaint: "Now I'm sorry I said all that about you. I don't know what made me say it." George, however, compels Emily to own her own feelings. He

confirms the worth of her perception--as well as her decision to express it--by telling the druggist, "I'm celebrating because I've got a friend who tells me all the things that ought to be told me." Emily's denials are met by George's equally emphatic confirming statements: "No Emily, you stick to it. I'm glad you spoke to me like you did."

Having established the validity of Emily's perception, George discloses his own feelings forthrightly. ("Why, sure,--I always thought about you as one of the chief people I thought about.") George declares that mutual fondness is important in a relationship, but it is also crucial that your partner "likes you enough to be interested in your character." This insight beautifully matches Martin Buber's famous commentary on confirmation, communication, and human relationships. From here, their bond is set.

In terms of gender and communication, there are many issues here on which one could focus, but what might be most interesting is that George's diligence in opening up the conversation and revealing their bond for one another runs counter to much of the current wisdom expressed by scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Deborah Tannen about male and female patterns of personal disclosure and relational openness. George, a sensitive man of the early twentieth century, seeks to establish honest, open communication about the relationship in the face of prevailing stereotypes. Whereas the passage does not overturn every stereotypical expectation we have developed about communication in intimate settings, it suggests to students that individual

difference and matters of personality are often the most salient aspects of communicative patterns. Whether or not George would have eventually evolved into his father, who avoids important relational communication with his wife by refusing to discuss a romantic vacation in Paris, he seems, at this moment at least, a male at home with intimate connections and webs of relationships.

Hemingway's "Up in Michigan" is the blunt story of a sexual encounter between Jim Gilmore, a rough blacksmith "with big mustaches and big hands," and Liz Coates, a rather simple young woman who works at the house where Jim boards. Liz is attracted to Jim, who finds her pretty to look at but doesn't think much about her. One evening, after a bit too much to drink, Jim impulsively escorts Liz to a secluded warehouse out of town. They sit, Jim pulls her close to him, and begins to explore her body with his hands. When his hand moves up her leg she responds by saying "Don't, Jim." When he continues, she complains, "You mustn't, Jim. You mustn't." Despite this clear request that he desist, Jim relentlessly proceeds, saying simply, "I got to. I'm going to. You know we got to." Liz continues to protest vehemently, even at the moment of penetration: "No we haven't, Jim. We ain't got to. Oh, it isn't right. Oh, it's so big and it hurts so. You can't."

After the sexual encounter, Jim falls asleep on top off her. Unable to wake him from his alcoholic slumber, she extricates herself and leaves the scene. The narrator reports that "she was cold and miserable and everything felt gone" and that "she was crying." By herself, she walks back to town.

The question that quickly arises from students of gender and communication is "Was Liz raped." Clearly, her verbal responses communicate that she disapproves of Jim's advances, and there is no question that he repeatedly rejects her spoken requests as he forces himself upon her. Her tears, her misery, and her isolation after the act suggest that she has been violated.

On the other hand, from the moment back in the house when Jim puts his arms around Liz, he communicates nonverbally that he is interested in her sexually, and Liz, by agreeing to take the walk, responds affirmatively, if indirectly. Furthermore, when Jim first touches her beneath her dress, Liz's nonverbal response--"she snuggled close to him"--communicates assent. Even when she begins her verbal protests, there is no record of complementary nonverbal communication. Therefore, could we--should we--say that Liz's "no" really means "yes"? Does she protest verbally simply to maintain some semblance of Victorian feminine decorum in the face of overwhelming sexual desire?

The narrator's glimpses into Liz's minds might support the latter reading. When Jim first touches her it is reported that "she wanted it now," and even as she protests his final advances in the warehouse, we are told in no uncertain terms that "She was frightened but she wanted it. She had to have it but it frightened her." The incongruity between Liz's verbal and nonverbal communication, along with her covert desire, could allow one to argue that Jim, despite his roughness and inebriation, hasn't committed rape, but has simply understood what she really wants and has acted upon that understanding.

And, after all, Liz still cares for him, as is indicated in her parting kiss and her efforts to protect him with her own coat. This mixed message, Hemingway may suggest, is natural in communication about romance and physical intimacy; men must simply learn to understand what is truly meant by women and act upon that meaning. This approach to sexual hermeneutics is by no means alien to our current culture. After all, in a nineties country-and-western song, Holly Dunn instructs her shy admirer, "When I say no I mean maybe and maybe I mean yes."

I suspect that this second reading of the sexual encounter will disturb most of you. In fact, I hope this is the case, for this story embodies crippling myths about communication between men and women, and it challenges contemporary readers to say what they mean, mean what they say, and to act upon what is actually said. Even if Liz's protests were less than sincere, the pleas of many real-world women are genuine, and even if Jim "reads" his companion correctly, real-life Jims's must listen more and trust their instincts less. In a rebuttal of sorts to Holly Dunn, Lorri Morgan declares to her overly assertive barroom pursuer, "What part of no don't you understand?" It is such demands for clarity that we should encourage.

By featuring plays and stories, the traditional domain of literature teachers, I seek to demonstrate that communication is linked to many fields and should not be understood as an isolated discipline in the academy. Jim's "complex" might never gain the fame of Oedipus', yet such interdisciplinary characterizations could increase the accessibility and appeal of our subject.

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Notes

¹ I was first exposed to the idea of using this Hemingway story as a vehicle for discussing communication and gender at the 1987 University of San Francisco Literacy Conference. Regrettably, I am unable to remember the author of the particular paper.