

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**Paulo Freire, Social Change, and the Teaching of Gothic Literature***by Carmelo Tropiano***Abstract**

Constructions of power are latent everywhere; the nature of the concept of power, as it finds its expression in and through literature, is presented in all its forms, notably power's implications and its consequences. Far too many college students approach literature anemically and conclude that reading literature and writing about it are meaningless exercises that hold little practical value, particularly as they pertain to the social contributions they can make to the world around them. Arguably lulled into this state of indifference by traditional teaching methods, teachers can stem the tide by altering how one approaches literature, an approach that coincides with a specific pedagogy. Paulo Freire's teaching approach to impoverished Brazilian citizens, for instance, made social change its aim. These citizens, who lacked access to literacy education, found themselves increasingly out of power and, as a consequence, felt powerless to change their world. Students, when encouraged to see political constructs within the confines of literary texts that they can dissect and analyze, can then turn to their immediate surroundings for change that they too can endeavour to achieve. Naïve utopianism aside, change is endlessly desirable, but often impractical. Critical awareness of political and structural impositions, such as those expressed in Gothic literature, unravel those systems of power that are assumed to be normal, and hence functionally true. The empowerment that students experience from this precise literary analysis can then be used to procure a greater sense of awareness of the innumerable implications of power at work in their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Introduction

Paulo Freire (1921-1997), Brazilian educator and social critic, developed a system of education which placed social change as the ultimate goal of teaching. The starting point for social change activism is the notion that people can create knowledge that is more relevant, practical, and empowering, than knowledge that is limited, coercive, and hegemonic. In other words, knowledge-creation is linked to the concept of power. Thus, by studying forms of oppression through an analysis of the way power works helps to reveal inequities and promote empowerment on individual and collective levels. Freire exposes the "banking model" of teaching (the widely accepted educational praxis of depositing knowledge into an empty bank account) as anemic in terms of empowering individuals. Students who learn under the banking model do not see themselves as transforming their world because they feel they lack power to do so.¹

Teachers, from their perspective, possess the "power" (knowledge) and distribute that power within a framework that

mimics institutional order—a microcosm of society itself, where power advocates in various venues (government programs, for example) are able to maintain control over a compliant majority. Thus, as is quite clear from surveying Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), education functions as a political construct within an intractable dialectic that resists change. Rather than submission or developing a “false consciousness,” students along with their teachers can challenge such inequities and injustices at all levels through altering the way teaching, that is, knowledge-creation “happens.”

Instead of parroting societal norms through dictation, Freire advocates that teachers become co-learners, working closely with students by taking an active part in their “culture” and experiences, locales in which residues of tangible power imbalances and concerns can realistically be approached and analyzed. Gothic literature, such as Angela Carter's “The Bloody Chamber” and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, may be seen as a repository of power-related issues, as well as a conduit from which the desire for societal change is channeled. Gothic texts examine sets of binaries (natural/unnatural, male/female, beautiful/ugly) that are reified in common-sense logic, scientific discourses, and societal expectations and that erect societal standards that are socially constructed and thereby oppressive, and are not, as perceived, reflective of “reality.”

Adapting Freire's teaching approach to literary analysis aids the reader in unveiling functions of power, power that readers can particularize, analyze, and deconstruct, allowing them to become active participants in a world they believe they have trouble accessing, but also a world that desperately requires their contribution, enacting beneficial change for themselves, and for others.

The Role of Literature

Literature can play an important role in the ways we approach our narrow and broader surroundings. When we read, we participate in the structure, interpretation, and communication of literary production of experiences, attitudes, and beliefs latent in literature and, by extension, in the very culture in which these categories find their affective outworking. Michel Foucault (1972: 50) has argued that reading necessarily places us within constructions that evolve from the application of power, contained and expressed as, and in, a discourse:

Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who—alone—have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such as discourse?

To have the right to speak, one must be “trained” into a set of discursive procedures—to speak, that is, in a particular discourse, a boundary-laden objective that stipulates various modes of being. Gothic literature, for example, contains variegated expressions of

power, which constitute given discourses, institutionally enacted practices that immobilize “standards” that often appear “natural” and are treated as fundamental for a functional and stable society. Gender bias, scientific autocracy, religious oppression, and various forms of violence are often the driving forces behind a Gothic narrative, providing the occasion for students to engage various connections to contemporary culture, particularly notions of powerlessness that are often disguised as the “norm.” Developing a “critical self-awareness” of the world around them and empowering them to enact change can be accomplished by engaging their imaginative faculties (a creative-literacy, so to speak). In Freire’s words, critical self-awareness allows students to emerge out of a “culture of silence,” “name their world,” and realize that they can become active participants in changing the world (Freire, 1972: 11).

Education and Politics

Freire’s writings typify his principal concern with the politics of the teacher-student relationship.² In “liberating” education, he notes (1972, p. 53):

The teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

This “democratic” approach to teaching is demonstrably at odds with traditional teaching paradigms; Aristotelian and Platonist definitions of pedagogy involve ethical parameters of “to like and not to like the right things.” In other words, some teachings are true and some are false. What is more, deciding upon the correct ideal or “virtue,” is the essence of education. This essentialist perspective of the way education should function is necessarily constructionist, of the way education must function to be successful. This is a discourse, a socialization device that is motivated by a particular view of what constitutes a stable education, and in turn advances a stable society. Other educational philosophers anticipated Freire’s approach. John Dewey (1859-1952), for instance, invoked the scientific method in his teaching philosophy, arguing that the “upsetting of beliefs” was part and parcel of learning. Likewise, Albert Mansbridge (1876-1952) maintained that the teacher should be in “real fact a fellow student, and the fellow students are teachers” (Wise, 1964: 420).

Freire went further, promoting the cognitive dimension of “critical consciousness” (*conscientizacao*³). Critical consciousness is a state of awareness in which immediate circumstances are traversed as material for critical analysis. It is an individual responsibility, and not one that can be dictated by rote. Freire demonstrates how individuals, who learn under educational rubrics that are methodically restrictive, are simply untrained to dissect critically the overarching themes of their culture (cf. the almost universal low voter turnout among young people), which makes them powerless to change any inequities they sense. They see themselves as objects of the state, who passively adapt to situations instead of subjects who generate and participate in social situations of importance to everyone. Freire’s literacy initiatives

among rural Brazilians went beyond the mere teaching of grammar and sentence structure (fundamental as they may be), and into helping these citizens obtain a “critical awareness of the systems that oppress them” (Magro, 2001: 87).

Conscientization may be seen as a process, with learners changing status from object-oriented consciousness to a subject-oriented one; to clarify, students move from a passive consciousness (the banking method) to a critical consciousness (Magro: 88). Rather than a decidedly materialistic application (financial security), Freire’s theory contains a clear moral dimension—not necessarily a religious morality, but an ethical alertness rooted in religious orthodoxies that are culturally present—essentially drawing from culture the good things, while repudiating the bad. Truly conscientized learners, then, come to understand the moral as well as the social, political, and cultural forces that have constructed their thinking. Consequently, they are learning to come to terms with the environmental rubrics responsible for their oppression, enabling them to facilitate their own liberation.

Freire’s concept of critical awareness is not condemnatory or vindictive; it is, rather, a generative process, of the oppressed enacting the humane restoration of both parties, the oppressed (the powerless) and oppressors (the powerful) (Freire, 1972: 172). The collaborative component is the impetus of democracy—educators work alongside students, rather than above them, in “critical and liberating dialogue that varies in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality” (Freire, 1972: 77). Empowerment here constitutes a “rebirth,” in cognitive (by understanding students’ history and social status) and psychological (the affective, feeling aspect of empowerment, including self-esteem and self-confidence) terms. Students, in other words, are actively involved in meaning-making, defining their own needs and reasons for being commensurate with societal pressures that seek to define their identities for them, often along exclusively economic lines; critical reflection and action produce empowerment, enabling students to transform their world and become “a maker of the world of culture” (78).

In Practice

In my own practice as an English teacher,⁴ I have used Freire’s approach to engage my students’ imagination more substantively—fostering creativity challenges students to think more widely and openly about cultural issues and political subjects, particularly societal notions that are uncritically accepted. Often, students interpret the strange phenomena in Gothic literature in such sterile terms that they completely miss the author’s creative and political intentions. I routinely challenge students to “think outside the box,” to see beyond the strange imagery and fanciful characterizations, and into latent power implications a careful analysis will yield. In *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004: 32), Freire argues that “dreaming” plays an important role in the process of social change:

What is not possible, however, is to even think of transforming the world without a dream, without utopia, without a vision....World transformation requires dreaming...their [dreams] realization cannot

take place easily, without obstacles. It implies, on the contrary, advances, reversals, and at times, lengthy marches.

“Dreaming” may be seen as a surrogate for imagination. It involves venturing beyond spatial limitations (historical, geographical, and cultural), thereby making it indispensable for expanding thought processes beyond the linear or matter-of-fact interpretations of reality. What this passage presents is a model for approaching texts of all kinds. Obstacles to learning, such as obscure imagery or allusions, once they are navigated (through “lengthy marches” of re-reading), open up interpretive possibilities that can have significant influence on how we read and why, as well as how we act and why.⁵

Literature provides the occasion to move into the in-depth, far-reaching, and “beyondedness” of human experience. Literature “can act as the undiscovered fifth element, the alchemist’s stone offering those who touch it the possibility of leaving changed” (Engen, 2005: 7). Gothic literature systematically concerns itself with “otherness,” categories that privilege one form of existence over another, beginning with notions of good/evil, civilized/savage, natural/unnatural, male/female, instituted boundaries that stipulate modes of being and ways of seeing; effectively, constructs that are concertedly policed by given discourses (religious, political, and even consumerist ideologies) that the dominant and the subordinate both agree are socially required.

The Gothic enables the ambivalent, the unwanted, the unknown, and the unacceptable to have a voice; by placing them alongside accepted norms of experience and status, akin to the subject-object distinction in Freire’s model (1972: 72), it unravels prevailing forms of dominance, of one group’s rule over another (Botting, 1996: 157):

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation. These disturbances are linked to a growing disaffection with the structures and dominant forms of modernity, forms that have become characterized as narratives themselves, powerful and pervasive myths shaping the identities, institutions, and modes of production that govern everyday life.

Identity is a chief concern to maturing young adults. Naturally, at their age, they face problems of where to fit in, which groups to join, what clothes to wear; note, for example, the plethora of status symbols that create the sense of belonging that such objects exemplify (fashion, cars, and computer games). But, more importantly, college students often struggle with who they are as people and the place they occupy in a world that is becoming increasingly computerized, manufactured, and contrived—issues of modernity and mass production that make the world less real and less livable. One does not have to look too far to see how reality has come under increasing duress as computerized shrinking of model’s waistlines and synthetic enhancement of musclemen that saturate the media—advertisements produced, ostensibly, to improve our lives in some way.

In all this, students are left to consider, “what role does imagination play in such an environment?” They often object to my emphasis on a developed imagination; what place is there for creativity, they ask, particularly when their own educational and career advancement depend on the “empty bank account” teaching method, characterized by dictation and repetition, memorization and replication. By incorporating some of Freire’s critical consciousness ideas, it is possible to engage students’ imaginations more thoroughly (creative-literacy) through Gothic works, precisely because such texts elicit similar forms of oppression that they encounter daily. These forms of oppression, however, are thoroughly defamiliarized in order to overturn our habitual tendency to ignore violence, for example, due to excessive repetition. But also, I might add, oppression is mediated through proxies that essentially do the critical work for us.

Pedagogically speaking, teachers who work alongside students, by encouraging them to critically analyze the simplest of events, provide students with an apparatus from which to circumscribe legacies of power that are applicable to them. Change, as Freire says, must be relevant; it has to begin where the innermost need lies, which must be determined by the student. Critical reflection involves investigation and critique (using their imaginations to facilitate critical thinking and discussion) of the way power takes shape and the way it circulates in and through society; “truth” is no longer that which corresponds to reality, it is rather that which is popular, prevalent, or reasonable. Discourses function in this way, appearing rational and also fundamental to societal order. Discourses are necessarily prescriptive, binding, and exclusive, inevitably placing limits on individual expression that may or may not be right, true, or ethical. When students come to terms with the limits placed on them; that is, when they see for themselves if a concept is applicable to them or not, they become empowered to change their worlds—an exercised imagination allows them to expand their thinking to find real solutions to the problems they face.

To provide an example of how Gothic literature can be used in this way, it is instructive to look at structural components in Gothic texts, situations of isolation and fragmentation, for instance. A host of characters can be shown to possess the effects of being outcast, alienated, or oppressed. Students can relate to such characters beyond “cheering for the underdog” because the character grants them an emotional correspondence of experiences that they share. Angela Carter’s Gothic tales contain a number of characters who are victims of an encroaching modernity, where change is met with increasing resistance and violence, even to the point of extravagant brutality and dismemberment. The Marquis’ young bride in “The Bloody Chamber” (a reworking of the Bluebeard tale) enjoys all the modern tastes of fashion, culinary delights and prestige, but is locked away in a dreary castle, isolated from familial contact or communal interaction. Carter’s message is clear: marriage provides material support and stability, but the bride essentially surrenders her identity and self-awareness in the process. Carter views marriage as an embodiment of dominance, and the self-effacing nature of following sanctionable codes of conduct; traditionally, it is through marriage that a woman would complete her identity, an idealism that is presented as natural, even biological, and fomented through purely materialistic intermediaries (wedding magazines, marriage conventions, and the like). But, as Carter shows, marriage is a mask—sexual surrender

amounts to isolation and imprisonment, not liberation and identification.

When students read "The Bloody Chamber" for the first time, many of these ideological issues do not resonate with them; it is as if they have been trained to ignore imaginative interplay, substantially reducing interpretive possibilities. The focus, reflexively, falls on peripheral issues alone, such as material aspects of the tale that undergoes a glorification process. I recall one student moralizing on the plight of the heroine, "Hey, why is she even complaining? Look at all the stuff she has!" Or, "She doesn't have it so bad; sure the husband is a murderer, but I wouldn't mind having a castle and a servant." This "false consciousness" renders the individual agent a slave to the master of the next "must buy" item (following a Marxist rubric) or the trendy new gadget that will bring them provisional comfort. Working together by raising these issues and in turn questioning them by looking at images in a more critical way, allows students to see that they themselves contribute to their own isolation and fragmentation by accepting as true the corrosive idea that material wealth provides happiness and stability, a stability that has a number of forces working surreptitiously to ensure that a particular view of society prevails. What I try to show them, and in turn enable them to practice, is that they need to discover on their own what it is that brings happiness and fulfillment—do not accept the word of another, but discover for yourself if what is being promoted is true. As one biblical proverb aptly states: "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him" (Proverbs 18:17).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides numerous examples of power inequity; in fact, the entire novel is preemptive in its treatment of women's issues, the development of knowledge, and freedom of speech. Teenagers identify well with the creature, a nameless "thing" that is denied fruitful access to communal existence or recognition by the creator to whom he owes his misery (Shelley, 2007: 102):

I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around, and I have no relation or friend upon earth....I am full of fears; for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world for ever...I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster.

The plight of the creature mirrors the teenage life, pining away for exterior perfection, not realizing that societal standards of beauty are rarely, if ever, stable. But the concept here expressed in *Frankenstein*, and expressed in various contemporaneous venues, is that the more beautiful people are the greater access they have to happiness and fortune. Students easily side with the pathetic figure for they see in him the injustice and discrimination that permeate their world (media-dictated images of beauty tell young people that their value as individuals is proportional to the level of physical beauty they possess). The creature's disappointment (which accelerates with each turn of the page) soon spirals into violence and revenge upon his maker, offering us a graphic demonstration of what human passion can produce. Students do not necessarily see this violence as negative—I recall some students discussing how some media celebrities, in order to remain fashionably relevant and up to date in terms of appearance, undertake extreme measures to remain thin,

muscular, or shapely. The result for some—the Olson twins are often cited—was emaciation (anorexia) and debilitating psychological damage (requiring medical treatment or rehabilitation). The tragic outworking is quite personal, but it exposes the danger of holding to such values, essentially empowering the individual to not only take precaution over truth claims, but to propose viable alternatives when those same claims are demonstrably false. Students see the unfortunate logical outworking of believing this “norm,” with the destructive consequences that follow, by questioning whether it is good, useful, fair, or true.

Clearly, students using this fictional example were able to make connections to popular culture and criticize the absurdities that is mass produced and circulated. I can say that many students, after reading this example, commented on how they had never looked at *Frankenstein* in “that way,” that they were always taught to view it as a ghost story, or at most as an indictment of unfettered scientific experimentation. They had no real concept of the numerous issues of power imbalance that Shelley wished to treat, considering that as a female she too experienced objections to her authorial ambitions, so much so that some scholars view her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, as the real author of the novel. On the contrary, the Gothic genre provided Shelley with a medium that was duly maligned for its trivial subject matter, but by which she sought to challenge her oppressors, essentially restoring their humanity as she increased her own. In order to challenge establishment powers (ideas, ideologies, or methods), students must be willing to question concepts, systems, and political principles, and never to accept anything as true merely because it is mandated, popular, prevalent, or desirable.

Conclusion

The “banking model” of teaching stifles the imagination, in which students must tread along a fine line of interpretation in order to achieve success. Freire’s critical consciousness approach places the onus on them. Gothic works, for example, allow students to itemize and critically examine those things they fear, such as rejection, intimidation, racism, and prejudice, things that find their most forceful outworking in the culture around them. Numerous books, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, or Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber,” feature a plethora of accounts of the mysterious and overwhelming that do not necessarily need to be divorced from the period itself, but can be shown to be of vital importance to the lives of students today in the ways that they confront the contemporaneous forces that threaten to overwhelm them.

Endnotes

¹ I am indebted to Patricia Cranton’s *Planning Instruction for Adult Learners* (2000) for the classification of learning frameworks.

² The evolving connection between students and teachers calls for adaptive procedures to enable the process to have its full effect, of liberating education, not confining it; see Stephen Brookfield’s *The Skillful Teacher* (1990), specifically the chapter “Teaching Responsively.”

³ In other words, subjects learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, so much so that they facilitate and produce "wholeness." By commitment to action, people can create a new situation or world, "one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Freire, 1972, p. 32). Holistic education stems from this kind of all encompassing perception.

⁴ A colleague of mine, who teaches high school English, shared similar experiences in his practice; my thanks to Alex Filiputti for sharing his teaching experiences and his helpful comments in finalizing this document.

⁵ Consider Louise M. Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1995), which discusses the "immense, often untapped, potential for the study and teaching of literature in a democratic society" (back cover). Rosenblatt draws a parallel between human freedom and the "proper" reading of literature—an active "event-oriented" reading that seeks to speak to specific needs as they arise outside the reader and then within. In other words, the political implications that motivates certain readers to turn to specific texts over others.

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◀ [Contents](#)

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