Commentary

Harry’s Girls: Harry Potter and the Discourse of Gender

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Like millions of readers, I’m just wild about Harry. I enjoy the escape the Harry Potter novels offer a tired teacher, one who is sick of the world as it exists today, one who worries about her students and their future. I’d love to wave my wand and create a peaceful, healthy world where everything is possible for all our children. But that is fantasy. I can teach toward a better world, perhaps, but I know it will be very hard work indeed.

Lately I have found something that sustains my efforts to teach for social justice. Feminist poststructural theory offers me some new approaches to teaching critical literacies, ways of reading, writing, and thinking that unsettle our common sense notions of how the world works and that can lead us to challenge our ideas of what is “normal.” In this article I speak to literacy teachers who work with teenagers about unsettling their students’ collective views of the world and their sense of life’s inevitability, about teaching their students to better understand how they came to be the people they are and where their power to act on the world resides, about equipping their students with concepts and strategies for a liberated life, and about challenging the status quo and teaching critical literacies for social justice.

In what follows, I hope to explain some concepts from feminist poststructural theory to illustrate their usefulness in analyzing Harry Potter novels and other artifacts of popular culture and propose that critical reading informed by feminist poststructural theory can offer secondary students and their teachers hope for a better future and power to act for change in the world. To provide a focus for my analysis and a theme for my examples and illustrations, I have chosen an area of intense interest to young adults (and to me): gender.

Humanism and Common Sense

Many teenagers want to know: Why is the world the way it is, and why is it so difficult to change? There is no easy answer to those questions, but the young people we teach may be interested in this idea. “The world” is in part a social construction, a set of beliefs about reality that people share. Humanism is a
system of beliefs, a centuries-old philosophy, a body of thought and practice articulated during the eighteenth century (the Enlightenment) for a time very different from our own. Humanism has become our common sense, characterized by these ideas (and others) that we now accept as natural and normal:

- There is a stable, unified, coherent, and individual human “self.”
- Language is a transparent medium, something you can see right through to the preexisting reality it unveils.
- Reason can provide an objective, reliable, universal foundation of knowledge.
- Knowledge comes through reason. Reason leads to knowledge and truth.

These are dangerous ideas that present life and the world as simple, as certain, and as structured in inevitable ways.

Humanism encourages (even requires) dualistic thinking. It constructs binaries as a way of understanding the world. The language of humanism presents us with these binaries, hierarchical opposites that take their meaning in relation to each other. Binaries like male/female, rational/irrational, mind/body, and good/evil are humanism’s “common sense.” Binaries are dangerous because they preserve hierarchies (one term in a binary is marked as normal and better) and because they lead us to oversimplify complicated situations. Humanist binaries allow us to think of U.S. foreign policy, for example, as simple: white against black, the good guys against the bad guys, the Christians against the Muslims. Humanism makes people certain and unable to listen to and learn from others unlike themselves.

Humanism also provides us with cultural story lines (Davies, 2000) about how the world works. The Cinderella story (good people who suffer will be rescued), the Horatio Alger story (hard work leads to success), even “Puss in Boots” (anyone can succeed) are examples of cultural story lines into which we can insert our “selves.” Collectively, these humanist story lines convince us that the world works in reasonable ways. Collectively, these story lines keep us from wanting to change the world. Through binaries and story lines, humanism supports the existence of social structures like patriarchy, racism, homophobia, ageism, and other hierarchies that depend upon its premises. Humanist beliefs are harmful to women and other groups of people because they make invisible the structures that subjugate them. Humanist beliefs go unquestioned, as “common sense.”

“Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak,...the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we can imagine, the limits of our pleasures” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478). But it is possible to challenge and interrogate what humanism takes for granted (St. Pierre, 2000). Poststructural theory helps us do that.

Poststructuralism is a response to humanism. After World War II, after the Holocaust, humanist beliefs about right and reason, about knowledge and truth, came dramatically into question. But poststructuralism has not replaced humanism—far from it. Humanism and poststructuralism coexist. This makes for uncomfortable times, a historical moment when what we see as normal, natural common sense is being called into question. Teachers ought not to ignore this. We need to help young adults engage with the uncertainty and the ambiguity of our times so that they are equipped for living now.

**Concepts From Poststructural Theory and Illustrations From Harry Potter**

It is helpful for high school students to understand the premises of humanism and the ways in which poststructural theory undermines humanist beliefs. Contrasting the ways in which certain concepts function in humanism and in poststructuralism can serve as a strategy for helping students build understanding of both worldviews (Davies, 2000). Looking closely at the following terms (and using popular texts like the Harry Potter novels to illustrate their meanings) is a useful beginning. Language, discourse, subjectivity, desire, agency, positioning, and binaries are the concepts whose poststructural meanings provide a contrasting worldview. I will take my illustrations from the last four novels of J.K. Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly
—侕陋 (2007)—侜侕俚rollers in which 侕俚 is of 高 moving school age.

**A Cultural Story Line.** Rowling has a classical education, and she knows the story lines and the discourses of Western humanism. They are part of 侕俚 Potter’s world. For example, in *Goblet of Fire* Rowling introduces us to the Veela, magical creatures who look like beautiful young women but who have strange and dangerous power over men. We meet them first as the mascots of the Bulgarian team at the Quidditch World Cup, but they are descended from the ancient Greeks. They are, of course, the sirens of the Odyssey. When the sirens sing, men lose all reason. Even the reasonable boy with the ordinary name, 侕俚 Potter, loses himself and his reason when the Veela dance. Watching from the top box at the magical Quidditch stadium,

哈利的 mind went completely and blissfully blank.... As the Veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry’s dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea.... (Rowling, 2000, p. 94)

**Language.** In humanism, language is a tool for naming and describing a reality that already exists in the world. In humanist thinking, one sees through language to what is real. But in poststructural theory, language is not transparent and not something that names an existing reality. Instead, language is the site where reality and the social order are created, constituted, and constructed. The meaning of language shifts according to social context. Meaning is never fixed but always in flux. We can examine the language of cultural texts like the Harry Potter novels to understand how social realities are created and constructed in language.

Rowling, like all novelists, uses language to construct a world and a social reality. She invokes familiar story lines to remind us of what we already “know.” By inserting the Veela episode at the beginning of her novel, Rowling accomplishes several purposes: She makes educated readers smile at the reference to an ancient Greek text with which they are familiar; she underlines 侕俚 Potter’s humanity and vulnerability; she foreshadows the arrival of the character Fleur Delacour, whose grandmother was a Veela; and she uses language to create a certain social reality, to invoke an idea that is obvious and full of common sense. What is obvious in the siren story line, so obvious that we all know it, so obvious that it is common sense? It is the understanding that female people are different from normal people. Girls and women are sexual beings with dangerous power over men.

**Discourse.** In humanism, “discourse” is conversation—communication through talk, something simple and straightforward. But in poststructural theory, discourses are patterns of public and private language that reflect and also construct patterns of meaning (Weedon, 1997). Discourses are ways of thinking, speaking, and writing that both reflect and create our beliefs about the world, including our social identities, like gender (Gee, 1999). We share discourses with other people, which permits us to share ideas of how the world works. Discourses include the story lines (narratives) that circulate through a culture (like the story of the sirens). Sometimes discourses are in conflict with one another, reflecting different views of the world.

I believe that the Harry Potter novels present readers with the cultural discourses and story lines of our own times and of times past. Rowling, like the rest of us, is a human subject produced in and through language, and her work makes use of the discursive patterns and narratives available to all of us. Rowling, for example, often uses a discourse of rationality to mark male characters as reasonable and a discourse of irrationality to mark female characters as foolish (one has only to recall the ways in which Hermione’s concern for the well being of the house elves is scorned by Ron and 侕俚 to see these discourses at work). But the Veela episode turns this familiar discourse upside down. Rowling uses a discourse of irrationality (of minds that are “blank,” “dazed,” and “vague”) to mark 侕俚 and Ron as males made helpless by the sexual call of the Veela and a discourse of rationality to mark Hermione as a female untouched by and outside of sexual confusion. Hermione makes tutting sounds and exclaims “Honestly!” as she pulls 侕俚 back from danger at the edge of the stadium box and back into the arms of reason. Rowling uses a certain discourse (a familiar pattern of language) to create
Poststructural theory explains how it happens that children re-create gender hierarchies from generation to generation. Female children learn to take up the subject position of siren at different points in their lives. The position of siren is only one of the subject positions offered to girls in the Harry Potter novels, of course, but it is one that is offered to them again, on a daily basis, in clothing stores, in films and music videos, in advertising, and in fairy tales. The subject position of siren inscribes itself on girls' bodies as they paint them, starve them, pierce them, and bare them to attract men, as they speak and write themselves into existence. And the sirens may also inscribe themselves on the emotions of male children who take up the pleasures of the irrational with guilt and then learn to excuse themselves from the unacknowledged force of their own destructive desires. This is one way in which men construct themselves as people who can make war.

**Agency.** The Harry Potter novels take a humanist view of agency. Harry is presented as an individual
who makes choices and acts as a free and worthy moral agent, in accordance with truth. He makes himself a hero who completes the tasks and conquers the difficulties that the world puts in his way. But it is also possible to use a poststructural view of agency to read the Harry Potter novels. In this view, Harry can also be seen as one caught up in desire and as one who troubles the binaries of good and evil. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, for example, 17-year-old Harry is caught up in his love for Ginny Weasley. The fear that she will die in the war with Voldemort and the desire to secure her safety trouble Harry and sometimes work to create his hesitancy to act. At the same time, a conflicting desire for revenge for the deaths of his parents makes Harry anxious to act. Harry is conscious of these desires. They make him human. But Rowling presents these desires as problems, as weaknesses that must be overcome if Harry is to win the war against evil. Harry must not be distracted by desire. He must let reason rule.

In Rowling’s humanist view, it is rationality, not desire, that must triumph. Harry exercises agency by consciously choosing to turn away from his desires for love and peace and also by controlling his desire for revenge. In a time of widespread war in our own world, students may wish to “trouble” (question) Rowling’s views and Harry’s triumph. We must move beyond the idea that individuals must choose. Where desires are in conflict, is it not better to see and name the desires we experience and understand how they construct us as agents in the world? Understanding our selves and our desires may be our best hope for acting wisely.

**Positioning.** According to a humanist worldview, individuals move forward through the world, carrying their essential selves and their natural desires along with them, encountering reality along the way. But in a poststructural worldview, people actively produce social and psychological realities at a given historical moment. Discourses provide “subject positions,” places from which to see the world in terms of particular story lines, metaphors, and images. There are many contradictory subject positions that are made available to people and that people can and do “take up” at different points in their lives. Discourses position us to be seen and acted upon in certain ways, but they also allow us to position ourselves in relation to others. Others speak us into existence, but we also speak ourselves into existence. And we can refuse to take up certain subject positions.

The Harry Potter novels offer a variety of gendered subject positions to young people. Early in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, before Harry leaves to seek out and destroy Voldemort, Ginny invites Harry into her bedroom and kisses him with passion.

...and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed him before, and Harry was kissing her back, and it was blissful oblivion, better than Firewhiskey; she was the only real thing in the world, Ginny, the feel of her, one hand at her back and one in her long, sweet-smelling hair—The door banged open behind them and they jumped apart. (Rowling, 2007, p. 99)

Ginny’s brother Ron enters the room to remind Harry of his duties and the grim work ahead. (“All the reasons for ending his relationship with Ginny, for staying well away from her, seemed to have slunk inside the room with Ron, and all happy forgetfulness was gone.”)

In this episode, we see young people creating social and psychological realities at a given historical moment. In Harry’s world, war has already begun, and he has been positioned as “moral leader.” Ginny’s initiation of the kiss offers Harry the subject position of “lover,” of one who values love and personal connection above any other reality. Ron’s arrival brings with it the subject position of “rational man,” who must value duty and the good of all above his own pleasure and happiness. Harry is offered two different subject positions and then takes up the subject position of dutiful, rational man. He speaks to Ron—and not to Ginny. “‘It won’t happen again,’ said Harry harshly” (Rowling, 2007, p. 100).

The Harry Potter novels also offer a wide variety of subject positions to young female readers. In the episode above, Ginny is positioned as a dangerous temptation. But elsewhere in the Harry Potter novels Ginny is positioned as an achiever (for her athleticism, her popularity, her intelligence, and her beauty). In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, her brother Ron expresses concern about Ginny’s popularity with boys, hinting that she may be too sexually free. He invokes the fear that people might say about her behavior. Without using the word, Ron positions her as “slut.”
that girls are alluring and irrational sexual beings and that boys had better watch out.

There are other binaries, other story lines associated with girlhood and femininity, that mark our culture and that appear in the Harry Potter novels. Fleur continues to be associated with the irrational as *Goblet of Fire* progresses. She is attacked by Grindylows during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament and fails to rescue her hostage. (Harry is, of course, able to overcome them.) Fleur becomes hysterical when her little sister Gabrielle is missing, and foolishly grateful to the wrong person. She deprecates her own efforts in the second task (“I deserved zero,” p. 439). As the third task commences, Fleur screams and is not heard from again. I think it is important to note that Fleur’s beauty is mentioned frequently, and this may make the subject position she occupies (as the weak and irrational one) more desirable for girls to take up.

Because the character of Hermione Granger takes up so many different subject positions in the Harry Potter novels, I find her one of the least credible characters in this series. Hermione often serves as a foil for Harry. For example, in the first pages of *Goblet of Fire*, Harry imagines how Hermione would react if she knew that his scar had been hurting (Rowling, 2000). He imagines her as shrill and panicky, as much too quick to trust the authority of a book, and as much too willing to appeal to the established authority of the headmaster. Positioned against Hermione, Harry appears cool, calm, and capable of acting independently. Comfortable with binaries and dualistic thinking, Harry Potter’s readers may find it easy to accept these contrasts.

Binaries. Humanism encourages dualistic thinking. It constructs binaries as the only way of understanding the world. The binaries of humanism present us with sets of hierarchical opposites that take their meaning in relation to each other. Binaries like male/female, rational/irrational, mind/body, and good/evil are humanism’s “common sense,” embedded in its discourses and story lines. The Harry Potter novels, embedded in the discourses of our times, take for granted the dualisms and the binaries that are part of our daily common sense. They do nothing to challenge our dualistic ways of thinking. But poststructural theory can draw attention to the binaries that structure the texts of popular culture and deepen our understandings of how language works to construct our realities.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, the story of the sirens has played into and supported the binaries that mark Western civilization and humanist thought. For many centuries, the sirens have presented us with a discourse that associates female people with the irrational, with the sexual, with danger, with evil. We recognize this discourse when the Veela appear in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. At the very least, the sirens support a view of gender as a binary, as a set of two opposite and antagonistic categories of unequal worth and power. What is obvious in the siren story, so obvious that we all know it as common sense, is that girls are alluring and irrational sexual beings and that boys had better watch out.

But Ginny is quick to refuse this subject position. She stands her ground, points to the unfairness of a sexual double standard, and declares herself free to act as she pleases (Rowling, 2005).

Lesko (2001) suggested that contemporary popular culture is marked by “confident characterizations of girlhood,” discourses of girlhood we all understand and share. What is obvious to us, what is common sense, is the idea that middle class white girls are and must be innocent and sexually pure (Cherland, 2005; Walkerdine, 1997). But today, in a time of third-wave feminism that celebrates “girl power” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Gonick, 2006), other newer discourses are circulating—and conflicting with discourses of girlhood innocence. Girls like Ginny Weasley may be positioned as immoral or impure, but they can speak themselves into another existence by taking up different subject positions.

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At other points in *Goblet of Fire*, we see Hermione the giggler (on page 77), Hermione the helpful and capable (on page 302), Hermione the emotionally expressive (on page 314), and Hermione the clever (on page 631). These all draw on discourses and story lines that work to constitute girlhood in Western culture and that offer subject positions that girls can take up.

But it is the presentation of “Hermione the Just” that interests me most. It is in *Goblet of Fire* that Hermione first realizes that the house elves who cook and clean at Hogwarts are in fact unpaid slaves (on page 161 and then in Chapter 21 on page 317). Hermione is horrified to realize that it is house elves
who cook and clean and make the fires at Hogwarts, living their lives without holidays, sick leave, and pensions. She sees this as terribly unfair. But Ron Weasley is quick to mark her desire for justice as silly and irrational. He claims to know that house elves don’t mind working hard and being exploited. He asks her how the world could get by without their services, as if the needs of those with power naturally take precedence over the needs of those who serve them. He positions himself as a man of reason. Together Hermione and Ron enact the binary of male/female and of rational/irrational. Again, we are presented with gendered subject positions we can take up and use to construct ourselves and our ways of being in the world. In the process, the binaries of humanism work to make the desire for justice seem foolish.

**Harm and Hope**

I have concentrated on the male/female binary of humanism and the ways in which the last four Harry Potter novels include the cultural discourses and story lines that construct, support, and sustain that binary. I will continue to use them for my examples, as I turn now to some reflections on harm and on hope made possible by poststructural theory.

The Harry Potter novels need critiquing. I am not arguing that Rowling intends young people any harm; I don’t believe she does. I think she intends to entertain and charm them. But part of her charm is her facility with language and her familiarity with the story lines of humanism as they have appeared in European history. These have helped to make the Harry Potter novels wildly successful, because they help us to see ourselves in the novels and they help us to imagine ourselves as part of Harry’s world.

But Harry’s magical world is not so very different from our own. We understand as obvious and as common sense what Harry sees as obvious and as common sense. The same binaries apply. The same gaps and silences exist in Harry’s world. For example, in Harry’s world as in our own, homosexuality is made invisible. Gender is only about the male/female binary. I wonder what it is like to be a gay child (it is generally accepted that at least 10% of children are gay) and not to see one’s self in a text that everyone adores and celebrates. If the creation of the self is a discursive process, then how does one create one’s self as gay in the absence of positive discourses and story lines? One has, perhaps, only negative story lines with which to work. Is it any wonder that gay teens are three times as likely to commit suicide?

The male/female binary is a cultural fiction (Butler, 1999) that Harry Potter helps to create and support. Cultural phenomenon give us the images, the story lines, and the language to use in constructing ourselves as people who belong on one side of the gender divide or the other. And it is important to remember that the first part of this binary is marked as normal, as worthy, as most human. The second part of the binary is less so, on all counts. This binary helps to justify unequal power relations and our hierarchical social order.

But there is good news. Poststructural theory offers hope. Girls and women and other subordinates can refuse to take up the subject positions and the discourses that mark them as inferior. It is possible to produce new story lines and new language patterns where gaps and silences exist. It is possible to expose what is seen as obvious and what is accepted as common sense in order to refuse the traditional ways of seeing and being and create new ones. The Harry Potter fandom is working at just that.

The Harry Potter fandom, a large international community of readers, viewers, and writers united by their interest in the Harry Potter novels and films, works through websites, fan fiction, podcasts, fan art, and song videos (Wikipedia, 2008) to celebrate Harry’s world, and to produce new discourses that fill in some of the gaps and speak to some of the silences that exist there. Fan fiction ought to be of special interest to literacy teachers. Written by teenage and adult fans and distributed online, fan fiction has a huge readership. It creates new story lines and new subject positions for Rowling’s characters. For example, one subset of Harry Potter fan fiction writers called “shippers” (short for “relationships”) write into being certain romantic relationships between series characters. Some have created relationships between Harry and Hermione, but others have paired Harry and Draco Malfoy, erasing the love/hate binary and writing homosexual love into Harry’s world.
They answer a silence there and write a possibility into existence.

Writing fan fiction is an enjoyable literate activity that takes place outside of school. It is the kind of passionate, engaged writing that I would like to see occur in secondary schools. It often refuses traditional ways of thinking and seeing and creates new ones. Writing this kind of fan fiction is hard, intellectual work. It requires the ability to read and write critically, against the grain, and to think beyond what we already know, abilities we would like to foster in all teens. Without making the mistake of appropriating fan fiction or popular culture for school curricula (see Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), literacy teachers could open their classroom doors to these kinds of creative intellectual endeavors. In doing so, they might help young people come to an understanding of literacy as a tool of power for acting upon the world.

The hope that poststructural theory offers is that the story of who we take ourselves to be is never concluded. We are always changing and becoming, even as we read Harry Potter. With the help of feminist poststructural theory, we can understand the workings of Rowling’s language, discourses, and story lines and find ways to re-create them to change the social world for the better.

**Teaching Strategies**

A variety of instructional strategies can support students in using poststructural theory to examine popular culture and provide them with structures for working through their ideas about language, discourse, and gendered subjectivities. On the understanding that all knowledge is partial and that “truth” can never be fully known (Kumashiro, 2003), teachers and students can speak, read, and write themselves and a better world into existence. I have found it useful to think of instructional strategies in terms of teacher demonstrations, activities students can do individually, and activities students can do in groups (Cherland, 2000).

**Teacher Demonstrations**

Teachers might begin by speaking to and with the entire class, presenting some of the concepts of humanism and poststructural theory that contrast in meaning and encouraging students to find examples in a text from popular culture, one they have helped to select. Students can then write to the teacher about a popular text of their choice, using a dialogue journal to apply the new ideas and also to question them. Teachers can then respond to what each student has written, taking the one-on-one opportunity to demonstrate and teach new ways of thinking about language and gender. This will be time-consuming for the teacher but invaluable to the activities that follow.

**Individual Activities**

**Response logs** allow students to record their thinking about what they read and view and possible applications of poststructural theory. To offer students safety and privacy as they learn, teachers may wish to check and give credit for the response logs but refrain from reading them. Students could later choose ideas from their response logs to use as writing topics or use the logs to support large-group discussions.

**Contrapuntal readings** have been suggested by Singh and Greenlaw (1998). They involve juxtaposing two texts—one Eurocentric and the other postcolonial—but about the same group of people living at the same historical moment. As students read, they compare the representations of the people in the two texts, noting the language, images, and discourses that create them as different.

**Chaining** is a method suggested by Sumara (1998), which requires students to create interpretive links between three ideas related to a chosen novel. Students first do unprompted timed writing about the novel and then (with help from their teacher) juxtapose the text and their own writing with another work of literature related by theme. Students create interpretive links between the three texts (the novel, their own writing, and the related text) by selecting one line from each, recording the three lines on a clean sheet of paper, and then creating interpretive bridges between the three. This could involve more written language or visual images. Although Sumara does not suggest that chaining is a way to teach poststructural theory and its uses, chaining does offer students opportunities to see discourses at work in creating identities.
Group Activities

Literature study groups of the kind described by Peterson and Eeds (1990) seem to offer more fine opportunities for learning and applying poststructural theory in the study of literature. Literature study groups begin with student responses, but they go on to examine the language of literary texts. Students work in mixed, usually teacher-assigned groups to analyze a novel or another text they have all read. They work together to examine the author’s language and construction of the text and to comment upon the meanings they find there. The teacher may listen and take notes while the group works and perhaps coach students when it seems useful and appropriate. Although Peterson and Eeds (1990) did not suggest discourse analysis as a project for literature study groups, there would be nothing inconsistent with their views in encouraging groups to examine the discourses and story lines at work in the language of an author’s text.

Critical writing workshops are new to me. I have long been familiar with writing workshops grounded in humanist, progressive theory that emphasize student creativity, personal expression, and the ownership of texts. But lately I have been reading about critical writing workshops that retain the personal focus but also highlight the sociological implications of the personal issues students raise (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008). I also see their potential for encouraging students to think in poststructural ways as they write.

Critical writing workshops often begin with reading and discussing literature with social and political themes and then invite students to use fiction writing to construct and analyze social justice issues. Students, working as a writing collective, can call upon a wide variety of cultural discourses and story lines as they create their characters, giving or taking away social power through the language they use and disrupting the discourses and binaries that create injustices.

Conclusion

I have oversimplified poststructural theory for the purposes of this brief paper. Teachers who would like to look more deeply at the theory and these concepts could first read Weedon (1997), Davies (2000), and St. Pierre (2000) for overviews, definitions, and applications of feminist poststructural theory in education. All three of these authors reference a variety of theorists for those who wish to read the foundational writings of poststructuralism.

These writings help us to consider an important question: What does it mean to be human today? The human subject is fictional. Powerful fictions constitute what we take to be real (Davies, 2000). But there is hope and power in the idea that teens can read and write fiction (and study popular culture) in ways that enhance their ability to understand their own humanity and the discourses that create them as gendered human beings. Their teachers can use poststructural theory to offer them ways to reread, rewrite, and re-create the world for greater justice.

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