

Apprenticing Teachers Reading: The Cultural Significance of Juvenile Melodrama

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If hope is to be complex and dynamic, one must be willing to acknowledge the difficult conditions that invoke hope in the first place, namely the vicissitudes of loss. (Deborah Britzman *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*)

Characters, at least those personages who are going to be important to the developing narrative, require context. They can't simply be flung onto the page as though they had metamorphosed from warm mud. (Carol Shields *Unless*)

In popular parlance melodrama is defined as a sensational dramatic piece with crude emotional appeal, where suspenseful plots are staged and characters endure extreme states of being. Traditionally viewed as a

poor relation to more respectable literary genres such as tragedy and realism (Brooks, 1995/1976; Gledhill, 1987), melodrama is usually conceived in negative terms, especially in adolescent narratives where it is often derided for over indulging in emotionalism. Yet it is culturally significant for several reasons, including its provocation of powerful feelings such as power, loss or hope that are central to problems of identity.

Drawing from my recent doctoral research that focuses on the problem of the psychic and social uses of juvenile historical fiction by beginning teachers (Britzman, 1998; Galbraith, 2001; Gupta, 2005; Hunt, 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004; Robertson, 2001, 1999; Rose, 1994; Thacker, 2000; Thomas, 2004), this paper reveals the educational significance of melodrama as a moral aesthetic, specifically in relation to work with literacies around identity in the teacher education classroom. Unmasking the ways two award winning juvenile historical fictions – Karleen Bradford’s (1992) *There will be wolves (TWBW)* and Karen Cushman’s (1995) *The midwife’s apprentice (TMA)* – depend on melodrama to instigate their narrative appeal, this paper unravels the skein of melodrama’s particularity and complicated affective potential for teachers who want to work in liberating ways with youth fiction in the classroom.

My approach to studying the intercourse between the formal/aesthetic provocation of juvenile historical fiction and teacher apprentices’ entry into learning how to teach takes up Deborah Thacker’s (2000) call for a psychological approach that can uncover how subjectivity performs in both texts and readers. Thacker suggests that we attend to two important issues: aesthetic form and reading experience. The first considers how various formal strategies used in texts address readers in highly consequential ways; the second examines memory and desire, and the ways the reader’s inner life unwittingly triggers knowledge effects in reading. Both are at play in this paper, where I use

methods of Lacanian discourse analysis and genre analysis (Brooks, 1994, 1987, 1984; Felman, 1982; Robertson, 1994) to trace the aesthetic form/modes of address in the texts against, and with, the forces of desire in the teacher readers who participate in this study. I begin, however, with what initially provoked my curiosity about the modes of address at work in juvenile historical fiction, especially for teachers who use the genre as a means of covering curriculum expectations and to foster historical knowledge: my own “apprenticeship” as a teacher of teachers in the University of Ottawa’s Faculty Education.

The Tangled Skein: Beginning teachers’ reading *There will be wolves* and *The midwife’s apprentice*

My first reading of *TWBW* (1992) left me completely shaken. Bradford’s novel represents the traumatic experience of Ursula, a young woman of the medieval period whose desire to take up a place in the world, emplotted in her ability to read, leads her to being accused of witchcraft and condemned to burn at the stake unless she goes on the Crusade to atone for her sin. Reading the novel, which was on a list under the topic of “risky stories” for the first language arts course I was teaching in a faculty of education, I was in awe of what Bradford recovers about truth and knowledge through her heretical representation of the historical past, and mesmerized by Ursula’s bravery in challenging authority and rescuing others while she is on a crusade to save her own life. But, at the same time, I felt a deep sense of terror. Initially I believed that it was Bradford’s scathing representation of Catholicism that was worrying me: I feared that the text would offend students of this faith.

Then I read *TMA* (1995), Cushman’s story of Alyce, a girl who, having confronted some of the major dilemmas and conflicts of medieval life including homelessness, poverty, gender violence and ignorance is

taken and trained by a midwife. Although recognized by the community for her skills and kindness, when she fails during a difficult birth and must call on the midwife for help, Alyce denies her own virtue and leaves the village. In this story there is also an emplotment of reading's desire. While working as a maid in a nearby inn, Alyce learns the shapes and sounds of letters, leading her to question her own assumptions about her worth. Using her birthing skills to rescue a distraught woman in labour who arrives at the Inn, Alyce regains her confidence and eventually returns to the village with the knowledge of her own virtue. In my favourite scene of the novel, she stands at the midwife's door and exclaims that she will keep knocking until she is let in. Reading *TMA*, I was relieved, believing that Cushman's representation of female desire and medieval life was as risky and significant as Bradford's, but absent the religious charge of *TWBW* it might help diffuse some of the tension the latter might provoke. This hope did not last long. In the first minutes of the class where we would discuss the texts I faced the same sort of attack that Judith Robertson writes about in her experience of teaching *TWBW* (2001): for instance, while some students objected to *TMA* because of some reference to sexuality, most of the students objected to *TWBW* on the basis of "parents," "sensitive issues," and "offensive portrayals" (Robertson, 2001, p. 29). And my relationship with the two young heroines, Ursula and Alyce, was just beginning as I decided to follow the lead of a few students – who told me after class that they didn't all "think like that" – and explore what practicing teachers were able to think about through these stories.

Beginning the yarn: participants and method

With a long journey ahead of me, as I had yet to work through the identifications and conflicts the two juvenile texts and their young

apprenticing heroines had provoked in me, I sought a cohort of willing readers interested in exploring significant aspects of their readings of *TWBW* and *TMA*. The volunteers were twelve students, six males and six females of ranging in age from 23 to 34. The group was largely white from European mixed descent with one visibly black participant from the Caribbean. There was one Jewish participant, one Roman Catholic participant and one participant in the process of converting to Moslem. The other nine participants stated that they had no religious affiliation. These participants were in the second term of their eight-month teacher certification program at an Ontario teacher education faculty, enrolled in an English Methods course in which *TWBW* was on the reading list. All were native English speakers. Over a two-month period the participants read *TWBW* and *TMA*, and participated in a focus group discussion as well as two one-on-one interviews.

As a means to focus on the two key variables of this study, aesthetic form of a story written for children and beginning teachers' readings, I turned to Johnson's idea of "structuralist ethnography." This method explores how the formal elements of a text "realize and make available subjective forms" so that we can understand how a text enters into the life world of readers and how this has an impact on cultural formations (1996, p. 13). In both the interviews and focus group discussion, the main question I asked the readers, was "what is the literary forcefulness of the text for you?" I then used specific questions around the literary aspects of the narrative (plot, setting, narrative point of view, characterization, author's context, theme, style and so forth) as a means of continuing to explore what provoked their response to the text. This forum of conversation served as a venue to investigate my two questions: How do teachers read juvenile historical fiction? Why does "reading reading" matter to education? In other words, why should we in education attend to teachers' reading practices, which as Britzman argues links to "forms

of sociality and to the very structuring of intelligibility, modes of address, and civic life" (1998, p. 84).

The participants were coded alphabetically to ensure anonymity, and, because I conceptualize the readers in the study as apprenticing through reading to become teachers, I refer to them as apprentices. The tape-recorded interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed; I then analyzed the data for the repetitions of ideas, themes and memories in response to the formal structures of the historical narratives. I used the interpretive method of rhetorical analysis (Felman, 1982) that relies on the method of tracing the significance of frequencies that repeat through the reading responses. These frequencies (word repetitions, emotions, condensed symbols, associations and non verbal expressions) signal the effect that the specific reading or response moments are having on the reader, and they reveal movements of desire through language and experience (Robertson, 1994, p. 13). Analytically attentive to the psychic structures mobilized in reading, such as transference, identification, idealization and conflict, my method, which I call a psychoanalytic stylistic, also explores the dynamics of form/aesthetic provocation. Following Peter Brooks (1984, 1987, 1994), who combines a structuralist approach to narrative, similar to Johnson's structuralist ethnography mentioned above, with Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory, I attended to the significance of how the form of the story acts as a place where we may return to the implications of our own identifications and better understand our reading practices.

The yarn: what I learned through reading the readers' readings

Despite the criticism that generally associates historical fiction with the realist mode (Baldrick, 2001, p. 212), the aesthetic form of juvenile historical fiction is melodramatic. Brown's (1998) argument that juvenile

historical fiction should be a transparent genre of learning is contradicted by her view, echoing what Brooks (1995) calls the “imaginative mode of melodrama,” that such writing is “not...wholly constrained within a realist aesthetic” (vii). Brown points to the fact that “almost all children’s books are legends of power and weakness” involving child-heroes, while in reality “children don’t have power in their situations” (Schlee cited in Brown 1998, 3). Schlee makes the case that such characters are represented in terms of “moral legibility,” a term film theorist Linda Williams (1998) coins in her redefinition of melodrama: the presentation of a hero “who is also a victim and whose moral worth is revealed, to the audience and usually to the other characters in the film, in the course of the narrative” (Williams, 1998, p. 61). As the structure of melodrama “works to recognize and regain a lost innocence” (Williams, 1998, p. 61), historical novels written for young adults have a similar structure that, Brown reports, produces morally legible characters of “heroic proportions” which are “immensely satisfying to young readers” (1998, p. 2). Yet, despite how these stories have caught the attention of young readers, Brown points to the riskiness inherent in creating these heroic characters, since “by inflating their valour and courage, an author may diminish or even sacrifice their humanity as well as challenge the reader’s suspension of disbelief” (p. 2). While the project of tracing the effects of such experiences of reading on youth is beyond the scope of this paper, the findings of this study reveal how the narrative structures of *TWBW* and *TMA* make possible a visualization of the hero as victim, follow a trajectory of the quest for lost innocence, and, as an aesthetic object of provocation, make morally legible a powerful fantasy of the self as teacher.

This fantasy offered the apprenticing teacher-readers in my study an important point of address, a transit, which they used to define themselves provisionally as teachers. Responding to *TWBW*, the readers

used Bradford, the writer of the risky text, as a means to plot out their own stories as revolutionary, heroic and insurgent teachers. Drawing on what Bradford recovers about truth and knowledge through her heretical representation of the historical past, the readers first performed their desire to rescue this story, second, used it to rescue young learners from loss through the difficult knowledge it represents, and, third, used it to find rescue for themselves through their work as radical pedagogues.

While the beginning teachers' readings initially suggested an enchantment with *TWBW* that gestured toward their enmeshment with the illusory romance of the self as a teacher who embraces a risky text, their responses to the repeating questions around the form of the story revealed the fragility of their radical ideas about using it in their teaching.

In what I call the "Ursula Syndrome," when the readers came head to head with Bradford's apprenticing rescuer Ursula, the idealizations provoked were too hard to bear and they produced conflicts: a turning away from Bradford's appeal brought about by recollections of adolescence and unresolved conflicts around loss (family breakdowns, powerlessness, and subjugated experiences of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, race and religion). In transit and feeling torn, reading juvenile historical fiction catapulted the teacher apprentices into the medieval world of their own adolescence.

The apprentices' readings evidence Williams' (1998) five formal structural operations at work in melodrama. In order to exemplify how the genre's effect stimulates the readers responses mobilizing their return to their adolescent pasts, this paper takes up three of them: the longing to begin and end "in a space of innocence" (p. 65); a tendency to focus on "victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue" (p. 66); and the

presentation of characters “who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaen conflicts between good and evil” (p. 77).ⁱⁱ In what follows I describe how three readers simultaneously engaged with these melodramatic operations and turned away from them.

Remember, we are dealing with a risky text: while the readers embraced this risk and in their first responses to *TWBW* seemed driven to rescue the story because of its radical potential to deliver something significant in terms of pedagogical truth and knowledge, as they continued to explore what struck them about the text, there was a wind change. They become caught in the bind of wanting to champion the cause of adolescent learning through difficult knowledge but also to use literary pedagogy as a means of defending against feelings of lack and loss, which the reading of the texts provoked. Thereby revealing the politics and aesthetics of literary/literacy formations.

Vignette One: “Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence”

Melodrama, as Williams notes, is “suffused with nostalgia for rural and maternal origins that are forever lost yet – hope against hope – refound, reestablished, or, if permanently lost, sorrowfully lamented” (p. 65). The beginning of *TWBW* is representative of this operation. Ursula wants to heal a wounded dog, to fix what has been broken. She meets the young apprentice stonemason Bruno who wants to help and they bring the dog to Ursula’s home, where Ursula fetches the book of healing that a priest taught her to read and then gave to her. With this book she prepares to heal the dog, using the passage on “how to set and mend a broken bone in a man’s arm” as a guideline (p. 6). Ursula is a perfect example of what Brooks calls innocence “taking pleasure in itself” (Brooks, 1976, p. 29). Yet this space of innocence is interrupted when a neighbor sees her reading; as Andrea Deakin (1993) puts it, “the ignorant

and the envious have branded Ursula as a witch” (p. 2). She is put on trial and then forced to atone for her sins by going on the Crusade.

To exemplify the significance of this mode of address, I turn to Apprentice H. As the only self-identifying Jewish participant in the sample of readers for this study, she is unique. The granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, and with a father whose profession was fundraising for Jewish education, her first response to the question of literary forcefulness in relation to *TWBW* was, unlike those of the other readers, to be struck by the concept of the “risky text” itself. She asserts: “I grew up reading risky texts” (1, l. 10).ⁱⁱⁱ Repeating what she heard throughout her childhood, “Oh here is another good novel about the Holocaust, read this one.” (1, l. 12), Apprentice H told me “if I hadn’t known that people had problems reading risky books, I wouldn’t have thought twice about them” (1, l. 20).

As it turns out, she then had the opportunity to witness the ‘riskiness’ of stories for teacher readers when she walked into a local coffee shop and found some of her peers discussing the inappropriateness of *TWBW*. Noting that her classmates were “dancing around every reason why they wouldn’t use it,” she found herself defending the professor: “I said, ‘hey’ she is just using it as an example...you don’t have to use this book. This is just an example of historical fiction” (1, l. 32), she then found herself defending the story, asserting “this is a particularly good as a jumping off point to many issues” (1, l. 1). Yet she explains that there was a barrier in the reading that “they couldn’t break through” (1, l. 1). Attempting to rescue the risky text and a professor who dares to suggest beginning teachers need to carefully consider how texts can be risky for classroom learners, Apprentice H takes up her subject position through the work of rescuing the representation of traumatic histories in adolescent fiction and their significance for pedagogy. Surprising me, however, when I later return her to the question of what was the literary forcefulness of

TWBW for her, she states, "I am not sure if I liked it or not. It seemed like a good book. I read it and wasn't bored while I was reading it so umm...umm" (1, 1. 122).

While praising Bradford's work for the historical truth it reveals, Apprentice H takes up her own "trouble around the text" (Robertson, 1994, p.13). In trying to put her finger on the ambivalence of her response, she notes:

There are some parts that bothered me but they bothered me because they were gruesome. Not because of the Crusades.... a lot of the Catholic teachers were angry because it was a part of their religious past that disturbed them that they really didn't want to talk about, but I don't really have that. If my religious past was anywhere in there, I would be with David and maybe his family that was killed, so I wasn't on the Crusades. I didn't feel any remorse there .. um .. um .. um. Actually there was one part of the novel that really disturbed me. The woman was a gypsy and her child. (1, 1. 143-148)

Providing a visual externalization of how through the experience of reading she is suspended in the real time of the text: "I wasn't on the crusades," as she experiences the fear of hiding with the young Jewish boy David or being killed along with his family, the psychological reality that the reading has brought her into is deep and real. Yet as if she is almost awakening from a dream, asserting that she reads without remorse, her word "Actually" marks what she can't resolve about her reading. As I clarify that it is "Elizabeth and Verity" she speaks of, a mother and child who are also on the Crusade, she continues:

It disturbed me that the woman was letting her daughter get beat up and she was getting beat up too. I was just

thinking about battered wife syndrome and she felt like she didn't have anywhere else to go. I thought that Ursula was pretty gutsy in taking the child away but I also thought that she was rude to the mom, so I was torn because I was feeling for the child thinking I don't want that kid to get beaten up anymore, but then I was thinking about Ursula being so rude to this mom who obviously cares for the child and taking the child away. That disturbed me because I didn't know whose side I was on. I guess I was on the side of the child and I wanted the child to be with the mom and I wanted the child to be safe. That was the most disturbing part for me. (1, l. 143-148)

In the scene described above, the mother Elizabeth wants to return with the child to the man, Lemmet, who has almost beaten her to death. Ursula implores the mother to stay and argues that Verity must be moved as little as possible after suffering a serious blow to the head. When Elizabeth refuses saying she must return before Lemmet awakes, true to the melodramatic form, Ursula dramatizes through words and gesture her frustration with Elizabeth's decision and refuses to give the child back to be taken into harm's way. This scene appears to press against Apprentice H's very existence, she piles up the words "bothered," and "disturbed," and then the word images of abuse "beat up...beat up too...battered wife...beaten up" and "wanted." Her response provides an external representation of the inner conflict that she experiences through the scene of conflict between Elizabeth and Ursula over Verity's welfare. Performing her desire to rescue through the repetition of the word "wanted," Apprentice H experiences the pain of feeling "torn" in her split identifications. As "texts produced in reading may be interpreted as the structuring effects of historical desire working its way through language" (Robertson, 1994, p. 13), arguably Apprentice

H's response dramatizes how she feels caught in an impossible situation of wanting to rescue the child but also wanting the safety and oneness of mother and child together, and she defends against the separation of Elizabeth and Verity by refusing to take Ursula's side.

While initially she performs what unfolds for her in the narrative experience of either being killed or hiding from the Crusaders, as the representation of Ursula's work as a heroine provokes both identification and conflict for the teacher reader, Apprentice H performs her anxiety around imagining herself in this role of rescue. She moves from envying Ursula's "gutsy" qualities to resenting her for being "rude."

I return for a moment to Williams who suggests that "the greater the historical burden of guilt, the more pathetically and the more actively melodrama works to recognize and regain lost innocence" (1998, p. 61). She calls on Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* as a "melodramatic example of the impulse to regain a lost innocence vis-à-vis the guilt of the Holocaust" (1998, p. 62). Williams theorizes that "Schindler ultimately relieves the rest of us—Americans and Germans alike—of the historical burden of guilt, ...and also rescues the potential moral good of all ordinary people who played along with the Nazis" (p. 62), and asserts that "[m]elodrama is by definition the retrieval of an absolute innocence and good in which most thinking people do not put much faith" (p. 62). However she reminds us that "[w]hat we think and what we feel at the 'movies' are two very different things. We go to the movies not to think but to be moved. In a postsacred world, melodrama represents one of the most significant, and deeply symptomatic ways we negotiate moral feeling" (1998, p. 62).

In the case of Apprentice H, she attempts to negotiate her moral authority through embracing and defending the risky text, and while she clearly wants this story of rescue, at the same time she refuses it. Her refusal is akin to the structure of disavowal, where "one simultaneously

recognizes and ignores a traumatic perception" (Pitt, 2003, p. 32). Never really saying whether or not she likes *TWBW*, in comparing its ending to that of *TMA*, she is quick to assert that for Cushman's apprentice Alyce, "it wasn't a romantic ending that finishes off the whole story" (1, 1, 200). In *TWBW*, Apprentice H asserts that "there is a wedding and a happy ending," and asks rhetorically, "that was a little sappy wasn't it? It was strange too." Noting that Bruno and Ursula "suddenly kissed and got married" (1, 1, 200), Apprentice H turns away from Bradford's work, perhaps because, in part, the resolution is "sappy" and too resolute in terms of the virtue it tries to regain and the innocence in relation to the history she is burdened with rescuing.

Vignette Two: "Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue"

Williams (1998) argues that melodrama is not a "genre exceptional to a classical realist norm," but is instead "a more pervasive mode with its own rhetoric and aesthetic" that engages "... the complex tensions between different emotions as well as the relation of thought to emotion" (p. 49). Williams points to Christine Gledhill's (1987) work around female spectatorship which reveals how identification does not just have to do with lavishing pity on a female victim, but rather points to a whole field of study around "women's attraction-repulsion to the pathos of virtuous suffering" (p. 45). The readers' responses to Ursula's position of victim-hero and rescuer/healer converge around a structure of logic pertaining to her work as a rescuer.

Like Apprentice H, the next reader I present here, Apprentice G, performs her ambivalence in both wanting and *not* wanting this risky story. Yet unlike Apprentice H, Apprentice G does not profess to be comfortable with the risky text about the Crusades. As a music major,

she notes that she lacks historical background and has very little knowledge of religion; yet, like all the apprentices in this study, she performs her desire to constitute herself as a teacher through the symbolization of her desire to teach the risky story. Unfolding her inner passionate world around reading for rescue, Apprentice G tells me how during her youth when she had to stay in bed for eight months because she suffered from a life threatening illness, she did not feel like reading but her parents finally convinced her to read *A prayer for Owen Meany* (1, l. 254). She recalls crying through most of this story, and recounts how it felt like “it saved her life.” She recalls, “it was so real I could make it all out in my head” (1, l. 255). Here, Apprentice G performs her desire to repeat this rescue fantasy of the life-saving read. While she speaks of her lack of background in the subject area in relation to Bradford’s work, “I would have to go and research this more” (1, l. 260); and she reveals her fear over broaching the difficult topic of the Crusades in the classroom, “This is a big context and involves all sorts of religion, races and cultures and things. Religion is such a strong factor in this that I think it can be scary in the classroom” (1, l. 262); she constitutes herself as a teacher through the “real” experience that reading offers. She makes this important relation to historical fiction in the truths young readers may recover through identifying with the character’s point of view:

That is what the point is. For me that is what the point is in historical fiction. The point is to be able to see this for real yet almost softened in a light from a character’s point of view. If it is about the Holocaust, for example, and your parents teach you that the Holocaust never happened – like you have kids like that at your school – what if you taught that way and your parents preach hate and things like that – you have no idea what those kids have and this gives them the opportunity to go ahead and think for

themselves. Right? Because they are going to read this and maybe in the beginning it is going to be really hard and their parents are going to be down your throat saying “no,” my kids are not reading this, whatever it may be. But it gives you a chance to say things through it [i.e. through reading] and realize reality. But we have to bring in history for students and the reality of everything. And where they are today, and why, you know? Because – I don’t know – it gives them the chance without anyone else forcing anything at them. That is why I think it is important as a teacher. You don’t want to force anything at them either, so that is part of the fine line you have to stay on. And that is absolutely true. But not teaching them the risky [story] is not going to get them anywhere or promote anything and give them the chance to think about things. (1, l. 227)

Struggling through what Robertson (2001) calls the “triumvirate of familiar concerns, a troika that circulates on schedule through the mezzanine of education: ‘parents,’ ‘sensitive issues’ and ‘offensive portrayals’” (p. 29) that often foreclose a future of teaching risky texts, this apprentice imagines a future situation where she could rescue young learners from histories of hate through using this very text.

While Apprentice G’s response reveals the psychological drama she is undergoing as a means to prepare herself for the important performance of teacher of difficult knowledge, and her uncertainty and fear, conveyed through her repetition of the word “point” and word image of “the teacher walking a tightrope,” the psychic effects she speaks of above in relation to experiencing the “real” of the past through “a character’s point of view” emerge through her reading. Whereas Apprentice H recognizes Ursula’s moral virtue in her “gutsiness”

rescuing Verity and then disavows it, calling her “rude,” Apprentice G, too, wonders how she would react in this situation. The figure of Ursula as a heroine/rescuer provokes multiple identifications in her -- conflict, fear and terror. Apprentice G exclaims:

Ursula was cold, cold, cold to this woman Elizabeth and it goes both ways and I was thinking how would I react because this woman is still taking her baby to this abusive man, but this woman has been beaten down to nothing and she is spineless and useless at this point because she has been treated so poorly. She is as weak as the baby is and she treats her pretty coldly. I think she is pretty self-centered. (1, l. 345)

The aggressiveness of the repetition of her words “cold” and use of the words “abusive,” “beaten down,” “spineless and useless,” “weak as a baby,” alongside her statement “I was thinking how would I react” (1, l. 345) is powerful. Apprentice G’s response to this scene performs her own ambivalence around the work of rescue. Williams (1998) notes that the melodramatic climax is meant to reveal the moral good of the victim, and then leads to the victim-hero turning his or her suffering into action which in part helps to orchestrate the moral legibility of the mode, as virtue is often played out through suffering followed by deeds (p. 66). The dramatization of Ursula’s deed here is too painful for these teacher readers. Like Apprentice H, Apprentice G’s reading of this scene of rescue performs her disavowal of the protagonist as heroic, and the readers negate the actual innocence and virtue that Ursula’s work of rescue comes to symbolize.

Williams notes “if a melodramatic character appeals to our sympathy, it is because pathos involves us in assessing suffering in terms of our privileged knowledge of its nature and causes” (1998, p. 49). Gledhill underscores that pathos is “intensified by the misrecognition of

a sympathetic protagonist because the audience has privileged knowledge of the true situation" (cited in Williams 1998, p. 49). Apprentice G's reading continues to perform her ambivalence around the dangerous work of heroism. She earlier told me that she had just accepted a teaching job abroad and was struggling over leaving her parents, especially her father whom she resembled in both looks and musical talent. When she later repeats that Ursula is "cold and emotionless" she notes that "even with her father and that is so surprising for me. It was just move on – that was it" (1, l. 382). Referring here to the scene in which Master William dies and Ursula is forced to leave her father behind, she ignores how Bradford writes over the course of many pages about Ursula's continued care for her ailing father: taking over her father's duties so he would not have to exert himself with the evil Count Emil; and ultimately burying him underneath an ancient elder tree in the hope that it would protect his body (Bradford, 1992, p. 184). Instead, Apprentice G repeats her surprise at how Ursula "just jumps up and is on her way again.... when her father died" (1, l. 392).

Moreover, while she hints that maybe it was because Ursula "had seen death after death after death, [and] maybe you become this cold" (1, 1, 394), Apprentice G goes on to undermine that reading, suggesting that Bradford "doesn't give us any hints towards that" (1, l. 396) and thereby challenging the aesthetic unity of the text. In fact, when I return this reader to the question of Ursula, she goes as far to negate the significance of Ursula's role in the story. Turning to embrace Cushman's apprentice Alyce, Apprentice G almost shouts that she thinks Ursula is "shallow" and, "no I didn't love her. I didn't think she was necessary as opposed to Alyce in *TMA* where you learn so much more about her.... Ursula is just part of this huge thing" (1, l. 165). While Gledhill argues that the scenes of the victim-hero work toward generating emotion because "the audience is outside a particular point of view but participating in it with

a privileged knowledge of the total constellation” (in Williams, 1998, p. 49), Ursula’s “shallowness” or at least her situation of being a “victim-hero” provokes a complex negotiation between “different emotions” and the relation of “thought to emotion” (Williams, 1998, p. 49) of this teacher reader that leads her to turn away from Bradford’s work.

Vignette Three: “Melodrama presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaen conflicts between good and evil”

Asserting that it is important not to pay too much attention to melodrama’s “excessive emotionality and theatricality,” Williams argues that “[t]heatrical acting and Manichaen polarities are not the essence of this form. They are the means ... the achievement of a felt good, the merger—perhaps even the compromise – of morality and feeling” (1998, p. 55). While the readers of *TWBW* move from Williams’ “felt good” in their thoughts of using this risky text to identify their own virtue as teachers of difficult knowledge to turning away from this merger, the compromise of morality and feeling becomes challenging. The readers collectively stand in defence of its demands. As Ursula stands in polar opposition to the evil that drives this story forward, her strength and bravery comes to haunt the readers in my study. Apprentice J expresses why Ursula is so troubling for her:

Apprentice J: I found the character Ursula... ...a lot of the time I was sort of shocked by her because as a young girl I was not capable of standing up for myself the ways she did and I wouldn’t have stood up for myself the way she did and I know I would have been swayed by beliefs around me and it would have taken me awhile to process that this is a negative thing. But Ursula from the beginning thought this was a negative thing. How strong she was in her opinions and how unwavering she was in her self-defense and how she wouldn’t recant her witchiness or

whatever I was very surprised by all of that. I found her a little bit unrealistic for a character in that time and that age. (1, l. 253)

I found that maybe once again because it is teen fiction I just know that the characters were a bit simplified. They had one basic trait, or a couple, and that is what they stuck with. You saw the effects on Ursula I guess while she became more bitchy. As the good people moved forward they saw so many things, and she became effected by all that, but they seemed a little simplified for me. They all seemed to be unwavering in their belief systems. Bruno was very strong in what he believed; as well was Ursula and even her father was very strong. But together I found them to be a bit too bizarre. I thought Ursula was very feminist for the time period and super strong. You see her on the cover here with her perfect white dress even though she has trudged through many disasters and her clean shining hair and whatever...[and] her book intact. The only literate person there, which is bizarre again. I don't know why an apothecary needs to be literate. It seems to me you just learn. (1, l. 265)

Brooks writes that the characters of melodrama "exist at a moment of crisis as exemplary destinies" and "[t]he peripeties through which they pass must be as absolute as they are frequent, bringing alternatively the victory of blackness and whiteness, and in each instance giving full enunciation of the condition experienced" (1976, p. 36). So, too, Ursula's quest for lost innocence rouses Apprentice J's memories of her own adolescent experience, as the reading incites her own difficult memories of powerlessness and fear. The distressed tone of her voice during the interview reveals the complex and unresolved historical presence of

memory, and Apprentice J's rhetoric becomes more aggressive, exclaiming that the powerful "visual details of the journey and the battlefield grabbed me." She turns from what she had first imagined doing with her students: with her background in visual arts she would have liked to incorporate what the text helped the students to see into her lesson, but her initial view changes, and Ursula's strange beauty transforms into something beastly. As if she is trying to regain her footing here after the memories that that text provokes, she then begins to question the text's veracity, and, moreover, the quality of the juvenile genre itself.

During her second interview, Apprentice J's disavowal in her reading of Ursula remains. Yet the disruption she experienced while responding to Bradford's heroine Ursula dissipates as she responds to the pure pleasure she experiences through Cushman's work and her heroine Alyce:

I liked it. I liked it. It was ah, ah, ah, I found the character to be more realistic. How she gets harassed by the boys... she goes with the flow and lets them bother her but as she grows as a person she learns how to fight back. She learns that she has some power to frighten themYeah umm I could see her becoming more human in a way where, Ursula became less human in some ways. But I found her to be unrealistic to begin with and I kind of shut the door a little bit on her [Ursula]. Yeah whereas Alyce... I found her much more realistic in the things she was able and unable to do. How she became afraid and she left because she thought she had failed and because of her lack of self-worth and self-belief and all the doubt that caused her to leave, I found that to be very realistic; whereas Ursula was

like standing strong and she had her feminist view point and wasn't afraid of anything at all. [Alyce] has fears and is very weak at times and it is very believable and you can see her development in that way. (II, l. 322)

Immediately valuing this text through her repetition of the word "like" and conveying the completeness she feels through the reading of the story through her loss of words "ah, ah" that leads to using the matter of fact term of "realistic," she establishes the text's mastery. While both Ursula and Alyce are just characters on the page, Alyce becomes flesh and blood while Ursula is like a statue. As Apprentice J identifies with Alyce's subjection and terror, the aesthetic provocation of the text meets the reader's desire for safety and success. As Alyce survives harassment and comes into her own through gaining knowledge and strength, overcoming failure and despair, *TMA* throws into relief the terror that Ursula's statuesque strength performs. Providing the mental image of "shutting the door" on Ursula, Apprentice J has turned to Alyce for apprenticeship.

The uses of the affective tangle of melodrama

Popular culture theorists have long recognized the power of melodrama. Yet Williams notes that "the most crucial element of the study of melodrama: its capacity to generate emotions in audiences" has not been explored (1998, p. 44). My analysis of aesthetic form/modes of address in the two novels, and my reading of these elements dynamically against and with the forces of desire in reading, reveals melodrama's power of affect for teacher readers. In returning for a moment to the beginning of the tangled skein of my own reading of *TWBW* and *TMA* as an apprenticing teacher of teachers, it was only when I began to work closely with the formal operations of the stories

and found that they coincided with the melodramatic mode that I began to understand that the readers were using the juvenile historical fiction not only as an aesthetic object to make morally readable a powerful fantasy of the self as a teacher, but also that their reading was about the quest for their own lost innocence. Here, I uncovered one of the significant findings of the research. While the aesthetic opulence of Ursula compelled the readers to imagine themselves as revolutionary and heroic teachers, in order to continue to imagine the self as having the capacity to rescue and to be rescued through the teaching of literature, the readers, as I had in my first reading of the text, had to defend against their own unresolved conflicts of loss that surfaced through the compositional elements of the text that work towards structuring the story of Ursula.

In designing this study I did not intend for the readers to compare the two texts. Yet their dramatic soliloquies of contrast and comparison demonstrate how *TMA* – a story of hope and transcendence sustained through a quest for lost innocence – offers them consolation against the disruption they collectively experienced at bumping up against the moral courage of Ursula in *TWBW*. Furthermore, the readers' readings of these texts with and against each other called up my own reading practices. Naming this reading movement the "Alyce Affect"⁴ I reflect on what I first resisted reading in myself. The readers use *TMA* as a means to create a desired cohesive state: *teacher*.

This study has begun to expose how the formal aesthetic qualities of literary texts are very much alive in questions of what gets valued – and why – by beginning teachers, and further, how gratification in reading can be linked to defences and pleasures fed simultaneously by unconscious fantasy life and the social. While the illusion of the self as whole is our passage into culture (Lacan, 1977), the teacher reader, it seems, must experience the "Alyce Affect" and act out the "Ursula

Syndrome” to defend against fragmentation and division, pain and uncertainty. While this making of the self through objects of pedagogy is an enormous achievement of symbolization, what do the rational discourses of rescue that accompany this work shut out and exclude?

Apprenticing teachers’ readings of risky texts contributes to thinking about how melodrama can be used as a means to explore and discuss the implications of identifications and defences within the framework of learning how to teach others to learn. Further work needs to be done to explore the power of fantasy at work in array of aesthetic forms and objects that comprise the taken-for-granted world of curriculum. Such research may advance knowledge about how popular melodramatic forms within the mass cultural framework of Canadian public education sustain certain ideological interests that may be culturally conservative and prescriptive despite teachers’ best intentions of using youth fiction in liberatory ways.

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Notes

¹ Coined by Roger Simon and Wendy Simon-Armitage (1999), the term “risky stories” refers to stories that “graphically deal with degradation, pain and death whose emotional invasiveness for child readers requires a pedagogical response that enables progressive moral force in the lives of individuals” (Robertson 1999, p. 278).

² Williams two additional structural operations are “melodrama appears modern by borrowing from realism but realism serves the melodramatic passion and action” (p. 67), and it “involves a dialectic of pathos and action – give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’” (p. 69).

³Citations refer either to the first or second interview and line number. Data from the focus group discussion does not appear in this paper but was consistent with the phenomena discussed here.

⁴The terms "Ursula Syndrome" and "Alyce Affect" build on research cited in the *Ottawa Citizen* by Hilary Clarke that describes spectator dynamics in relation to Michelangelo's David.

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