

Stacy Miller

Shattering Images of Violence in Young Adult Literature: Strategies for the Classroom

Stacy Miller presents a unit on violence in young adult literature where she begins by helping students understand violence and its origins. Through activities and class discussion, students express strong, informed opinions about *Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles and recognize the need to read and view images of violence from an oppositional perspective.

What is violence?" I asked my second-period AP Literature and Composition class. "Violence is an unsolicited attack that causes trauma to its victim," said one of my female students. "Violence is some form of battery against another," said another female student who had recently been attacked with her mother by a mugger. "Violence is a lack of restraint against another, just like Kurtz who, in *Heart of Darkness*, could not control his behavior against the natives," said a devout Joseph Conrad fan. Though each student defined *violence* differently, there was coherence about what violence meant. Violence *is* difficult to escape and, whether we are prepared for it or not, it inevitably seeps into our lives through keyholes, windows, radios, newspapers, magazines, novels, young adult literature, TVs, movies, and our dreams.

Because of the prevalence of violence in our lives, four of my colleagues and I examined how violence manifests itself in the lives of students and in young adult literature as we read *Shattering Glass* with our respective classes or conducted research on violence in young adult literature. We chose this text because of its emphasis on violence and its setting in a public high school. In this article, I focus on the experiences of my students reading the book in AP Literature and Composition. Our school, which is located in an impoverished part of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is host to predominantly Hispanic, Mexican, and Native American students, most of whom come from lower-income families.

PREVIEW OF SHATTERING GLASS

Simon Glass would meet his violent and inescapable fate in high school. Rob would make Simon his project, elevate Simon to Mr. Popular, and let nothing stand in his way. Young would blindly follow Rob's command and others would follow in suit. The boys are victims of either negligent or abusive homes, and their unhealable wounds lead them to commit a violent murder. *Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles is a story about the shattering of lives that demonstrates the danger of prejudicial belief systems.

Violence: Understanding Its Roots

We framed the unit with an essential question: "How does violence affect our lives?" The unit began with a lengthy discussion of local and national hate crimes. Guest speakers, who had worked on hate-crimes legislation at the state and national levels, came to class to discuss hate crimes and their manifestations. Students learned about hate crimes through handouts, videos, diagrams, and discussions. We learned that the legal definition of *hate crime* is a crime committed against individuals based on actual or perceived differences such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or class. We discovered that New Mexico is the only state to include gender identity and national origin in its definition of a hate crime and that though hate crimes happen in a place, they affect an entire community. We viewed clips from MTV's *Anatomy*

of a *Hate Crime* depicting the story of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard and other acts of violence against individuals based on actual or perceived differences. Our understanding of hate crimes laid a critical foundation for viewing the different types of violence we would soon read about in *Shattering Glass*.

To begin the unit, I introduced key terms so that we would all have a common understanding of how the terms were being used. A handout from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) defined the terms *prejudice*, *power*, *privilege*, and *oppression*. In their notebooks, students wrote

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down these definitions to contextualize the unit and use for future reference. I also guided a discussion of the concept of the “isms,” words that become “nouns” (almost any word can be “ism’d”) and are laden with pejorative connotations based on actual or perceived differences (see fig. 1). Our

awareness of the “isms” prepared us to recognize other forms of violence that might be identified in the later reading of the text. Most students were already familiar with the concept of the “isms,” but our discussion formalized a new context of learning about them. With a grasp of terms and how they work together and against one another, we embarked on the unit.

The week that we began the unit examining violence, Eve Ensler, director of *The Vagina Monologues*, was in Santa Fe screening her documentary, *Until the Violence Stops*, which is about an international movement called V-Day aimed at stopping violence toward women. The documentary followed the grassroots impact of V-Day in five international communities while exposing the pervasive and cultural forms of violence that women experience all over the world. Viewing the documentary filled our toolbox with new tools that would help in preparation for reading the text. Students witnessed images of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and violence toward women through female castration, rape, and torture. Afterward, one of my young male students said, “I am a vagina warrior!” Another male said, “I am vagina friendly!” referring to statements made by males in the film. Both responses demonstrated sensitivity toward the mistreatment of women and their bodies.

We next looked at “The Cycle of Oppression and Prejudice” (see fig. 2) through a sketch on the chalkboard to make meaning of possible origins of violence and its systemic insipidness. We discussed how the cycle of violence begins with myths or misinformation, stereotypes or a biased history. We then looked at how the cycle continues as myths are validated and reinforced by institutions, culture, media, family, religion, and friends and then become socialized into the cycle. This awareness helped us to see

FIGURE 1. Key Terms for the Unit

Prejudice is the unconscious or conscious manifestation of dislike against another based on actual or perceived differences that can be, but does not necessarily have to be, legitimated by institutions.

Power is the ability to influence others and to have access to decision-making opportunities to accomplish what one wants to have done. Power manifests itself through access to resources, work, institutions, physical security, housing, protection by the law, and representation in government and can be used to discriminate against people based on actual or perceived differences of ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, ability, national origin, religion, age, appearance, or weight.

Privilege refers to the choices, entitlements, and advantages granted based on membership in a culturally dominant group.

Oppression is a lethal combination of prejudice, power, and privilege.

-isms. Prejudice may be based on a number of external factors, such as the following:

- > Able-bodiedism, based on physical abilities
- > Ageism, based on age
- > Anti-Semitism, based on a person's being Jewish
- > Classism, based on social class
- > Heterosexism, based on the belief that everyone should be heterosexual
- > Lookism, based on appearance
- > Racism, based on a person's race, ethnicity, or national origin
- > Religionism, based on religion
- > Sexism, based on gender
- > Sizism, based on weight or height (“GLSEN”).

that once myths are socialized, and if not adequately deconstructed, the cycle can be internalized, causing misinformation and myths to later become truths. We then concluded that the internalization of the myths may lead to behavior that is prejudiced, oppressive, and even violent, thus completing the cycle.

Afterward, we discussed how the cycle manifested itself in our lives and drew parallels to school bullying; violence at home; violence perpetuated in and by the media; and violence in state, national, and international communities.

The Appeal of Violence in YA Literature

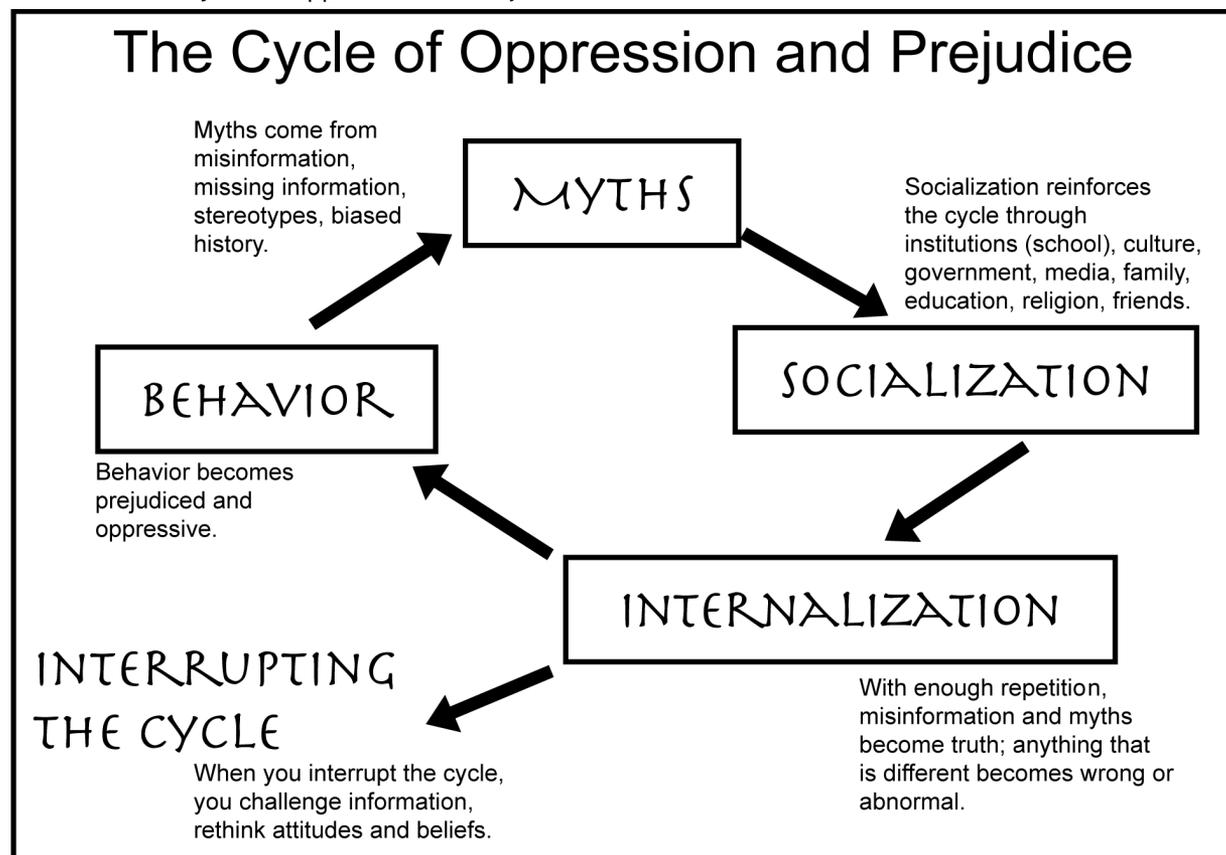
With our toolboxes full of varying ideas about violence and its origins, we read *Shattering Glass*. When designing the unit on violence, I was careful to align the unit to both state and NCTE language arts standards. While it is always important to align units to standards, it is especially important with units that may be perceived as controversial.

I assigned fifty pages of reading each night so that students would finish *Shattering Glass* in the week prior to final exams. During the reading, they participated in a daily Socratic Seminar; highlighted and created marginalia (writing comments or questions about the text for clarification in class) for the “isms”; and looked for manifestations of prejudice, power, privilege, and oppression and other acts of violence in the text. They also journaled daily. As they read, I asked students to identify categories of violence in the book and then create a key of terms that they would highlight throughout the reading.

Day One: Unpacking Violence in *Shattering Glass*

Day One began with a definition of *violence*. The class consensus suggested that violence is action driven by anger with the possible intent to injure and a lack of restraint. Students further suggested that violence is timeless, ageless, universal, and perceptual. I listed

FIGURE 2. The Cycle of Oppression and Prejudice



Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.

on the board the subcategories students had created for highlighting violence and writing marginalia in *Shattering Glass*: “I found sexual violence on page 52: ‘Mark wore that hunger like a bandage, and the young camp counselor pulled the bandage from his wounds, just as he removed the clothes from Mark’s body,’” said one student. “I found verbal violence on page 130: ‘You’re a dog. An ugly dog,’” said another student. Examples of violence poured from their reading of the text and included emotional, physical, spiritual, and social violence and violence against the self (such as appearance, body, beauty), other humans (such as bullying), and animals. One young woman showed me her book, saying, “I couldn’t put it down. I kept highlighting and highlighting categories about violence. Look what you made me begin.” Others highlighted categories that included sexual abuse, examples of power, privilege, oppression, and several “isms” such as sexism, lookism, heterosexism, able-bodiedism, and classism. One student even noted, “I found an example of institutional oppression on page 139, when Coop’s scholarship was dependent on his ACT scores. Why can’t he just play football? Those scores

Another student concluded that because youth are susceptible and malleable to violence in all of its aspects, they are vulnerable to being subsumed by violence altogether.

are so lame and unfair toward students who don’t test well!” By the end of this first discussion it became obvious that students had read well beyond the assigned number of pages, and I discovered that over a quarter of the class had finished the text on the first night that it was assigned.

After a hearty discussion, I prompted them through Socratic Seminar to respond to the question, “Why do you think violence is such an interesting topic for young adults?” and they responded eagerly and incisively. One young woman suggested that young adults gravitate toward violence “because they are desensitized to it and because it surrounds their lives.” Another student suggested that “violence is inescapable, trendy, and is sold to youth through video games, films, books, TV, and magazines.” When asked how violence surrounds their lives, collectively they noted that they are observer-learners, desensitized by the media, consumers of the war and news, subjected to constant bullying in schools, exposed to pejorative dialogue and gossip, and witnesses to tagged bathroom walls and hallways. From

this point, our discussion quickly moved to the commercialization and consumerism of violence that has escalated to a point that it has become a commodity for sale just like clothes, computers, and cars. Students felt that violence sells because it is something they can relate to; a desire is created, which can escalate to an insatiable craving. A student suggested that in viewing violence, “It can become a projection of inner feelings of anger that we cannot act on and because of that, we vicariously experience the lives of others and act out our inner darkness.” Another student concluded that because youth are susceptible and malleable to violence in all of its aspects, they are vulnerable to being subsumed by violence altogether.

The discussion then turned to allusions between *Shattering Glass* and films and plays in popular culture. Students suggested that themes and characters in the text paralleled those in *She’s All That*, *Jawbreaker*, *Elephant*, *My Fair Lady*, *Pygmalion*, *Never Been Kissed*, *Drive Me Crazy*, *The New Guy*, and *Whatever It Takes*. The excitement about films led to a lively discussion about how realistic the characters and contexts were in the story. What struck me as particularly interesting about their responses was that there was an air of expertise, as if the students were somehow “above” the characters in the text, which I attributed to their status as AP literature students.

A student exclaimed, “The book felt like a made-for-TV movie, was oversimplified, middle school oriented, and not realistically grounded in a high school.” Responding to this student, a young man corroborated, “The book felt fake, as if an adult were trying to pretend to be a high school student again and was out of touch with students’ points of view.” In response a student articulated, “High schools don’t have alpha males and females and there is never just one person at the top of the social hierarchy; rather, there are groups of people who tend to be collectively popular.” Students also said that belonging to fixed, singularly identified, stereotypical categories that label students as geeks, nerds, jocks, drama kids, goths, queers, and punks is unrealistic to what they really see in their school—a hybridization among stereotypical, categorized groups. A young woman responded, “Students in our high school either belong to several groups at once or within each group there are hybrid identities like goth-nerd, jock-punk, or drama-queer.”

Interesting to me was how *they* honed in on how the prejudices directed toward Simon, who was the perceived “nerd” in the text, became the foundation that would eventually lead to his tragic downfall. Simon came from money, behaved awkwardly, and wore dull clothing. Because of the prejudices that were manifested toward him—classism, able-bodiedism, and lookism—Simon did not stand a chance against the power and prejudices of the alpha male, Rob.

Day Two: Interrupting the Cycle of Violence

We began discussion on the second day of class with a warm-up in dyads where students posed Socratic Seminar questions of their choice to one another. Facing one another, each student had three minutes to respond to the question while the partner actively listened to the answers. At the end of the three minutes, the other student could ask clarifying questions or respond to the answers. Conversations in the dyads led to a lively class discussion about why the main character, Rob, was motivated to make Simon “Mr. Popular.” We learned that Rob and Young had each been sexually molested by males: Rob by his father, Young by his camp counselor. Students inferred that homophobia or the belief in heterosexism was the cause of much of these boys’ wrongdoings and inevitably led to Simon’s violent death. Because neither boy had ever received any psychological help after the molestation, many students interpreted that their wounds became the reason for which many of their evil acts ensued.

As our discussion came to an end for the period, I asked students to respond in their journals to the prompt, “If and when I become a father/mother and my child is harassed in school, how will I intervene?” Several themes emerged from their responses, including engaging in discussions, investigating what happened, paying close attention to the relationship with their child, intervening immediately, contacting the school, and educating their child about harassment.

Day Three: Observing Violent Acts

The night before the third day, the class had attended a reading by Joyce Carol Oates from *Rape: A Love Story*, her latest novel. She read aloud a story about a fifteen-year-old girl who was abducted from a mall

parking lot by a serial killer and rapist, but for some reason he spared her life. Students sat transfixed listening to her words and painfully realistic story. In class, we recapped the story and then returned to *Shattering Glass*. A combination of Oates’s short story and the previous night’s reading about teen sex led to a heated discussion on popularity, teen promiscuity, and the mistreatment of women.

In the section of *Shattering Glass* assigned for class, one of the main characters, Young, dumped his girlfriend Ronna because Rob told him to do so. Rob’s plan was a deliberate act of sexism. His intention was that Ronna would end up dating the nerd, Simon, and help increase his popularity. Rob coerced Young to “hook up” with another young woman whose morals were far from intact and who he knew had loose lips. The plan was intended to hurt Ronna so she would dump Young and fall into the arms of Simon. Students were extremely opinionated about the reading and were concerned about Ronna’s feelings. Because students had viewed Eve Ensler’s documentary, they had a deeper insight regarding the mistreatment of women. Comments ranged from “I would never treat another person that way” to suggesting that the trick was “violent and spiteful.”

Something unusual occurred that day as we were discussing the mistreatment of Ronna. The conversation merged into a discussion about hierarchies of power, prejudice, privilege, and oppression. A student noted that “Rob’s status as the alpha male was a result of the reinforcement by his followers. If Rob had no followers, he would not be in the position of power in the school.” I went to the board to attempt to make meaning of this brilliantly shared insight. I drew a ladder with Rob on the top rung, Young beneath him, Simon closely parallel to Young, and other boys between Simon and Lance, who was on the bottom rung. Rob’s power was reinforced by the placement of others beneath him. As Simon gained popularity and inched toward Rob’s social status with Ronna in tow—dancing with pretty girls at school dances, driving a new Firebird, hacking into the school computer, and even cheating for someone on the ACT exam—he had to be stopped, which resulted in his violent murder. Because of Simon’s graduation from the position of scapegoat, another victim (Lance) took his place, thus reinforcing the power status of Rob. Rob’s status, combined with his prejudices toward Simon and

his privilege as “Mr. Popularity,” enabled him to oppress all those beneath him, including his “friends.”

My intention was that the visual representation of the ladder would inform students even more deeply about their belief systems and those beliefs that make them vulnerable to being victims of prejudice. From the ladder, we moved to an activity where students were to construct an identity frame—list character traits of the self, traits that others would use to identify them, traits teachers might use to identify them, and traits they possess that might make them shatter (see fig. 3). Around the outside of the frame they were to list key words that helped hold them together and that literally framed their lives. Little did I know what a profound impact this activity would have on them until the following day.

Day Four: Liberating Ourselves from Violence

On our final day of discussion, the class seemed concerned about how Simon met his fate. Most disturbing to me was the consensus that he precipitated his death and that his death could have been avoided had he not cajoled and provoked Rob by publicly revealing the gruesome accounts of his molestation. Though at the time I was reluctant to admit this, I had to agree that the murder was indeed catalyzed by the pent-up anger and rage Simon felt toward the boys and the plan to make him popular.

Many students suggested that Simon had to die because he was inching toward the status of Rob in the school and, having just won “Mr. Wittiest” in the class favorites category, his popularity had surged to new heights. He had to be stopped and Rob made sure that he was. These insights cycled the class back to the previous day’s exercise in which students had created identity frames. Students began to share how their identities differed from the perceptions of others. Similar to Simon, who was more than likely content with his life before he was “made over” by the boys, students explained how perceptions of themselves by others led to different types of harassment and even bullying at school. Examples included being perceived as gay, lesbian, nerdy, unkempt, “jocky,” stupid, irresponsible, manic, low achieving, conceited, tactless, mean, burly, lazy, prude, and ditzy. Several students shared that to

FIGURE 3. Student’s Identity Frame

	Job	Red Bull	Community		
Experimentation	<u>Self</u> creative motivated high-strung OCD compassionate philanthropic angry longing argumentative shy interdependent musical <u>constructively</u> manipulative		<u>Others</u> creative motivated frustrated outgoing loud intrusive high-strung obsessive musical		Friends
	Performance	<u>Teachers</u> high-strung obsessive loud outgoing creative without boundaries argumentative silly independent malleable unstable ADD angry		<u>Shatter</u> high-strung obsessive loud w/o boundaries argumentative ADD malleable unstable angry too happy intrusive outgoing <u>Musical</u>	
Family		Unknown		Music	

some degree they had internalized these terms and oppressed themselves. We spoke at length about how perceptions of others about us, if used pejoratively, are a form of oppression and violence. Throughout this discussion, I observed students making meaning of Simon’s situation as they related the text to their lives and came to understand how he must have felt as the targeted student because of his actual or perceived differences.

I closed that day by asking the students to whom they would recommend the text. Eight students suggested that ninth graders should read the text, eight suggested it for sophomores, and three suggested it to eighth graders. Those who recommended the text to eighth graders suggested that the book was too violent and graphic for younger students and that they were likely neither emotionally nor psychically mature enough to handle its con-

tent. Class consensus was that the text needed to be carefully taught and that a “dominant” reading, one where the reader agrees with the content, might affirm or perpetuate stereotyping and violence (Fiske 292). Students were emphatic that the text must be taught critically through an “oppositional” perspective wherein students come to realize that their social position clashes with dominant ideology and they are encouraged and guided to make decisions other than to commit violent acts (292). Although Fiske’s discussion of “dominant” and “oppositional” viewing is for television, his concepts also applied to the class experience.

Students offered words of wisdom when I prompted them to respond to the question, “Just as Simon was labeled as the ‘nerd’ and was killed because of the presuppositions of who he was and how those presuppositions were projected onto him, how can we liberate ourselves from labels that perpetuate stereotypes of students in schools that can lead to a destructive end?” A student suggested, “Others should not give in to stereotyping of groups of students and students should learn who each other is on the inside and not judge by the labels associated with a particular social group.” They also admonished each other that the media are dangerous because they feed naive minds with notions of stereotypes and then resell these concepts back to society. They emphasized teaching texts critically and helping students develop the skills to deconstruct myths about individuals. Their insights demonstrated that they were profoundly interrupting the cycle of oppression and prejudice. Many students said that people should act in ways that are “oppositional” to dominant culture and try not to be consumed by popular ideologies. “This would mean doing random acts of kindness consistently for everyone and intervening when necessary,”

said the Buddhist. We ended our discussion with a profound thought: If we interact in ways that are loving and empathic toward others and assume the best in others, perhaps we can begin to eradicate the proliferation of violence in our lives. If we are taught to interrupt the cycle of oppression and violence before it escalates, perhaps we can shatter the frequency of violence to which we are all exposed. Then, we may not have to defend ourselves against violence after all; rather, we can open our lives to healthy images of acts of love and compassion.

Note

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