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# The Shutdown Adolescent Female Student in Alternative Education

Joyce Benvenuto

*"This is me she is carrying.  
I am a baby.  
She does not know  
I will turn out bad."  
—Sandra Cisneros*

I would like young women to write better. I would like them to be able to see the heart of a question, analyze it, well—perhaps, even synthesize the question into some new piece of thinking. In process writing, quite often girls feel there is nothing to rewrite. Their papers are neat and spelled correctly. It has all been said in their first drafts. If I suggest they need to dig deeper into their own thinking, their response is to be hurt. They don't take suggestions well. So I've changed things. Nowadays I give fuzzy, funny, exotic stickers and stars for signs of intellect in every female student's writing. It works. If you give enough hearts and squeeze bears, young women can handle a lot of tough criticism. Without a doubt, I have male and female students who write well without prompting. I also have males who can hardly write. For them to produce writing is wonderful. But the special group I have been thinking about is the "shutdown female." Sometimes she is like the wallpaper. Sometimes she is loud and troublesome. But I have learned that if you want a woman to write well, you have to allow her to feel, think, and speak.

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**But the special group I have been thinking about is the "shutdown female." Sometimes she is like the wallpaper. Sometimes she is loud and troublesome.**

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Occasionally I have been told by some colleagues, "Does it ever occur to you, Joyce, that so and so has, maybe, nothing to say?" In the past years I've taken up the challenge of that remark and have worked hard getting "shutdown" young women to open up and have something to say. For instance, I again noticed that I was making an impact on 14- to 18-year-old females in the science class which I also teach. Since it was science and we were outdoors, at least once a week, I regularly wore t-shirts, heavy shoes, slacks and often a flannel shirt. It was the shoes that pricked my interest. The jeans and heavy shirt were easy for them to slip into, but one by one students began to wear those heavy soled shoes like mine. I was awed when Julie, the chubbiest young woman in my class who rarely

wants to walk as far as the school fence, suddenly appeared in a new pair of Sears and Roebuck tan suede high-tops. Julie was now, officially, a deep woods hiker. Not only did she take on the clothes of Ms. Biologist, she said more on paper, used science vocabulary well and turned in a final biology project concerning the classification and ecology of plants. Julie received an "A-." She had moved from a nothing-to-say writer, a non-stop talker, a non-listening teacher-thwarting loud mouth, to a girl who with great pride wrote out her final lesson. She was more academic than her boyfriend who sat next to her. He was proud of her too. "You did all that?" he said with a big smile. His new admiration was even better than my fuzzy star on her paper.

*"Isn't a bad girl almost like a boy?"*  
—Maxine Hong Kingston

Julie was a minister's daughter. She seemed in opposition to her dad. According to Julie, he said all this stuff in the pulpit, but he didn't act that way at all. She had been kicked out of her house for two years now and was living on her own, sometimes on the streets. In turn, Julie lectured *me* on religion. I listened. Then she began lecturing me on what a teacher is supposed to be—I should demand respect from students; I should separate myself from students; I should know all the answers, and tell the students if they are right or not. I told Julie that like Popeye, "I yam what I yam." Julie reflected on that all term.

Julie was more than chubby; she was fat. She paid exact attention to everything I wore every day and reported on it. She also lectured me on what I ought to look like, where I should shop. I finally realized that somehow she was rehearsing body image to herself. After a while, I came to expect her careful examination. The best day was when I accidentally wore one shoe from two different pairs of tennis shoes to class. Julie perceived that although the shoes were white, they were two different patterns—one a Nike, the other a Reebok. Julie howled; her boyfriend howled, the class howled. After that, periodically, we would all look at my shoes to see if I'd got it right.

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**She tried hard to shock me. At no time did I back down and become the "sweet good woman stereotype" that Julie had been so defeated by.**

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Julie, a white girl, spoke black dialect. She had a sexual relationship with her boyfriend. This was probably all in defiance of her dad. Her boyfriend was openly affectionate in class. He was a devoted, courteous mate. I ignored commenting on her too-early love life. I concentrated on responding to her written work. Every day that she turned in her folder, I wrote many things to her telling her when she was "really using her head." I worried that maybe no one in her life had told her she was smart. I kidded her in the margins. In response to bad behavior, I wrote that I was giving her a D or an E in writing (isn't writing across the curriculum a behavior dialogue too?). My feelings were laid out in words. I lavished attention on her, recognizing her presence every day in the room. I gave her honest answers. I was pretty bored with her anger, but I knew she had to practice saying and feeling things if I was ever going to get her to be a student and writer.

She tried hard to shock me. At no time did I back down and become the "sweet good woman stereotype" that Julie had been so defeated by. I wasn't asking her to become a sweet good woman. As I slowly passed Julie's tests for being down to earth, she bought the Sear's shoes and became a biologist. Since I do believe in writing across the curriculum, there was a lot of science writing to be done. Along with her shoes, her writing changed too. She became more serious about her writing, and the results were as good as the best students' in the class. When I asked for a comparison between Darwin's ideas of gradual change and Lyell's concept of catastrophic change, her writing showed that she had been actively listening to class discussion.

*"This is the hour of lead—  
Remembered if outlived,  
as Freezing persons recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting  
go—"*

—Emily Dickinson

A year ago, I was teaching an English class. That term, because I was teaching in more than one building, I dressed well. I wore hose; I wore eye shadow; I wore skirts often; I wore my dangling earrings. And what did I see happening over the term? The girls, who in the beginning of the term looked like they had rolled out of bed, began to pay attention to their dress. They especially began to wear eye makeup and jewelry. I looked well-groomed, and they all began to as well. It was amazing. I wore my black leather lace-up boots—and somehow they began to find leather lace-ups too. What power a teacher has as a model! If on an off-day I actually looked crisp in one of those Peter Pan collar blouses, I always made sure I said, "hell or damn" just to mitigate my image.

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**Many young girls see womanhood as a reprehensible condition—subservience and a second rate life.**

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At this point the reader may still be asking what all of this has to do with writing first and second drafts. It has everything in the world to do with it. A female does not go through an Oedipal phase at age three as young males do. According to the literature (*In a Different Voice*, Gilligan, 1982), Erik H. Erickson and Sigmund Freud explained male development but did not take into consideration female development. The crisis for the young female centers around the age of her onset of menses. Gilligan says:

*For example, we began to hear girls at the edge of adolescence describe impossible situations—psychological dilemmas in which they felt that if they said what they were feeling and thinking no one would want to be with them, and if they didn't say what they were*

*thinking and feeling they would be all alone, no one would know what was happening to them. As one girl put it, "no one would want to be with me, my voice would be too loud."*  
—Gilligan, xx.

At this time in life, a young woman is asked physically and emotionally to take on the cloak of womanhood. Many young girls see womanhood as a reprehensible condition—subservience and a second rate life. The best position possible is to become a "sweet good woman." This entails self sacrifice to the causes of others—a woman who never shows anger, a woman who quiets her own voice to maintain harmony and avoid separation from the group. Middle class society would see this as taking on the responsibilities of a woman and acting the part of a woman.

In a class discussion my males will go to great lengths to make their points. Some girls will hang in there during such arguments, but many girls won't. Instead they bow out, turn to their fellow classmates, and wonder where they can buy that particular bottle of nail polish.

In the Harvard study that Brown and Gilligan conducted at Laurel School (*Meeting at the Crossroads*, 1992), they observed the development of girls 5th through 12th grades. They found again and again that the boisterous voice of girlhood was eventually shut down to conform to the role of "getting along in society." The study tracked specific girls' development over a period of ten years. Girls reacted in different ways to this restricting of their lives. There was little that was positive. Julie would fit right in at Laurel School.

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**I can at least identify that alternative education females have identified the role they are supposed to play—and are acting out their opposition to it.**

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In their last chapter the researchers were embarrassed. They had asked the girls to discover self knowledge about how society conformed them. Yet, they, the researchers, also saw how they themselves had become conforming females. The

researchers had rediscovered their own girlhoods. They only allowed themselves to record what the girls were telling them. But at the end of the study the researchers wanted to rewrite the script, not only for themselves but for the young girls they were studying.

As a teacher I am not limited by my research. I can, so to speak, help girls to rewrite the script. They don't have to do all their school work, get decent grades in school and then because they have learned to have no voice, go out there and get second rate jobs as they have witnessed in so many of their mothers. And while I would be the first to say everything can't be cured in a generation, I can at least identify that alternative education females have identified the role they are supposed to play—and are acting out their opposition to it.

In the same research (*Different Voice*, Gilligan), the author identifies that boys at the time of puberty take risks and are rewarded for doing so. A boy has seen himself as separated from his mother since childhood; thus, a boy learns early the good and bad consequences of risks. He learns to temper his feelings about being separated from the group for his actions. He can take on an absolute set of rules that seem related to fair play. A boy handles being called "out." The authors note, however, that the opposite is often true for females. Unlike a male, a female does not suffer early in her life from anxiety over separation. Instead the tiny girl develops with a sense of continuity with her mother and the larger group. Gilligan says:

*"Have arrived at the following working theory: that the relational crisis which men typically experience in early childhood occurs for women in adolescence...because girls' resistance to culturally mandated separations occurs at a later time in their psychological development than that of boys, girls' resistance is more articulate and robust, more deeply voiced and therefore more resonant."*  
(*Voice*, xxiii)

Thus, at puberty a great separation conflict occurs in girls. She has been free up to this point, but now she is told to be guarded, to be careful and to never do anything risky. The law is laid down: a girl entering womanhood is no longer encouraged to take risks. The conflict begins.

She wants to be part of the group. The group direction says she should take on the role of the sweet good woman—but the young girl wants to gag. Before you know it, she has taken on delinquent behavior—blue hair, a nose ring, tattoos—and she becomes enrolled in an alternative school.

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**There is a group of risk-taking females out there, and you as teacher are inviting your young female student to indulge herself in risk-taking behavior.**

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The alternative education teacher who can identify risk-taking behavior in a female student and say so—and further say, "I see this in your writing"—is giving that student a small window of light at the end of a tunnel. There is a group of risk-taking females out there, and you as teacher are inviting your young female student to indulge herself in risk-taking behavior. With such encouragement, the female student will want to write about what really matters to her. *Jane Eyre* is still a novel that succeeds powerfully with a young woman who is sampling such challenges.

*"I've stayed in the front yard all my life.  
I want a peek at the back  
Where it's rough and untended and hungry  
weed grows.  
a girl gets sick of a rose."  
—Gwendolyn Brooks*

We must return to my English class and the girls who parroted dangling earrings and eye makeup. Obviously the girls are exploring new roles, whether they are heavy biology-walkers or black lace high-tops. The maxim, "They'll follow whatever duck looks like a mother," has been working in my classrooms.

In that English class we spent the term reading, talking and writing, using four stories as a springboard. The first was Alice Munro's "The Red Dress" and "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968). We also read Guy Vanderhaeghe's "Drummer" and "Cages" (*Man Descending*, 1982). These four stories talk about

young people wondering about the big question—the opposite sex. Vanderhaeghe's language is strong, contrasted to the lady-like expression of Munro. But students bought into both authors; their essays had much to say about relationships: father, son, mother, daughter, brother, peers and romance. All of these stories deal with the very thing women understand so well—social mores. It was also interesting how sensitively the males handled these stories. In fact, many male students read and discussed feminist material in a mature way. But what did the students see in the stories? Uncensored writing—thus, they wrote me uncensored writing. I always responded as honestly as I could.

Another writer who was harder to teach but equally successful in generating student writing is Bharati Mukherjee. Her short story "Jasmine" (*The Middle Man and Other Stories*, 1989) addresses modern immigration in our society. The students enjoyed Jasmine's daring, risk-taking behavior. My final essay question to them was to predict what would finally happen to Jasmine, based on the story. In another story, "Orbiting," Mukherjee describes a very alternative Thanksgiving. Students from dysfunctional families had no trouble writing letters to different characters in the story and telling them how to "accept" each other. I am not using traditional male literature that is a polished obtuse diamond of technical brilliance (Hemingway and those horrible white hills of Africa), but stories about the struggle for continuity, and the threat to continuity.

I also use a few movies that work every time. The first is *East of Eden*. We also read from the text. A few students always go on and read the whole book. Julie Harris plays perfectly to James Dean. She models female risk-taking. A second movie which I use is *Pow Wow Highway*, where we see a fat hero. There are always overweight students in the school, struggling with self-image and vulnerability. Female students often respond by writing about the collective responsibility portrayed in this movie.

Other writing allowed young women to vent their anger and frustration in biography and autobiography, through interviewing each other, and through poetry which the class publishes. Young women have a lot of anger. It is hard as a

teacher to read one more angry-female poem, but my strategy has been to believe that sooner or later it will all work itself out. If a happy poem appears accidentally in the midst of all the pages of gloom, celebrate it. It might generate another happy poem.

I can remember one statement I made which accidentally endeared me to Julie. Students were coming in from lunch break. Someone somewhere was playing music very loud. Another teacher went past the door to go after the "too loud music." I turned to Julie and said, "There is no such thing as too loud music." Julie roared. She loved it. Why is it guys only are permitted to love too loud music? Julie and I want our music loud, and offensive too.

*My mother got out her Ashes of Roses  
Cologne,  
which she never used, and let me splash it  
over my arms.  
Then she zipped up the dress and turned  
me around to the mirror.  
The dress was princess style, very tight in  
the midriff.  
I saw how my breasts, in their new stiff  
brassiere, jutted out surprisingly, with  
mature  
authority, under the childish frills of the  
collar.*

—Alice Munro

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**The young women came to say  
good-bye. I feared for these 16- and  
18-year-old teens were going to  
cross this vast country alone.**

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The last time I saw Julie, she and her friend, Dolores, came over to my house before they took off for California. Julie and her boyfriend had naturally found the need for some space in a too intense relationship. Dolores was one of those quiet wallpaper types until she got around me. The young women came to say good-bye. I feared for these 16- and 18-year-old teens were going to cross this vast country alone. But I never said, "Don't go." They had both been on the street for two years. The world they lived in had already thrown them away. That evening I showed them

pictures of an Apache Indian Sunrise Ceremony that I had recently photographed on the San Carlos Indian Reservation in Arizona. The Indian female at the age of puberty undergoes a great ceremony. Her family brings her out. She is dressed in deerskin and beads. The dancing begins at dawn and goes on until noon. Then a feast begins. The ceremony is filled with symbols of the special power of the young female. Everyone wants to touch her to get some of that power. The whole tribe dances around her and for her. An Apache school teacher explained to me the significance of the event. "The Apache lives on the back of the female all his life," the teacher said. "First he is carried as a papoose. Then, everything he does is supported by women. We owe our women everything."

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**They are America's next generation, uncelebrated in every way.**

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I was explaining all of this to the two young females thrown out of their homes and on their way to California. They are America's next generation, uncelebrated in every way. These females have categorically shut down rather than become "sweet good women," although I find

them to be two of the most delightful young people I have ever met, full of wonder and sensitive intellect. Will they even live until they get to California? When they get there, will they go to school? What will they write about? I know that will be interesting—and not be from the point of view of "sweet good women." I wonder, will they pass the course?

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