



## ***Creating a Place for Lesbian and Gay Readings in Secondary English Classrooms***

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*A life lived in fear is a life half-lived.  
Strictly Ballroom*

**A**s a cautionary note to readers, let me begin by stating my preferred title for this piece: “How Watching a Silly Film Initiated the Process of Rethinking My Own Approach to Reader-Response Theories.” What that title lacks in pithiness it makes up for in accuracy. For in this essay, I will return to 1993 when I first saw the Australian comedy *Strictly Ballroom*, which evoked in me a powerful response. In considering that response, I, as a novice teacher and a gay man, began to think about the implications of the pattern of responses I have as a reader of film and literature. Why would this film strike a chord with me? Was I merely projecting my own desires as a gay reader onto the film? Or was I constructing meaning in a personal way, one that was perhaps similar to that of other gay spectators? In trying to answer these questions, I began to examine the place of lesbian and gay readers and readings in secondary English classrooms.

### **We Are Everywhere?**

Since the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the advent of the gay rights movement, lesbian and gay visibility has increased dramatically

in the culture at large. In the academic realm, we have seen the formation of a new discipline—lesbian and gay studies—and in many quarters we can honestly say that there is a better understanding of sexual difference. Secondary schools, however, for the most part seem to have resisted such change; while there are isolated instances of progress—gay-straight alliances, same-sex couples attending school dances—lesbians and gay males are still by and large an invisible minority in middle and senior high schools.

In facing the everyday reality that most lesbian and gay students would not dare to reveal their sexual identity to their peers or teachers, we have to push ourselves to understand why this is so. Describing the difficult psychosocial adjustments these students face, Harbeck and Uribe write:

For [lesbian and gay adolescents, secondary] school is often a time of isolation, humiliation, and pain. Those who openly admit their sexual orientation or who depart from traditional sex-role stereotypes . . . are verbally harassed and physically abused. Those who conceal their homosexual feelings experience loneliness and alienation, a splitting of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity from the rest of their personality. . . . By developing elaborate concealment strategies these young people are often able to “pass as straight,” but at some significant, unmeasurable cost to their developmental process, self-esteem, and sense of connection. . . . The traditional support structures that serve all other children do not serve gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. (11–12)

My own experience with U.S. public schools and international schools abroad leads me to conclude that many teachers and administrators often turn a blind eye to blatant examples of homophobia such as name-calling or bullying of those thought to be lesbian or gay. In other words, institutionalized homophobia usually goes unchallenged. At the international school where I currently teach, when discussing with colleagues the general need to foster greater tolerance and understanding, I am impressed by the high level of awareness shown for various minority groups within the school, as well as a certain willingness to appreciate individual differences among students. The faculty seem genuinely eager to promote openness and curiosity, to have students

look beyond themselves in order to consider the world at large, and to help them find a place for themselves in a rapidly changing society. Yet when I attempt to discuss the need for increased awareness of issues facing lesbian and gay people and the importance of confronting homophobia within the school community, I often encounter what at first seems to be ignorance. Many well-meaning colleagues say they would be more inclusive if only they had more knowledge; some say they would rather not talk about homosexuality at all because the issue makes them uncomfortable; still others cannot understand why such discussions are relevant in the classroom setting; and I even have heard a few say that so long as they have no students who identify as lesbian or gay, there is no need to raise the topic. There are times, of course, when I wonder if this ignorance is not in fact veiled hostility.

Have we not reached the point in the year 2000 where we can agree that lesbian and gay people do exist in significant numbers and in all walks of life? Why, then, do these arguments against their inclusion persist? Would social studies teachers be serving their students well by ignoring feminism in a unit on social movements of the past fifty years because they just did not know enough to include such information? Would science teachers be nurturing a healthy approach to scientific investigation if, during work on genetics, they bypassed topical discussions on research into genetic predisposition for, say, eye and hair color, because such discussions brought discomfort? Would we consider it acceptable for literature teachers to refuse to assign works by African American authors on the grounds that there were no African American students in their classrooms? So many of us fool ourselves into thinking that we have no lesbian or gay students or that discussions about homosexuality are irrelevant for our students who identify as straight. By making such decisions, teachers deny students the opportunity to develop understanding and open-mindedness toward other ways of being in the world.

If we consider the attempts made in the past few decades to end racism and sexism in schools, we certainly have not expected children from groups which have been excluded or marginalized to challenge the system on their own. Rather, we have counted on adults in schools to ensure the safety of all children and to help them develop to their fullest potential in academic and social realms.

## Implications for the English Teacher

These questions about inclusion have evolved over the years as I have explored more deeply my role as a secondary English teacher in encouraging personal response to the literature my students and I read and discuss. Having been trained in reader-response theory, I have noted the “opening” many theorists provide for various types of discourse, from the subjective approach articulated by Bleich, for example, who asserts that “all people, young and old, think about themselves most of the time and think about the world in terms of themselves. . . . [U]nderstanding and reconceptualizing a work of literature can be best understood as expressions of the personalities of the reader. The role of personality in response is the most fundamental fact of criticism” (4); to Rosenblatt’s theory that meaning emerges from “the reader’s contribution in the two-way, ‘transactional’ relationship with the text” (*The Reader* ix). While I want to imagine the inclusion of lesbian and gay readers in these theories, never in the canon of reader-response texts have I found reference to the role sexual identity plays in the reader’s efforts to read and understand literature.

Gradually a new set of questions emerged for me to ponder, such as: Don’t lesbian and gay readers locate themselves in a text just as other groups of readers do? Moving beyond mere response and realizing that most works taught in the secondary English classroom ignore or pejoratively depict homosexuality, I asked myself: When confronted with heterosexist or homophobic bias in the text and subsequently in class discussions, do lesbian and gay adolescents, in order to protect themselves, efface their own identity for the sake of fitting in with “accepted” or “traditional” interpretations which validate those biases?

While at the university level such questioning has been elaborated under the auspices of queer theory, I have seen little interrogation of this issue at the secondary level. Yet let us look at the way Rosenblatt envisioned the ideal English classroom setting in her seminal text *Literature as Exploration*:

The youth needs to be given the opportunity and the courage to approach literature personally, to let it mean something to

[him or her] directly. The classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should create a feeling of security. [She or he] should be made to feel that [her or his] own response to books, even though it may not resemble the standard critical comments, is worth expressing. Such a liberating atmosphere will make it possible . . . to have an unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction. (66–67)

While Rosenblatt may not specifically have had lesbian and gay students in mind, her words should resonate with English teachers who, sensitive to the needs of all students, aim to foster “a liberating atmosphere” and “unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction[s]” in literature discussions. The contrary would be classrooms which inhibit or, worse, prohibit students (in the context of this argument, read lesbian and gay students) from participating fully and honestly in the study of literature.

In widening the reader-response approach, therefore, we can consider the work of a number of feminist critics who have argued for a new type of reading. Patrocinio Schweickart, in critiquing the androcentric bias in canonical literature, urges resistance in the act of reading:

Taking control of the reading experience means reading the text as it was *not* meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself. Specifically, one must identify the nature of the choices proffered by the text and, equally important, what the text precludes—namely, the possibility of reading as a woman *without* putting one’s self in the position of the other, of reading so as to affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence. (81–82)

This idea of the “resisting” reader is precisely what I have in mind when discussing lesbian and gay readers and readings. Yet it would be naive to assume that adolescents, especially those who identify as lesbian or gay, would come forward to challenge heterosexist readings of texts, especially in a school environment in which being identified as homosexual could lead to physical and/or psychological abuse. For that reason, we as teachers must not only encourage but also be willing to lead the broadening of dialogue in the classroom so that it is inclusive of *every* student,

which in reality is just one step in the process of transforming an intolerant school environment into one which genuinely accommodates lesbian and gay people.

An English classroom which embraces lesbian and gay readers and readings would serve all students—those who are lesbian and gay themselves, those who have other differences which go unrecognized, and those who lack sensitivity to difference. Ultimately in this essay I would like to introduce such a scenario, but before we enter the classroom I want to go back to 1993 when I first saw the film *Strictly Ballroom*, the starting point of my own understanding of myself as a gay reader.

### **The Text: *Strictly Ballroom***

*Strictly Ballroom* focuses on the world of competitive ballroom dancing in Australia. By the time it was released in the United States, the film had already received much favorable attention in Australia and parts of Europe. Director Baz Luhrmann conceived the story, originally performed as a play, as an allegory of the suppression of artistic expression behind the Iron Curtain during the cold war (Brunette 26). The principal characters are Scott (Paul Mercurio), a rebellious young competitive dancer who bucks the system in the name of artistic freedom; Fran (Tara Morice), a shy young student in a ballroom dance school who aspires to be Scott's dancing partner; and Scott's father, Doug Hastings (Barry Otto), a rather detached and seemingly broken man who quietly encourages the pairing of Scott and Fran.

The film begins with on-screen red velvet stage curtains opening to reveal sparkly titles, perhaps serving as an enticement to enter another world. Such an opening—the film ends with the curtains closing—asks the audience to suspend its disbelief, thus allowing the director to introduce implausible plot shifts and fantasy sequences.

In the ensuing ninety minutes, Luhrmann concocts a fairly simple and somewhat silly story. Fortunately, he decorates it with wonderfully eccentric characters and intentionally exaggerated melodrama. Strauss's "Blue Danube Waltz" provides a backdrop for the opening scene, as we glimpse, behind half-opened double

doors, silhouettes of dancers in slow motion warming up just before starting a competition. As the music ushers in twirling couples in slow motion, the lights come up and the camera zooms in on their garish costumes and highly stylized moves.

Luhrmann grabs our attention as we wonder at this artificial world. We laugh at the spectacle, yet we remain curious about who these people are. Suddenly, documentary-style, the camera jump-cuts to a living room where Scott's inconsolable mother, Shirley Hastings (Pat Thomson), disconsolately describes her agony over her son's audacity in trying new "crowd-pleasing" steps in a regional ballroom dance competition. "That's the tragedy—my son was a champion!" she laments.

Next, we flash back to the scene Shirley has just described. On the dance floor, Scott and his partner Liz (Gia Carides), moving to a samba beat, become boxed in by another couple, forcing Scott in an act of desperation to break out of his traditional steps. From this point on, he seems unable to control himself. We hear from Scott's coach, Les Kendall (Peter Whitford), who derides Scott's behavior; we recoil as dance federation head Barry Fife (Bill Hunter) moralistically admonishes those who would dare to try new steps; and then Scott's mother comes back on screen, this time even more upset, wailing, "I keep asking myself, Why? Did I do something wrong? Did I fail him as a mother?"

Less than ten minutes into the film, we are fully immersed in the lives of characters who take themselves so seriously; to add to their zaniness, Luhrmann often films them in extreme close-up. We quickly understand, though, who is being shaped as the hero: The camera loves Scott's handsome, angular face and his lithe body, which moves so elegantly; furthermore, his rebellious streak, brazen self-confidence, and youthful nature all stand in stark contrast to the oppressive stances taken by the older generation. Obviously he does not heed the federation's rules as the others do, as evidenced by his risking a chance at winning.

Once the dust has settled, Scott seems as shell-shocked as everyone else, although his confusion more likely stems from the overreaction of others to his behavior. The omnipotent and sleazy Barry Fife sums up the general reaction to Scott when he says, directly to the camera, "Well, of course you can dance any steps you like. That doesn't mean you'll win." We realize that Scott

has effectively ruled out any future he might have had as a competitive dancer by challenging the authority of the dance federation.

The rest of the film charts Les and Shirley's frantic attempts to find Scott a suitable partner, Fran's newfound boldness in asking Scott to give her a chance as his partner, and Doug's vicarious thrill at seeing his son rebel against a system which years before had crushed him in a similar manner due to the machinations of Shirley, Les, and Barry. Although most of the film comes off as parody, Luhrmann never lets it get out of hand. The audience grows giddy with the bizarre goings-on, only to be reminded every so often that something important is at stake here; namely, artistic freedom.

If the film had been played straight—that is, without the winking of the camera's eye—*Strictly Ballroom* would have been no better than the standard Hollywood comedy. By using heavy doses of humor and irony, however, the director weaves a significant message and provides visual and textual clues which invite the viewer into an act of complicity in the interpretive process. We cannot help but cheer for Scott and Fran, and yet we revel in the depiction of the cartoonish characters who stand in their way, simply because they are larger than life.

## **Crafting a Gay Reading of the Film**

As far back as I can remember, I have been most attracted to films and literary texts that reject the rules, that show me the world from an unusual perspective. My passion for a particular work stems from my attachment to characters with the ability to overcome obstacles, which often take the form of societal oppression. The three characters at the center of *Strictly Ballroom* all have some trait that sets them apart from and makes them the object of derision by the rest of the crowd; however, they retain dreams that translate into fierce optimism. If they were to accept the reality as laid down by the majority, they would never succeed.

As I became engrossed in the film, certain lines of dialogue took me beyond the surface story, allowing me to read the film in

a deeply personal way. For example, Shirley Hastings's dismay over her son's refusal to conform ("Did I fail him as a mother?"), along with her disparaging comments about her ineffectual husband, strangely echo the misogynistic and homophobic cultural myths in our society, perpetuated through now-outdated medical and psychiatric discourses which have insisted that homosexuality in males is "caused" by a domineering mother and a weak father. Les Kendall, who appears to be a gay character, is called a "faggot" by Barry Fife when it is discovered that he has assisted Scott and Fran. In general, the lines spoken by the film's authority figures about preserving sacred traditions, conforming for the sake of upholding the status quo, and fighting the corrosive influence of nonconformist behavior mirrored the kinds of utterances I was reading daily in the conservative media in response to lesbian and gay visibility. As Barry prepares to wage war against Scott, he imperiously declares, "It's about time that lad learned some home truths about where this kind of thing can lead."

On another level, I was drawn into the film by Scott's physical appeal and his independent spirit, which pushes him to go against the grain. He rejects the regulation dance steps not just because they are not right for him but also because there is injustice in the dance federation's tyranny. He follows his instincts, and in doing so he disrupts the world around him. When he cannot understand why such fierce opposition is directed toward him for doing what he feels is natural, he cries out, "What's wrong with me? What is so wrong with the way I dance?" Reading the film as a gay man, it did not take long for me to develop an affinity with Scott.

Interestingly, Scott, who exudes sexuality on the dance floor yet appears to have no interest in anyone except himself and his dancing, falls for Fran by the end of the movie; it is not clear how serious their relationship will be, as Scott himself admits that it is the passion of the dance that has made him romantic. While one might assume that this blossoming romance defines Scott as heterosexual, I found Scott's hedging on his feelings an even more appealing aspect of his character. It gave me, the viewer, a further opening through which to project my own same-sex desire, knowing as I do how impossible it is to fix boundaries to desire. The

moment when Scott shares a kiss with Fran comes across as the least authentic scene in the film and led me to read their romance as inconsequential.

Certainly *Strictly Ballroom* is not a gay film per se. Rather, I would argue that my reading of the film relies on my sensibility as a gay man. Charting this difficult terrain in his afterword to *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Movies*, Vito Russo cautions against defining a gay sensibility while acknowledging that it does exist:

Gay sensibility is not something we have or share or use. It isn't even something that only gay people express. It's a blindness to sexual divisions, an inability to perceive that people are different simply because of sexuality, a natural conviction that difference exists but doesn't matter; that there's no such thing as normal even when a majority of people think so. (326)

In the past two decades, studies of the reception of film by gay viewers have placed the viewer/reader in focus alongside the "text" and "author," mirroring in many respects reader-response theories in literature. In a chapter on gay readings of film in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Janet Staiger studies various gay male responses in the 1950s to film star Judy Garland, contending:

One of the procedures gay men seem to have used is to find homologous image structures between themselves and others—of the same or different gender and sexual orientation—and to apply those individuals' experiences to their own circumstances. Without images of their own, this seems . . . a reading strategy much like that of any repressed group's struggle over the meaning of a sign. (176)

Staiger carefully stresses that she is not lumping together all gay males as a monolith but instead is analyzing a phenomenon which existed within a certain faction of the gay male population over forty years ago. For when we attempt to understand responses to texts, we look for patterns.

Beyond the aforementioned elements of my own construct of *Strictly Ballroom*, I also saw a camp quality to the film. As Susan

Sontag defines it, camp “is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (281). Director Luhrmann has put such effort into every detail of the film’s look and sound that he sacrifices character development; dance and music do most of the storytelling for us. From the outlandish costumes to the outrageous personalities portrayed on screen, the entire film seemed to be true to Sontag’s definition in that we can see a “proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive” (285). While *Strictly Ballroom* might not appeal to all lesbian, gay, and knowing straight viewers, it would most likely resonate with many of them for these reasons.

### **Lesbian and Gay Readers and Readings in the Classroom**

Imagine lesbian and gay students in an English classroom who might “read” a text similarly to the way I have read *Strictly Ballroom*. If not openly gay at school, they would face a dilemma over responding honestly to the text. Knowing that their teacher asks students to share responses, they most likely would be tempted to choose a response other than the one they instinctively feel, for obvious reasons reluctant to expose themselves as gay.

Imagine too that the only romantic relationships depicted in literary texts are heterosexual and that no reference whatsoever is made to the possibility of divergence from this “norm.” In class discussions, lesbian and gay students would listen as classmates—most of whom probably self-identify as heterosexual—express strong reactions to and personal connections with the text at hand. They would sit by feeling marginalized, unable to speak their minds. The essay or presentation which could have emerged from an honest response might not have been brilliant, but it would have been heartfelt; most students are energized and motivated by the thought of sharing their original ideas. In suppressing their responses, however, lesbian and gay students learn a sad lesson about their sexual identity: neither the teacher nor their classmates will acknowledge it. They themselves fear asserting it in public, and even though they might share certain

values with their peers, they are effectively silenced because of who they are. Fear prevents recognition, and with the absence of lesbian and gay voices, we easily develop and perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices.

I am not asserting that every lesbian and gay student reads the way I have done, or that such readings exclude or take precedence over other types of reading; rather, I am putting forward the idea that if we do not give students the opportunity to be truly genuine in their responses, no matter where they locate themselves in the text, we have fared poorly as teachers. We must try to imagine the world through their eyes by opening ourselves to the various possibilities of reading the texts we teach. We also surely must strive, as Rosenblatt urges, “to help the student arrive at a more balanced and lucid sense of the work [which] involves the parallel effort to help [the student] understand and evaluate [his or her] personal emphases” (*Literature* 96). Moreover, we must understand that “the nature of the student’s rudimentary response is, perforce, part of our teaching materials” (51).

How does an English teacher create a place for lesbian and gay readers and readings in the secondary classroom? An important step would be to acknowledge publicly that there are lesbian and gay readings of texts and to find a way to express them in the classroom. This task is not necessarily easy to undertake, for again, reader-response theorists do not usually locate lesbian and gay readings in their theories although they do provide spaces for them. If we were to take, say, Richard Beach’s approach to various perspectives of reader-response theories, which he labels textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural (8–9), we could locate lesbian and gay readings in most, if not all, of these categories. Opening ourselves as teachers to these possibilities would enable such readings to emerge and develop.

Furthermore, as texts concerning lesbian and gay studies are published in greater numbers each year, teachers can find valuable resources in bookstores and libraries and on the Internet. Several critical series which deal primarily with texts used in secondary schools are beginning to address issues of sexual identity. In teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, I have found Twayne’s Masterwork Studies edition of this 1950s novel to be

helpful in challenging overt homophobia in the text. Sanford Pinsker, in a chapter titled “And Holden Caulfield Had a Great Fall,” discusses the protagonist’s derogatory references toward homosexuality throughout the novel and his efforts to confront his feelings for his favorite English teacher, whom he suspects is “a flit.” Presenting Pinsker’s analysis as a basis for class discussion, I urge students to address Holden’s homophobia in the course of seeing patterns in his behavior; not surprisingly, they can draw from their own experiences of hearing antigay comments from their peers. Students readily see that Holden often uses homophobic language when he grows defensive or confused on sexual matters, but as he matures he shows a willingness to reevaluate his attitude when faced with the possibility that a man he idolizes is gay.

I remember the profound effect *The Catcher in the Rye* had on me as a young reader. Holden’s rebelliousness and his search for goodness in the world made him a hero in my eyes. At the same time I was admitting to myself my own desire for the same sex, sadly, homophobic comments made by peers, silence on the part of adults, and daily validation of heterosexism and even homophobia in school became powerful warnings to me against public disclosure of my own sexual identity. I accepted Holden’s homophobia because I had no means with which to challenge it. Now, as a teacher of young people, I know that being complicitous through silence when encountering such antigay sentiment only reinforces oppressive social relations.

### **“A life lived in fear . . .”**

Teachers must open up their own imaginations before they can expect their students to do the same. Rosenblatt, again writing in general terms but making a point which has a special meaning for gay people, defines the role a literature teacher must play in encouraging personal response:

We must indeed forgo the wish for a single “correct” or absolute meaning for each text. *If we agree on criteria for validity of interpretation*, however, we can decide on the most defen-

sible interpretation or interpretations. Of course, there remains the possibility of equally valid alternative interpretations as well as for alternative criteria for validity of interpretation. Such an approach enables us to present a sophisticated understanding of the openness and the constraints of language to our students without abnegating the possibility of responsible reading of texts. (*The Reader* 183)

To take this a step further, we must see lesbian and gay readings as valid, but we also must question criteria for validity of interpretation when they are heterosexist, just as feminist critics have challenged sexist and masculinist criteria.

Creating space for lesbian and gay readings initiates a dialogue which in practice most secondary classrooms lack. This dialogue can lead to wholesale transformation of attitudes, for in reading and discussing texts we must remember that “the point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to *change the world*. We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (Schweickart 70).

I would not want to conclude this essay without a return to *Strictly Ballroom*, to which I am indebted for my own initiation into appreciating lesbian and gay readings of texts. In an interesting turn, it is not until late in the film that Doug Hastings, the protagonist’s father, is developed as a heroic character. His role in the film becomes transformed when he comes out of his shell and from behind his annoying home-video camera, and implores his son to follow his heart. Doug’s redemption is the most satisfying and emotional moment of the film.

To me, Doug easily represents a past generation stymied by social pressures and an oppressive culture. Through the present generation—epitomized in brash and confident Scott but perhaps more subtly brought across through shy but strong-willed Fran, Doug’s real soulmate—Doug is able to recapture the moment of glory stolen from him years earlier. While others might not read exactly the same meaning into Doug’s role in the film, for me he exemplifies the film’s motto, which Scott learns from Fran: “A life lived in fear is a life half-lived.”

In the classroom, we should be able to understand that our lesbian and gay students who suppress their true responses out

of fear resort to half responses to texts. In the same way, students who identify as straight lose the opportunity to understand and appreciate multiple readings if lesbian and gay readings are not given full expression. After all, an important aspect of our work as English teachers is to foster honest and genuine dialogue in our classrooms so that literature can help us and our students imagine worlds beyond the ones we normally inhabit. In doing so, we can take the lead in making schools better places for everyone.

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