

# If I Were a Woman

## Integrating Literature and Diversity across the Curriculum

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### Introduction

The course I teach in Cultural Diversity is a requirement for pre-service teachers seeking a Preliminary Teaching Credential as well as for in-service teachers who have returned to earn the California Teachers of English Learners (CTEL) Certificate. As part of this course I require a literature analysis assignment. In this article I will focus on how this assignment can be used by K-12 teachers in their own classroom settings. I will describe how I use a particular piece of literature to raise diversity issues while at the same time addressing important curriculum content standards.

The emphasis here is focused more on the content of the assignment than it is on providing a rationale for the assignment itself, in part because I did not create this particular assignment. While I believe it is a powerful planning tool for pre-service as well as in-service teachers, I cannot personally take credit for it. This assignment was passed on to me as part of the course outline that describes the Cultural Diversity course.

In searching for the origins of this assignment, I find that it was apparently inspired by a short section in the Appendix of Sonia Nieto's book *Affirming Diversity* (2000), which is used as the textbook for this course. In that appendix, Nieto says:

Because they reveal the intimate and social experiences of those who feel like "outsiders," novels and short stories can be tremendously powerful in teaching about others who are different from us. Literature also provides an authentic and engaging way to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion, the pain and

fear of immigration and racism, and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of obstacles. Gay and lesbian students are often marginalized as well, and fortunately literature is now being written to help both them and their heterosexual peers to face this exclusion honestly. (p. 380)

I believe this excerpt provides a strong rationale from which to recommend the assignment to other teachers and teacher educators. Over the several years that I have used this assignment, I have modified some of the parameters only slightly, in order to clarify what I think are the most important elements for teachers to consider while preparing their literature-and-diversity-based activities for their own classroom use.

Thus, I will focus here on recommending the specific literature selection I have developed and on the importance of raising the particular diversity issue I have identified. The short story I have selected, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" by Isaac B. Singer (1982), is very useful for teachers in secondary classrooms as they seek to raise and address gender identity issues.

### The Assignment

To provide a sense of what this process might look like, let me begin by presenting the directions for the assignment, just as I provide them to my students:

*Literature Analysis:  
Stories about Coming of Age  
and the Immigrant Experience*

*Purpose:* To review personal narratives of young people from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds which can reveal intimate and social experiences and thus be a teaching tool about those who are different from us.

*Process:* Read and react in writing to a novel or short story in a two page paper/handout. Present your findings to the

class. Address the following prompts in your paper/handout:

- A. Give a biographical sketch of the author.
- B. Briefly explain the storyline *and* the main message or moral of the story.
- C. Explain an activity that could be used with the story to connect with or build on the prior knowledge/experience of students from various cultural backgrounds.
- D. Describe a lesson related to the story that would integrate students' cultures, histories, and/or traditions in a particular content area and grade level. List the relevant California Content Standards.

As is evident, engaging students in reading literature is a necessary aspect of the assignment across any grade level and content area. However, in this case the real importance of the assignment is to integrate issues of diversity into the classroom context.

### A Caveat on Literary Criticism

Before I move on to my specific example, let me offer a caveat in regard to literary criticism. Some textual analysis and research is, of course, required to complete this assignment. That is, teachers must prepare effectively to use a piece of literature in their classrooms, especially when it is to be used as a way to introduce issues of diversity.

Since I am not a literary critic by any means, I am admittedly downplaying this aspect of the task and largely presume that my own take on the selection in question is sufficient for our purposes. This is also my expectation for my own students. I like to see them advance their own interpretation of the literature they select, over and above what they may have gleaned from additional background study of the work.

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My course is not one in literary analysis—it is about teaching, and I want my teachers to come away believing in their own power to produce strong lessons.

Also, this assignment is relevant for teachers of all grades and subjects, so integrating the text in a developmentally and conceptually appropriate way is more important—in my opinion—than interpreting the text itself accurately. That said, the following is the sample I created for my students, in which I assume I am teaching in a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts classroom.

### Part A Biographical Sketch of the Author

Isaac Bashevis Singer (born November 21, 1902; died July 24, 1991) was a Polish Jewish American author noted for his short stories. He was one of the leading figures in the Yiddish literary movement and received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978. Singer's father was a Hasidic rabbi and his mother was the daughter of a rabbi.

In 1921, Singer entered a rabbinical seminary but soon decided that neither the school nor the profession suited him. He then tried to support himself by giving Hebrew lessons but soon gave that up as well. In 1923 he moved to Warsaw to work as a proofreader and editor.

In 1935 Singer emigrated from Poland to the United States due to the growing Nazi threat in neighboring Germany. This move separated the author from his common-law first wife and son. Singer settled in New York, where he took up work as a journalist and columnist for a Yiddish-language newspaper. He married a German-Jewish refugee woman from Munich in 1940 and produced prolific writings using various pen names.

Singer always wrote and published in Yiddish and then edited his novels and stories for their American versions, which became the basis for all other translations. He wrote at least 18 novels, 14 children's books, and a number of memoirs, essays, and articles, but is best known as a writer of short stories. The short story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," first published around 1960, has enjoyed a wide impact since its conversion into the musical-drama movie "Yentl" in 1983 starring Barbara Streisand.

While based on a play co-written by Singer, he gave the movie a poor review. Overall, his writings reflect the world of the East European Jewry he grew up in and, after many years in America, his

stories also concerned the world of the immigrants and how their American dream proves elusive, sometimes even after they have seemed to obtain it. Singer died on July 24, 1991 in Florida, after suffering a series of strokes.<sup>1</sup>

### Part B The Storyline, Message, and Moral

Yentl is a young Jewish woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland who eagerly desires to study the sacred books of Judaism, which is not considered an acceptable activity for a Jewish woman. When her father dies, Yentl sells their house, cuts her hair, puts on men's clothes, and sets out to find a yeshiva—a school in which the sacred texts of Judaism are studied by young men who are to become rabbis.

She meets a yeshiva student named Avigdor and follows him to his school where they become best of friends and close study partners. Yentl, who has taken on the name Anshel, hides her background and female identity from everyone. After Avigdor marries another woman, and leaves the yeshiva, Anshel marries Avigdor's ex-fiancé.

Yentl struggles with the increasing deceptions she has to keep up to maintain her false identity and, during an overnight trip out of town with Avigdor, reveals to him that she is a woman. Despite Avigdor's several intimations that they could both get divorced and then re-marry each other, Yentl rejects him. Although both do get divorced, Avigdor re-marries his ex-fiancé while Yentl continues to live her life of study as a man.

Throughout the story we see many indications that Yentl is struggling with her gender identity. In the narrator's words, "she had not been created for the noodle board and the pudding dish" (p. 150). Later, Yentl herself will say much the same, "I wasn't created for plucking feathers and chattering with females" (p. 164). Even her father says, "you have the soul of a man" (p. 149), which is also what Avigdor comes to think after Yentl reveals herself to him and tries to explain why she did what she did (p. 165).

Yentl had to find a way to get into the yeshiva so she could study, even if that meant having to look and act like a man. And, in the end, she could not give up that way of life: the story closes with Yentl bound to continue her life of study as Anshel rather than pursue a life married to (or even close to) Avigdor, whom she cares for deeply. To be fulfilled, she had to follow

her "destiny" (p. 167), as she puts it, "I'll live out my time as I am ..." (p. 166).

Given these indications, it seems that Singer is suggesting that we must follow what our interior life is calling us to, even if that means going against what the surrounding society expects of us or what our culture tells us is right. Further, with regard to who we are or our identity in religious, cultural, and gender terms, Singer also seems to be saying that it's okay to be questioning and searching.

Sometimes we don't know why we do what we do, or more accurately, why we want to do what we want to do. Sometimes what we *are* is too strong for us to go against and so, for the sake of happiness, fulfillment, or integrity we have to do what we truly want to do, what we are meant to do, what we were born to do—we have to be what is deep down inside of us, that is, who we are.

### Part C An Activity to Build on Students' Prior Knowledge

Students are asked to do a quick-write on the following prompts:

Yentl had to dress and act like a man in order to be accepted into the yeshiva to study the sacred books, which she greatly desired to do. Think of a time when you really felt strongly that you wanted to do something, act a certain way, or be a certain kind of person, but at the same time you felt great pressure *against* doing so because certain people around you "wouldn't understand" or wouldn't accept you as you are. Write a bit about how you felt and what you thought. Consider these questions as you write: Did you talk to anyone about it or consult any other sources or resources that helped you figure out what to do? What *did* you do: did you go ahead with what you wanted to or not? Why? How did it work out? What happened to the people you thought would not accept you?

In the context of the larger lesson, which follows, students are asked to share out parts of their answers in small, heterogeneous groups. The ensuing discussion is then focused on identifying the beliefs and values that our families and cultures have and the extent to which we choose these for ourselves.

### Part D A Lesson Involving the Students' Backgrounds

This lesson is conducted over two periods or days and is based on the following California English Language Arts content standards for grades 9 and 10 (see

California Department of Education, 1998, pp. 57 & 60).

### Reading

3.0 Literary Response and Analysis. Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science.

#### *Narrative Analysis of Grade-Level-Appropriate Text*

3.3 Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text (e.g., internal and external conflicts, motivations, relationships, influences) and explain the way those interactions affect the plot.

3.4 Determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

### Writing

2.0 Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics). Students combine the rhetorical strategies of narration, exposition, persuasion, and description to produce texts of at least 1,500 words each.

Using the writing strategies of grades 9 and 10 outlined in Writing Standard 1.0, students:

2.2 Write responses to literature:

- (a) Demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the significant ideas of literary works.
- (b) Support important ideas and viewpoints through accurate and detailed references to the text or to other works.<sup>2</sup>

After students have read the story, completed the quick-write exercise, and participated in the ensuing small group discussions, a whole class discussion addresses the following questions:

1. Which aspect of identity—gender, culture, or religion—plays the greatest role in Yentl's/Anshel's life?
2. To what extent is Avigdor necessary to the story? Could Singer have told the story of Yentl just as well, or even better, without Avigdor? How might the story have changed, for better or worse, if Avigdor's role were lessened or even eliminated?

With time permitting, additional issues can be examined to address standard 3.3 in greater depth by focusing in on any one of the standard's parenthetical concepts: For instance, compare Yentl's and Avigdor's *internal or external conflicts*. Or, what *motivations* does Yentl have for studying with Avigdor and what motivations does she have for leaving him? Or,

how do Yentl and Avigdor *influence* each other with regard to the spouses they choose and/or with regard to their continuation of sacred study?

In our discussions of questions 1 and 2 specifically, part of our goal is to meet standard 2.2 part (a) as well, that is, using textual citations—including quotes of what Yentl/Anshel thinks and says—to support our arguments. Thus we address specific lines and key ideas from the text. I will return to take a closer look at some of this analytic work on the text later. Here it is sufficient to note that the lesson could be adapted to suit the needs, interests, and capabilities of any specific classroom of students.

### Follow-Up Assignments

With the lesson completed, there are two follow up assessments which assume some prior knowledge and skill on the part of the students with respect to essay writing. The first, a homework assignment, asks students to compose an essay of two-to-three pages on the following prompt, closely related to question 1 above, but made personal:

Which aspect of identity—gender, culture, or religion—plays the greatest role in *your* life? Provide several examples to help support your position.

The final assessment is an in-class essay examination of four-to-five pages tying together several standards with the following prompt:

Which aspect of identity—gender, culture, or religion—plays the greatest role in Yentl's/Anshel's relationship with Avigdor? Consider the entire story, that is, both before and after Avigdor knows Anshel as Yentl. Use textual citations to support your argument.

### Issues Worth Discussing

The lesson I've outlined above is more detailed than what I normally expect from my students, since the course I teach is about diversity and not pedagogy or "methods" *per se*. With my class I intend in Part C to provide a way of connecting students with the story and in Part D I use one activity—not a full lesson with an assessment—that brings the literature into the course content in a natural way.

However, my description above may not be full enough to demonstrate how Yentl's story is a useful one for exploring issues of diversity in the classroom. Thus, while again admitting my limits in literary

criticism, I'd like to take some time to point out a few additional aspects of this story that I believe make it a good candidate for this purpose.

To begin with, this story provides a useful way into talking about issues of diversity in general, even if issues of *gender* diversity specifically are for any reason deemed unapproachable in a given classroom setting. "If I were a woman"—used as the title for this article—is a direct quote from the story as Yentl speaks to Avigdor (p. 160). This "if" could be used as a springboard into multiple perspectives, that is, for thinking about being a different person, whereby students could entertain a hypothetical situation about any aspect of identity. For example:

If I were a Catholic, then ...

If I were Italian, then ...

If I spoke Yiddish, then ...

If I came from Ireland, then ...

Or (my personal favorite, more in line with the setting and themes of Yentl's story), If I were a rich man, then ...

The students reflect on these possibilities and respond either in writing or conversation. The prompts can be left open ended as they are here or be made more specific so that students would intentionally learn about different cultures. For instance:

If I were from Poland, then I would likely speak the \_\_\_ language and follow the \_\_\_ religion.

In this way the prompts can be extended to factors other than gender, such as religion, ethnicity, language, heritage, and class. This makes for a more gradual approach for students, moving from aspects of diversity they are already comfortable with to others that might be new to them.

### Get the Conversation Going

For teachers and students who are more open to or comfortable with gender diversity issues, a variety of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Questioning (LGBTQ) and related topics can be addressed, as many are at least implicit in the story about Yentl and can be used to "get the conversation going" with adolescents.

It is clear at one point at least that Yentl is attracted to Hadass, Avigdor's ex-fiancé (p. 154), so there is some evidence for lesbianism. Further, it is also evident at one point that Yentl is in love with Avigdor himself, so bisexuality arises as an issue.

These conflicting or actually co-incidental desires or attractions Yentl has can form the basis for digging deeply into sexual preference and gender identity issues.

For example, why is she feeling the feelings that she does? Does she seem to be authentically experiencing both or is there a sense that she is deceiving herself? Does one feeling seem to take precedence either in how she understands it, speaks of or thinks about it, how she experiences it, and either acts on it or does not?

There are two statements that could be examined further in tandem with these questions. “In her dream she had been at the same time a man and a woman” (p. 155) and, “I’m neither one nor the other” (p. 164). What is Singer trying to say through Yentl? Is it that she believes she is possibly of bisexual form, or in other words, that she is not completely either but *to some extent* both? Or is it rather like she is not at all either, something like a neuter form? Or, is it perhaps that *she’s not sure herself* what she is?

#### A Clear Admission of Confusion

As I have indicated in the “message/moral of the story,” the reality, complexity, and authenticity of *questioning* seems to be what Singer wants us to come away with. In the same paragraph as the quote above, Singer remarks: “Even the soul was perplexed, finding itself incarnate in a strange body” (p. 155). Here we get a clear admission of confusion. Certainly, this could be the basis of a useful discussion for students to help them understand this reality, both by those who have had similar experiences or struggles and those who have not.

Clearly there are certain terms or phrases Singer uses that would be helpful to analyze closely or perhaps even re-translate from the original Yiddish. The version I have selected was not translated by Singer himself, so surely some meaning has been changed. While it is not my intention to try to sort out just what Singer means or intends in such phrases, it is notable that there is a significant tension between sex and gender in the story. Further, the gender aspect needs to be seen in the context of the setting and people and culture of the story, which is to say that it might be somewhat difficult to understand the author’s message without some real historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic contextualization and education.

With that said, I would suggest that the ultimate question is just as Singer has presented it through all the people of the

town, which is “why had Anshel done it?” (p. 168). In other words, why did Yentl do what she did? It’s as if Singer is asking the reader if they’ve figured out why. The answer must be either that she wanted to ‘be like a man’ in the sense that she wanted to do what men do, namely, study the sacred books—or—she *was* like a man, deep down, in her soul or being, so she *had* to want what men want. This tension between sex and gender, between being and doing, is a key source of useful discussion for students and is seen in several other places throughout the story as well.

#### Conclusion

While the emphasis in this particular story is on gender identity, I hope it is clear that many other aspects of diversity can be considered through the use of this and other pieces of literature. I selected this specific story first because I believe it is an exceptionally good piece of literature, and further because it can be used extremely effectively to begin to address issues of gender identity. These topics are timely and of crucial importance for schools to be addressing.

It is critical to help LGBTQ students *and others* develop emotional, intra-personal, and inter-personal intelligence, as well as self-esteem and a strong sense of identity, all in order to combat bias, prejudice, and bullying. Also, it is clear that there are a variety of levels of mandates for addressing gender and culture along with other issues of diversity, including the content standards in health education, several sections of the state Education Code, professional standards for teachers, and many other standards and regulations.

I would like to assure classroom teachers that while I have created my sample lesson for a 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade English and language arts classroom, this literature analysis assignment isn’t for high school reading teachers alone! At our university it is required of *all* our credential students, including Multiple Subject (elementary), Single Subject (secondary) in *all* content areas, as well as Special Education. While the task may be more difficult for some areas or levels, I strongly encourage my students to seek out a piece of literature that they can use in their future classrooms. Some of the selections used to date (with the classroom area in parentheses) are as follows: *How Many Days to America?* (history), *The Number Devil* (math), *Go and Come Back* (science), *I, Juan de Pareja* (art), *Whale Talk* (physical education), *An*

*American Summer* (special education), *When I was Puerto Rican* (languages other than English, Spanish).

It is worth bearing in mind also that, while the title of the assignment is “stories on coming of age and the immigrant experience,” I like to be flexible in this regard, with the result that auto/biographies, poems, and even plays have been used by my students to great effect. Ultimately, the point is to explore culture(s) while developing literacy skills in one’s content area—that is, integrating literature and diversity across the curriculum.

Through this sample assignment I hope I have presented a case for both the importance of integrating literature and literacy into all classroom levels and subjects as well as the importance of integrating diversity issues into our classroom lessons and conversations. The goal, beyond the academic task of the lesson at hand, is to get students connected to the story on a personal level. It is an opportunity to bring students’ lives—their prior knowledge, background, and experiences—to bear on the reading, to help them interpret it in their own light.

In turn, this will help them develop and re-affirm the value of their own perspective and can serve as an opportunity for them to learn about each other as well. It may take a little extra work on the part of teachers to plan such lessons, but I believe in the end the result will be curricula, classrooms, and schools that are stronger and more integrated. Such schools and classrooms will in turn help to produce students who are stronger and more integrated, with more integrity—just like Yentl.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This biographical sketch has been adapted largely from “Isaac Bashevis Singer,” 2011. For those who prefer other references, biographical information on Singer (and many other authors) can be culled from a variety of online sources such as:

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-bio.html)

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/isaac-bashevis-singer/about-issac-bashevis-singer/706>

<http://singer100.loa.org/life/1>

<http://www.purifymind.com/IsaacSinger.htm>

<http://www.notablebiographies.com/Sc-St/Singer-Isaac-Bashevis.html>  
<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/isinger.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Similar Core Content Standards could be

used in place of State standards. For instance, the following, which closely matches 3.3 is listed under Reading Standards for Literature 6-12, Grades 9-10 Students, Key Ideas and Details (p.29):

(3) Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

And these, which resemble 2.2a, are listed under Writing Standards 6-12, Grades 9-10 Students, Text Types and Purposes (p.36):

(1) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (a) Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create

an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counter-claims, reasons, and evidence.

See *California's Common Core Content Standards*, 10/15/10.

### References

California Department of Education. (1998). *English–Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. Sacramento, CA: Author. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/elecontentstnds.pdf>

*California's Common Core Content Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. (10/15/10). [http://www/scoe.net/castandards/agenda/2010/ela\\_ccs\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www/scoe.net/castandards/agenda/2010/ela_ccs_recommendations.pdf)

Isaac Bashevis Singer. (July 1, 2011). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved June 27, 2011, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Bashevis\\_Singer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Bashevis_Singer)

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Singer, I. (1982). Yentl the Yeshiva boy (Marion Magin & Elizabeth Pollet, Trans.). In *The collected stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (pp. 149-169). New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.