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# The cultural construction of femininity: gender relations, schooling and popular culture

> . . . no one asked me to dance. I sat there smiling, the smile going stiff. . . I'd made a world of my own, a retreat, but at the dance it couldn't save me. It was my body decked out in raspberry nylon and once I'd liked everything about it. . . But now, after the dance, it was something to be ashamed of. It didn't seem that it was my body—I couldn't get free of my failure and feel cosy inside it. The shame had got inside me. Only boys counted and they didn't want me and I was afraid. (Hanrahan, 1984, quoted in Gilbert, 1988b: p. 74)

In this first section of the book we will outline a framework for exploring the roles played by popular culture and schooling in the construction of femininity, and consider why the cultural construction of femininity is an important and relevant issue for the classroom. The basic starting point of our work is that while schooling is a site for the reproduction of gender relations, it is also a site for intervention and change. Our concern is to understand the processes involved in the construction of femininity in order to develop classroom practices by which they might be challenged. We are centrally interested in the role played by cultural texts in the construction of femininity, and in the ways in which such texts relate to the lived experiences of teenage girls. Before turning to a specific

focus on textuality and classroom practice in chapter 2, this chapter will consider the broader context of gender relations of which schooling is a part, and clarify relevant theoretical issues, in particular the approach to be taken to cultural studies.

Cultural processes are integrally related to the social structure and to power relations, and are important in reproducing the gender-based inequalities which characterise the social structure in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in the UK and USA. For example, although school retention rates in contemporary Australia have improved for girls since 1975, when girls were first identified as a 'disadvantaged group' educationally, girls still leave school with limited options compared with boys as a result of their school experiences. Subjects studied still show traditional sex differences, and girls are still less likely than boys to study mathematics and science (NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, 1988). They are also less likely to obtain post-school qualifications of any kind. Apprenticeship and trade courses, which are more likely to be entered by working-class students, are still almost totally the preserve of males: only 12.2 per cent of all apprentices in Australia are female (NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, 1988). Further, in terms of tertiary participation, sex-differentiated patterns still exist, with female school leavers more likely to enter humanities oriented and teacher education courses at colleges of advanced education, and less likely than males to enrol in either high status courses or higher degree courses at university level (DEET, 1989). One of the consequences of this is that Australia has one of the most gender segmented labour markets among comparable countries. In addition, women's full-time average earnings are still only 79 per cent of those of men (Women's Bureau, 1989), and the economic recession and labour market changes of recent years have made young women particularly vulnerable. In many ways these women have fewer options than in the past and have become increasingly vulnerable to welfare dependency and poverty (Taylor, 1986).

We are interested in how the cultural sphere relates to these social inequalities. In particular, we wish to explore how cultural texts are involved in reproducing gender ideologies and in what ways they might be used in the classroom to challenge these ideologies. Although we acknowledge that broad policies are needed to address structural inequalities

in Australia, we would argue that school-based and culturally focussed approaches are also important.

### *Theorising culture*

The approach we take to cultural studies is interdisciplinary—drawing particularly on sociology, feminist theory, literary theory and media studies. Because cultural studies is such a wide field, some clarification of the terms to be used is needed. In particular it is necessary to offer a conceptualisation of culture—'that most important and slippery concept of all' (Fiske, 1987: p. 20). We draw on John Fiske's work in explaining an approach to culture:

> Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our 'selves'. It also situates those meanings within the social system, for a social system can only be held in place by the meanings that people make of it. Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilized or destabilized by the meanings that people make of them. Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power. (1987: p. 20)

This definition captures nicely the relationship between culture and social structure, and between meanings and power relations, for meanings and their circulation are 'part and parcel of [the] social structure' (Fiske, 1987: p. 1). It also emphasises the dynamic nature of cultural processes where people as agents are involved in shaping the social structure, as well as the notion of 'the sense we have of ourselves', which is of central importance. We will discuss this in more depth later in this chapter.

This, then, is part of the framework for our work: we are interested in the generation and circulation of meanings, in this case meanings relating to gender, and how these meanings are implicated in the construction of femininity in girls and young women. Such meanings are organised at a number of interrelated levels within a dynamic ideological system. In relation to the construction of femininity we will refer to *discourse* about gender as 'a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area' (Fiske, 1987: p. 14). At a broader level such

coherent sets of meanings may be referred to as *ideologies*, although both discourses and ideologies operate in a dynamic ideological field: ideologies 'do not operate through single ideas; they operate in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations' (Hall, 1985).

Within this framework, cultural texts are part of a network of meanings which constitute the social world and which may be viewed as sites of struggle over meaning. Following Leslie Roman and Linda Christian-Smith (1988), our definition of *cultural text* includes both representational forms (for example a video clip or a teen magazine) and lived social relations (for example of a specific group such as Greek girls in a high school). Although these two types of cultural text are separable analytically, they are closely interrelated in everyday social practice.

Another 'slippery' term which we need to define is *popular culture*. Various definitions with differing emphases have developed historically and as Roman and Christian-Smith observe:

> Popular culture is a concept prone to... slippages and is so easily saleable that it serves the purpose of those who wish to defend it as the authentic experiences of everyday people and those who see it as representing the ways in which the masses are duped into their own manipulation by the so-called cultural industries, or even those who simply celebrate its relation to the sensory, the immediate, or the visceral impulses of contemporary social life (1988: p. 9).

In the context of our focus on meaning and the construction of femininity, Stuart Hall's (1981) view of popular culture as a site of struggle where 'the people' are constituted is useful. (See also Johnson, 1986.) Central in Hall's approach is the tension between the forces of domination which attempt to define 'the people' and the resistances to these imposed definitions. Drawing on Hall's work, and also on unpublished work by John Clarke, Roman and Christian-Smith (1988) argue that there is a need for an alternative position to both the 'cultural populism' and 'pessimism' approaches to popular culture which are reflected in the above quotation: an alternative position which recognises that structural conditions set limits on consumer resistance to popular cultural forms. Such conditions may prevent any opposition from becoming politically effective, constraining it to passive forms of dissent.

## *Gender and culture*

The general approach to culture and meaning, culture and power relations, and to popular culture outlined above can be related to a specific consideration of gender issues.

### *Gender relations*

An understanding of the reproduction of gender relations needs to take account of the links between personal lives and social structures, in other words to consider how everyday social practices constitute social structure. R.W. Connell's (1986; 1987) practice-based theory is useful here in that it takes account of structural dimensions and also historical change in gender relations. Following Jill Matthews (1984), Connell uses the concept 'gender order' which he defines as 'a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women' (1987: p. 99). Feminist theorising has often used the concept of patriarchy to refer to a single overarching structure of domination (see Eisenstein, 1984; Burton, 1985), but Connell argues that this over-simplifies the structures of gender relations and he offers instead three major structures focussed around the division of labour, the power relations between men and women, and sexuality. While Connell sees these structures as separable analytically, he claims they are closely interwoven in a dynamic way in social life. We accept this view of the complexity of the gender order, but would argue that the concept of patriarchy—a concept central to the theorising of women's oppression—needs to be retained. Hence we use the term *patriarchal gender order.*

Within this broad framework of the gender order we can view various institutional settings, such as schools, families and the workplace, where social practices are gender structured. Connell refers to the state of play in such settings as the 'gender regime' (1987: p. 120). Cultural texts of all kinds are a part of the gender regime in various institutional settings. For example in a school setting, as well as in the family or in the street, there will be a network of interrelating cultural texts, both representational and 'lived'.

Also associated with everyday gendered practices are appropriate definitions of femininity and masculinity which help to maintain, and in turn are shaped by, the patriarchal gender order. These understandings of what it means to be

female or male, which are implicated in all aspects of social life, develop in relation to each other in particular historical and social situations. Gender 'only has meaning when the concepts of masculinity and femininity are recognized as a pair which exist in a relationship of complementarity and antithesis' (MacDonald, 1981: p. 160).

These understandings of what it means to be female or male do not rest on biological differences. As Connell convincingly argues: 'There must be...a really thorough rejection of the notion that natural difference *is* a basis of gender, that the social patterns are somehow an *elaboration* of natural difference ...Social gender relations do not *express* natural patterns; they *negate* the biological statute' (1986: pp. 354–5). He points out that gender differences, rather than expressing natural differences, actually suppress natural *similarities*. And gender ideologies such as femininity and masculinity help to 'naturalise' gender differences so that they are seen as 'given' and inevitable. Societies where the gender order is patriarchal, such as contemporary western societies, are characterised by what Connell describes as 'emphasised femininity' and 'hegemonic masculinity' (1987: p. 183). Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to the dominance of men over women, as well as over other forms of masculinity. It is heterosexual and tends to be characterised by power, authority, aggression and technical competence (p. 187). On the other hand, emphasised femininity, the form of femininity which complements hegemonic masculinity, is characterised by compliance with subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. Associated with emphasised femininity are qualities of sociability, sexual passivity and acceptance of domesticity and motherhood (p. 187).

A number of versions of femininity and masculinity are constructed in everyday social practices within institutions, but at a broad cultural level the versions promoted provide the basis for women's subordination. Thus we see emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity represented at the symbolic level in the mass media as the cultural ideals. Connell comments on the relationship between everyday gendered practices and the historically constructed cultural ideals: 'The ideological representations of femininity draw on, but do not necessarily correspond to, actual femininities as they are lived. What most women support is not necessarily what they are' (p. 186). Connell asserts that the forms of femininity and masculinity constructed at the ideological level tend to be

'stylized and impoverished', but that 'their interrelation is centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women' (p. 183).

In theorising gender relations it is necessary also to take account of other major power relations such as class and ethnicity, and of the ways in which the patriarchal gender order is integrated with capitalism. There have been numerous theoretical debates in the literature about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, and between marxism and feminism, which have been further complicated by the different positions taken by radical, liberal, and socialist feminists (Eisenstein, 1984). To some extent these issues remain unresolved. In a general sense, our view is that patriarchy and capitalism have developed together historically to take on particular structural forms in contemporary Australia, and that these structures have also been shaped by colonialism and immigration. Zillah Eisenstein (1979) refers to the particular structural form which has developed in societies like Australia as a 'capitalist patriarchy'.

Madeleine MacDonald has provided a useful analysis from a marxist feminist perspective of the way in which capitalism and patriarchy are integrated. She suggests that:

> ...both class relations and gender relations, while they exist within their own histories, can nevertheless be so closely interwoven that it is theoretically very difficult to draw them apart within specific historic conjunctures. The development of capitalism is one such conjuncture where one finds patriarchal relations of dominance and control over women buttressing the structure of class domination. (1981: p. 160)

In her view, class domination under capitalism is supported by male dominance over women in the workplace, in the family and in public life. At the same time, class relations limit and structure gender relations and associated gender identities. The dominance of men in the workplace is sustained by the reproductive role of women as child bearers and rearers in the patriarchal family, and the ideological split between the 'public sphere' of men and the 'private sphere' of women helps to maintain the view that childcare and domestic labour are women's work. MacDonald argues that the public/private split is also a major factor in the reproduction of the sex-segregated workforce characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. She claims that: 'What it is important to recognise is that the congruence of these two structures is not natural but socially imposed and, as a result, has to be continually reinforced

through the legal, political and educational agencies of the state, if it is to be maintained' (1981: p.161). The ways in which this occurs through schooling will be discussed later in this chapter.

While class and gender relations operate dynamically at a structural level they are also interrelated in social practices and institutions and, with ethnicity, shape women's experiences differentially. It is important, therefore, that women's experience is not universalised and that women and girls are not referred to as homogenous groups. There are, for example, differences in the experiences and degree of subordination of white middle-class Anglo-Australian women and Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women are likely to be triply oppressed on the basis of class, race and gender, though for many their major struggle is still against racist oppression and its effects, both at a personal and institutional level (Neill, 1989).

### *Popular culture and femininity*

Gender ideologies are crucial in sustaining the patriarchal gender order and cultural texts play an important role in promoting the dominant forms of femininity and masculinity at a symbolic level. We are particularly interested in the images of femininity represented in the popular cultural texts that are part of the everyday world of teenage girls. Such texts, as we have explained, can be viewed as *representational cultural texts* and play an important part in the struggle over meanings in the popular cultural field.

Rosemary Pringle's (1983) attempt to theorise the links between sexuality and consumption in post-war Australia is particularly relevant to a discussion of the role of popular culture in the construction of femininity, (see also Game and Pringle, 1979). Pringle traces the increasing sexualisation of women's bodies in the media from the 1920s, a trend which became more direct and all encompassing in the post-war period. Accompanying the movement of women from the paid workforce back to the home, advertisers began to associate products with love and romance, and women were increasingly encouraged to consume to become attractive to men. Pringle suggests that sexuality was restructured in relation to consumption in ways which '...assumed emotional, and later sexual, connotations as the arena of personal fulfilment and individual meaning' (1983: p. 90). As a consequence of this restructuring, consumption has come to be seen as a way of

completing the ideal feminine identity. For older women that identity centres on the domestic sphere and on being the perfect wife and mother. For young women, however, the focus is on appearance and looks and on being the perfect sex object. Both of these ideals require that women become consumers; that they acquire particular products that will make them desirable—either as wife or sex object. The message of advertising being that 'to be able to buy is the same thing as being sexually desirable' (Berger, 1972: p. 144). As Pringle argues, certain products, such as cosmetics, are thus seen as being essential to femininity. This is in contrast with male products, which are seen as compatible with, but never essential to, masculinity.

A further important aspect of the construction of sexuality under consumer capitalism is that femininity has come to be associated with passive sexuality, with being touched and being looked at; masculinity, on the other hand, is defined more actively, and involves touching and looking (Game and Pringle, 1979: p. 11). In a much-quoted passage John Berger refers to the way in which these aspects are reflected in the social construction of femininity:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.
>
> And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.
>
> She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. (1972: p. 46)

Berger goes on to make the important point that the surveyor of woman in herself is male. 'Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight' (p. 47).

This focus on appearance and sexuality has particular relevance for the construction of femininity in young women and girls and helps to explain why the body tends to be taken on as a project. Rosalind Coward contends that the camera in contemporary media has been put to use as an extension of the male gaze on women, with the result that the development of female identity is fraught with anxiety and enmeshed with judgements about desirability. Thus the emphasis on women's

looks 'becomes a crucial way in which society exercises control over women's sexuality' (1984: p. 77). To 'be fashionable' necessitates the achievement of current sexual ideals, and these ideals connote powerlessness and, for adolescent girls, a responsive sexuality.

The emphasis on women's looks is most apparent in women's magazines, in advertising and on television, where visual representations of women are central. However, even in cultural texts which do not rely on visual images, the importance of good looks and sexual attractiveness for women is likely to be a dominant textual image. In relation to girls and young women the overall message in cultural texts is that sexuality confers power—though in relation to the social and economic context this power, derived from appearance and attractiveness, is extremely limited. We will take up this last point in the next section.

Despite this overall emphasis on appearance and sexuality, it needs to be emphasised that the role which such texts play in the construction of femininity is complex. Even though the ideal of sexual submissiveness characterises 'emphasised femininity' which we discussed earlier, there is no simple transmission of a single coherent 'patriarchal ideology'. Although dominant ideologies may be pervasive, media texts reflect a range of contradictory and conflicting ideologies. In addition, we need to be cautious about too readily assuming 'effects' from readings of texts. Representational cultural texts need to be considered in the context of *lived social texts*: everyday sub-cultural social relations.

### *Girls' sub-cultures*

To understand the framework within which teenage girls make sense of themselves, it is necessary to take account of their cultural perspectives. A number of studies of teenage girls' sub-cultures, particularly those of working-class girls, provide useful insights about the contradictions teenage girls experience and the concerns they express. This research is important not only for understanding the construction of femininity, but also for considering appropriate ways for feminist educators to work with teenage girls. Research on 'cultures of femininity' shows that teenage girls experience a number of conflicts resulting from the contradictory messages they receive about how they should behave, and it is possible

to group these conflicts into three sets of contradictory discourses. While these sets of discourses are interrelated, they will be discussed separately.

The first set of contradictory discourses centres on girls' futures and can be described as the domesticity/paid work conflict. Girls face conflicting ideas about what is appropriate both in relation to their domestic futures, and to their futures in paid employment. Most recent Australian research shows that girls not only accept that they are likely to spend a significant part of their lives in paid work, but that they also know that they are likely to be involved in domesticity and child rearing (Thomas, 1980; Moran, 1983; Samuel, 1983; Wilson and Wyn, 1987).

Lois Bryson (1984) has argued that the inevitable conflict that occurs when a woman must fill roles both within the family and within the economic system creates a tension and a double bind for women, which is central in the reproduction of gender relations. It is significant that this tension looms early in teenage girls' lives. Teenage girls are more likely to be involved in domestic chores and childcare than are boys of this age, and this is particularly so in the case of working-class girls and in some migrant families (Strintzos, 1984). Christine Griffin's (1984) study of 'typical girls' in England highlighted the importance of domestic responsibilities in the lives of the girls she studied and, in fact, she suggests that they learn about their present and future positions in family life and in the labour market through these experiences. The girls experienced strong pressures to get a boyfriend and to get married; they saw marriage and motherhood as distant but inevitable events, and both working-class girls and their more 'academic' peers saw their future employment being shaped by childcare and domestic responsibilities. Most of the Australian research supports these findings and shows that, although livelihood issues are now as important to girls as to boys, it is domestic concerns which still dominate girls' thinking (for example, Thomas, 1980; Moran, 1983; Dwyer et al., 1984; Wilson and Wyn, 1987).

The second set of discourses, which we describe as the 'slags or drags' conflict, following Cowie and Lees (1981) and Lees (1986), relates to sexuality. In their study of working-class girls in Britain, Celia Cowie and Sue Lees found that the use of the label 'slag' to describe girls who were supposedly sexually available was extremely complex, with constant sliding within

its usage 'as friendly joking; as bitchy abuse; as a threat or as a label' (1981: p. 18). The presence of the label acted as a powerful force in the construction of sexuality because for 'nice girls', sexual relationships were only seen to be permissible with love and romance. Cowie and Lees argue that the construction of female sexuality hinges on the difference between 'slags' and 'drags'; based on notions of overt sexuality and conventional 'decency'. Ways of behaving and dressing which were seen as sexual were deemed to be bad, and Cowie and Lees comment on 'the narrow tightrope [teenage girls] walk to achieve attractiveness without the taint of sexuality' (1981: p. 20).

These labelling practices have been termed 'the politics of reputation' (Bottomly, 1979) and have also been described in Australian studies of working-class teenage girls (for example, Samuel, 1983). Such practices are also particularly evident in some migrant girls' cultures, and research by Maria Strintzos on Greek girls in Melbourne shows the ways in which the Greek notion of 'honour' organises girls' lives in fundamental ways. For these teenage girls the tightrope to be walked was even more precarious because, while '[a] future without marriage was inconceivable', sexual involvements were absolutely taboo. 'To be Greek is to be "good"', was the code of honour which operated powerfully in the girls Strintzos studied—to be 'bad' therefore was a denial of ethnicity, as well as of an acceptable form of femininity (Strintzos, 1984: p. 30).

The third set of contradictory discourses relates to age or maturity and can be related to an adolescence/femininity conflict, as discussed by Barbara Hudson (1984). The notion of adolescence as a time of rebellion and independence has male connotations which conflict with expectations associated with femininity. While rebelliousness in teenage boys is more often tolerated, teenage girls are expected to be mature. From first menstruation girls are continually told, 'You're a young woman now', and this inevitably causes conflicts for girls in their early teens. Hudson argues that the conflicting expectations which impinge on teenage girls make it difficult for them to know what is expected of them. The effect, she reports, is that they say, 'Whatever we do, it's always wrong' (1984: p. 31).

These three related sources of conflict work together to define and construct femininity in particular ways and they do so within the private, domestic sphere. Both the slag/drag conflict and the adolescence/femininity conflict work to reg-

ulate sexuality in traditional ways—towards marriage and motherhood. They are consistent with the 'to have and to hold' discourse, associated with monogamous relationships, a discourse which is so pervasive in the construction of female subjectivity (see Hollway, 1984). For teenage girls, relationships are still usually seen in terms of marriage and motherhood; sexual behaviour is seen as only being appropriate within a context of love and/or marriage. These sexual codes create pressures on teenagers to get and keep a steady boyfriend (McRobbie, 1978; Cowie and Lees, 1981; Lees, 1986) and, because of these pressures, 'romance' emerges as a central theme in studies of the lives of teenage girls.

Unfortunately, these powerful pressures are experienced at a critical time: a time when girls could be thinking and planning for the future. Consequently, girls and young women often experience a conflict between their preoccupation with issues relating to femininity, and their awareness of educational concerns. As a result, girls often have 'romanticised' rather than 'realistic' views about their futures, and the research in this area is interesting and highly significant. Many of the teenage girls discussed in research studies *are* realistically aware of their futures, though there seem to be some interesting class differences. For example, Claire Thomas found that 'while middle-class girls sought a life partnership based on romantic love, working-class girls looked more for someone who would provide support for them and their children' (1980: p. 152). There are also ethnic differences in relation to these issues. For example, Griffin found that the Asian and Caribbean girls in her British study were more critical of the myth of romantic love than were the white girls. Significantly, in relation to their futures, the pressures to 'get a man' influenced job expectations. The girls drew a distinction between jobs like office work, which were seen as being suitably 'feminine', and factory work, which was regarded as 'not a good job for a girl'. This study shows the young women to be trapped between the demands of the sexual, marriage and labour markets (Griffin, 1984).

A Canadian study (Baker, 1985) suggests that while teenage girls may be *intellectually* aware of the fact that families break up and that there are people in poverty, they tend to feel that they themselves are immune to these forces. In spite of an awareness that they would in the future be engaged in paid work *and* raising a family, they did not seem to realise the difficulties they might have in moving in and out of the

workforce for childbearing/rearing. In terms of personal relationships, most girls portrayed marriage in romantic terms —their marriages would last, with husbands who would be loving and kind. Thus there was a contradiction between their intellectual awareness about trends in society and their personal dreams for themselves.

As well as this growing body of research concerned with girls' sub-cultures there has also been an interest in exploring the ways in which popular cultural texts relate to girls' lives (McRobbie, 1978; McRobbie, 1984; Frith, 1985; Willinsky and Hunniford, 1986). This work has usefully highlighted what is a central issue for this book: the nature of the interrelationship between the images of femininity in representational cultural texts, and the lived social relations of adolescent girls. For example, popular cultural texts such as teenage magazines are viewed as active in the production and circulation of new meanings for young women. As MacDonald comments: 'The problem, therefore, is not one of trying to fit these representations of women to the realities of their lives but rather to recognise the ideological 'work' carried out by these texts in the *reconstruction* rather than the reproduction of gender definitions and relations' (1981: p. 173).

Many studies show 'romance' to be a central theme in the popular cultural texts which are part of girls' everyday lives. For example, as we will describe in chapter 4, teen romance novels are the most popular genre of literature read by teenage girls in the USA, Canada and the UK, as well as in Australia. Similarly romance is a central theme in other popular cultural texts like magazines, soap operas and contemporary music. Clearly 'romance' plays a major and complex role in the processes involved in the construction of femininity, and it is a central theme in both representational cultural texts and girls' sub-cultures. Through romance, girls can rehearse the contradictory messages and anxieties they experience in their real lives, in their fantasy worlds, and in the blurred margins between them. We explore these issues further in chapter 4.

The economic context and the power relations with which the cultural perspectives of teenage girls are linked need also to be considered. Within a context of contradictory discourses, romance seems to offer a partial solution to girls and young women who, in many ways, have limited options. As Myra Connell and others have argued: 'Romance represents...a rational expression of, and response to, material and economic

subordination' (1981: p. 165). As in the past, when marriage was an escape or liberation from family life or domestic service (Alford, 1984), young working-class women today still lack economic alternatives. Thus a preoccupation with romance reflects the limited options available in the economic sphere. The appeal of romantic ideology may lie partly in the sphere of the unconscious, but it works together with material factors to lead to marriage and motherhood and, ultimately, to dependency.

### *Schooling and the reproduction of gender relations*

In our earlier discussion on gender relations we emphasised that schools are important institutional settings for their reproduction and in particular for maintaining ideas about 'women's place' under capitalism. Gender ideologies transmitted through schooling are important in maintaining women's subordinate position in domestic work and in the labour market.

Detailed discussion of various theoretical approaches to the role of schooling in the reproduction of social inequalities is not appropriate here. However, two points are important in relation to theorising the reproduction of *gender relations* through schooling. Early approaches to such theorising (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) were criticised in the literature for being simplistic and deterministic and for failing to take account of resistance, negotiation and contestation (see, for example, Apple, 1982). Consequently, more recent approaches have focussed on 'the ways in which both individuals and classes assert their own experience and contest or resist the ideological and material forces imposed on them in a variety of settings' (Weiler, 1988: p. 11). Kathleen Weiler refers to analyses such as these which stress agency and resistance (e.g., Willis, 1977) as 'theories of production' in contrast to reproduction theories.

The earlier work on reproduction theory was also criticised for its failure to take account of the ways in which schooling reproduces *gender* as well as class inequalities. For example, Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis (1976) saw the sexual division of labour as originating predominantly in the home and family. The role of the domestic work of women under capitalism was acknowledged, but the reproduction of the gender divisions in the labour market was not analysed. Similarly, although Pierre

Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), has since been used to develop a feminist theory of production (MacDonald, 1981), his work initially focussed on the cultural reproduction of *class* relations.

MacDonald's theory is particularly relevant for our purposes here as she takes into account agency in the construction of both class and gender identities in schools. She also highlights the need to focus on 'the cultural framework within which individuals find a sense of themselves' (MacDonald, 1981: p. 163). A number of studies have taken this approach and have attempted to explore issues relating to gender and education in their wider cultural context. Such feminist work has often explored the lived experiences of girls within and outside school, so highlighting the diversity and complexity of experiences of girls and women in schools. For example, Angela McRobbie (1978) and Claire Thomas (1980) have explored the complexities of class and gender, while Mary Fuller (1980) and Alison Jones (1988) have documented ethnic differences in girls' school experiences. In general such studies have been concerned with 'the ways in which girls, both individually and collectively, make sense of and try to negotiate oppressive social relationships and structures in order to gain more control over their own lives' (Weiler, 1988: pp. 45–6). These studies have utilised concepts of resistance and accommodation in attempting to understand how girls and women actively respond to oppression rather than passively internalise dominant ideologies, and recent work clearly demonstrates both the awareness girls have of their social situation and their ability to make rational choices about their lives (Wilson and Wyn, 1987). Our work has been influenced by approaches such as these, which put the perspectives and concerns of girls and young women themselves at the centre of attention.

### *Femininity and school processes*

Notions of femininity and masculinity have long been recognised as central in schooling, even though they have been promoted more subtly in recent times. Historically, however, the education of girls and boys has been overtly and explicitly different, as it has been based on supposed 'natural' differences and differences in life roles. In general, the formal education of girls was seen to be less important than the education of boys and was therefore limited and narrowly

defined. As each stage of formal educational provision developed (primary/secondary/tertiary), it was first made available for boys and later extended to girls. Students were placed in different schools, or rigidly separated where the same building was used, and this division was reflected in the different curricula which were taught (Kyle, 1986).

There were also class differences in the educational opportunities available to girls which affected participation rates, and although many boys and girls were engaged in paid work, working-class daughters often remained at home to help with domestic work (Kyle, 1986). In addition, middle-class girls were more likely to move to secondary schooling, often in catholic and private schools. But despite class differences in education, strong ideological pressures ensured that in general all women were prepared for future domestic roles as dependents of men. This ignored the fact that many women, particularly working-class women, were engaged in paid work. For example, a survey of women in employment in Melbourne in the 1880s showed the extent of women's involvement in domestic service and economic activity. As well as 47 per cent who were in domestic service of some description, 37 per cent were in manufacturing (particularly in the clothing industry), and the rest in commercial and professional categories (Grimshaw, 1986: pp. 199–200). However, powerful gender ideologies held that women's 'proper place' was within the domestic sphere and that only men were breadwinners. As a result, women's wages were set at lower rates than those of men, and the existence of the many women who were in fact supporting their families was ignored.

For many years, the schooling of girls reflected these ideas about 'women's place'. Middle-class girls were taught 'the accomplishments'—for example, music, singing and drawing —while working-class girls were trained for domestic labour, either as servants or as future wives and mothers. However, both working-class and middle-class girls were taught sewing and domestic science at the expense of other subjects. Domestic science was viewed as a way to ensure that 'as many working-class girls as possible were inculcated with the precepts of industry, thrift, self sacrifice and morality' (Kyle, 1986: p. 53). Academic subjects were only taught in elite private schools, and in convent schools, but the emphasis on domestic science was actively resisted by parents and students in state schools who demanded courses, such as commercial courses, which would prepare their girls for the new vocational areas

opening up at the beginning of the twentieth century (Kyle, 1986; Porter, 1983). This ideology of 'women's place' has persisted in various ways and is still reflected in contemporary secondary schooling. For example, home economics is still seen as a 'feminine' subject primarily associated with women's domestic lives, while physics and chemistry are seen as 'masculine'.

The construction of femininity and masculinity in secondary schools continues processes which begin in the family, and are reinforced by the primary school experiences of children (Delamont, 1980; Evans, 1982, 1988). In both primary and secondary schooling, teachers' expectations about different interests, abilities and likely futures of girls and boys are subtly conveyed through classroom practice and some of these processes will be described more fully in chapter 2, where we focus on the role of language practices in the construction of femininity. It is through the 'hidden curriculum' that many unintended and unexamined messages are passed through school processes, and this level is at least as powerful in its effects as the official curriculum. For example, Nancy Lesko (1988) has documented the ways in which the 'total ensemble of school experiences and messages' become in effect a 'curriculum of the body' which is implicated in social control and the legitimation of certain versions of femininity.

At the secondary level the official curriculum uses gender as a segregating factor in a most obvious way in single-sex schools and in single-sex classes, but there are many other ways in which curriculum and school organisation promote dominant gender ideologies. Here subject offerings and timetabling are important, as schools may force traditional choices by, for example, timetabling subjects such as manual arts and home economics at the same time slot. Dominant gender ideologies are also transmitted through various resource materials and through classroom interaction, as we will describe more fully in chapter 2. MacDonald has argued that 'the message of school texts is most likely to represent in its purest form the ideological statement of the ruling class or, at least, those values which it considers essential to transmit.' (1981: p. 172). In reviewing research on the representation of women in school texts, MacDonald highlights three main themes which emerge: women's invisibility and passivity, the under-representation of women in paid work and their concentration in low-status occupations, and an insistent emphasis on female domesticity. In relation to this last

point, MacDonald comments that: 'The message comes across not as any subtle or hidden code but rather with a degree of repetition that can only be described as ideological bombardment' (p. 171).

The dynamics of classroom interaction has also consistently shown that in the primary school, teachers demonstrate a preference for boys, interact more with them and value male ideas more highly (Delamont, 1980; Evans, 1982; Spender, 1982), while at the secondary school level, both male and female teachers give boys more attention and are apparently unaware that they are doing so (Schools Commission, 1984; Stanworth, 1984; Kelly, 1985). It may well be through classroom interaction that girls receive the most powerful messages about 'women's place'.

However, we have stressed that gender ideologies are not passively internalised but are actively negotiated and resisted by girls and women, and a number of feminist research studies have documented how working-class girls in particular resist the official gender ideology of the school. For example, McRobbie's (1978) study of working-class girls showed how they developed an anti-school sub-culture which was also antagonistic to middle-class girls. These girls asserted their femaleness in the classroom by introducing sexuality in such a way as to force teachers to take notice. McRobbie describes how the official school image of femininity (neatness and passivity) was rejected in favour of a more feminine, even sexual one, with the girls wearing makeup to school and disrupting the class by loud discussions about boyfriends.

In an Australian study of two girls' state schools in Melbourne, one working-class and one middle-class, Thomas (1980) found some interesting differences. Both groups of girls turned towards traditional female roles in their efforts to resist the academic demands of the school and to achieve positive identities which challenged the negative ones placed on them by the school. However, Thomas found middle-class girls much more subdued in their opposition to school than the working-class girls, who saw school as a hostile and repressive institution. Working-class girls constructed an image of themselves as 'tough, worldly and unromantic' and were much more 'anti-school' in their attitudes and behaviour. Linley Samuel (1983) also found, in her study of working-class girls in Sydney, that traditional notions of femininity were rejected by the girls, who instead used their sexuality as an effective weapon in the classroom. However, the teachers responded

by labelling the girls as 'promiscuous', writing them off, and encouraging them to drop out of school. Samuel also reports that despite such strong rebelliousness, these girls could not see any real futures for themselves outside marriage.

It is likely that, as with working-class boys, opposition to school leads working-class girls to a traditional working-class future. Willis's (1977) 'lads', in opposing school values, qualified themselves for futures as manual workers. However, for them manual work confirmed their masculinity and thereby gave them status. But in the case of girls, status is not achieved from 'women's work', and in the long run girls see few alternatives to motherhood and childrearing, whether they be with or without love, romance and marriage.

### *Construction of feminine subjectivity*

We have emphasised that gender ideologies are central in the reproduction of gender relations, and we have also suggested that we need a theoretical approach which takes account of the relationship between everyday practices and social structures. One crucial issue which we have not discussed so far is the formation of gender identity at the personal level. We need to understand how it is that gender ideologies continue to *work* at a personal level, and why women apparently consent to their own subordination.

Recent theorists interested in the relationship between the individual and social structure have tended to replace the notion of 'the individual' with that of 'the subject' (Beechy and Donald, 1985; Henriques et al., 1984). The distinction between these two concepts is relevant to the notion of 'sense of self'. While 'the individual' is viewed as being essentially biological, the notion of 'the subject' highlights the 'constructed sense of the individual in a network of social relations' (Fiske, 1987: p. 48). Thus, from this perspective, a sense of identity which is socially constructed is referred to as *subjectivity*, in contrast to *individuality*, which is the product of nature or biology:

> Our subjectivity, then, is the product of social relations that work upon us in three main ways, through society, through language or discourse, and through psychic processes through which the infant enters into society, language and consciousness. Our subjectivity is... the product of the various social agencies to which we are subject, and thus is what we share with others. (Fiske, 1987: p. 49)

This approach to subjectivity is particularly useful in exploring constructions of femininity, because it explains the contra-

dictory ways in which gender ideologies are experienced at various levels. For example, we have already commented on the fact that for teenage girls there may be a contradiction between their intellectual awareness about trends in society, and their personal dreams for themselves. Similarly, there may be a contradiction about having children: 'It is neither a question of free choice, nor of false consciousness. For example, women can recognise child-rearing as restricting and oppressive and yet still want to bear children' (Henriques et al., 1984: p. 220). However, while it is important to acknowledge the way in which gender ideologies work at an unconscious level through the structuring of desires, it is also important to understand that these desires are produced and are therefore potentially changeable. Some of the ways in which these desires are produced will be considered in the discussions of specific cultural texts in Part II of this book. In chapter 6 we then consider the development of a feminist classroom practice through which some of the processes involved in the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations might be challenged.