

TEACHING ARROWSMITH

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Because of the Sinclair Lewis Conference on *Arrowsmith* and to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Lewis being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*, I thought I would teach the novel to a class of new English majors and minors this past spring. I started searching for a rationale to teach the novel and make it speak to the students in a number of ways. By foregrounding issues of power and language, I was able to provide the occasion for several lively discussions on a variety of topics from medical ethics to male-female relationships. This section of the course ended with the paper assignment below.

The assignment read:

For your second paper you will be applying Deborah Tannen's ideas about language, sex, and power, as expressed in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* to Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*. There are a number of conflicts between characters in this novel. You need to choose one conflict and then apply a linguistic analysis to it. You need to offer an argument with a thesis that will connect the novel to the theory. (Ex: Can this relationship be saved? Would men be happier if they only had to deal with other men? What role does/should the community have in people's lives? Why have friends at all?)

Lewis's writing certainly lends itself to discussion about language both in a social linguistic sense as well as in a Bahktinian sense. The essays tended to focus on Martin's relationships with women, especially Leora, in an attempt to understand why Martin always returned to Leora and why she put up with what seems to be rather overbearing behavior.

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I've included some of the topics that were developed by the students because I think it shows in how many ways students found him relevant:

One student thought Martin loved Leora because of her simplicity and unconditional support of him, and that he only criticized her when he felt his status was threatened in society because his wife wasn't socially presentable. Another thought that Leora was the woman behind the great man and was very satisfied by this role.

Another student used Tannen to analyze one scene, where Leora takes Martin to dinner at her parents' house and how the conversation styles, her father's and Bert's bullying, and her mother's attempt to make peace, confirm certain stereotypes about the way men and women communicate. It made him wonder about the sorts of conversations he held every day.

"Martin is from Mars and Joyce is from Venus" looked at why the two did not have a very satisfying marriage, mostly because Martin didn't want to discuss his plans with her.

One student argued that Martin didn't want to compromise in his relationships and so refused to go back to Joyce because he valued his research over connection with another human being. The relationship threatened his major reason for existence and therefore had to end.

Two people suggested that Leora used male modes of communication. One suggested that she moved towards this style of communication in order to help Martin more, while another student used this change in communication style to discuss why she refused to accept Martin's explanation for why he didn't want her to go to the Caribbean with him. This second student rewrote some of

the dialogue to show how Martin might have gotten Leora to agree, but then said she probably wouldn't have agreed regardless of what he said.

Several people wrote about Martin lecturing Leora as a very male thing to do. Using Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*, one student concluded that Martin enjoyed being the superior in their relationship and that it's very obvious from the way he's annoyed when Leora talks back to him in their first meeting in the hospital.

In "How to Handle a Woman: Martin's Relationship Difficulties with Women in *Arrowsmith*," a student contended that Martin's relationships with Joyce and Madeline were doomed to fail because their language emasculated him and took away both his linguistic and male power.

Another person felt moved by their romance to construct almost a soap opera. She found the two of them together made a whole person and that the freedom she gave him to do research actually allowed her to satisfy him.

Some people concentrated on the role of gossip in Martin's career. The conclusion of one paper noted that it is only when Martin is in the woods with Terry that he's freed from gossip and able to pursue his scientific research with "unfounded rumors and unnecessary obligations."

One very interesting paper contended that Joyce Lanyon, Martin's second wife, seemed so annoying in the novel because she was portrayed from a man's point of view. She noted that when Joyce is shown speaking, Martin's responses are not recorded so it makes it look like she is doing all the talking. The student argued that Joyce was "a strong woman who knew what she wanted, liked and disliked and she was not afraid to express it. The reason for the misrepresentation of Joyce can be summed up in something Tannen quoted a researcher as suggesting, 'that most people feel instinctively (if not unconsciously) that women, like children, should be seen and not heard....' [Tannen 77]. It seems that this propaganda Lewis buys hook, line and sinker."

The most interesting paper contended that Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh was a visionary. Although I initially dismissed this idea as peculiar, the student's argument was that he was creating exciting new ways to treat disease and was actually years ahead of his time. Because the author was a nontraditional student and a nurse, she was able to bring a wealth of experience to back up her contention in a very solid way. The paper, *Pickerbaugh Was a Genius!*, appears on page 7. ✍