

Daughter of Earth

Reading, Writing, and Social Class

By *BILL BIGELOW*

IN SCHOOL, LEARNING IS NOT A ONE-WAY street from teachers to students. In the potent informal or hidden curriculum, students constantly teach and mis-teach each other about the world and their place in it. As “Marie” experiences in this excerpt from Agnes Smedley’s 1929 autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth*, the social mixing that occurs in school may be contradictory. Marie comes to

experience academic competence, even superiority. But other experiences offer constant reminders of her lowly position in the social hierarchy. Thus, schools are often sites that simultaneously challenge and reinforce social class distinctions. This excerpt puts a human face on these dynamics. It can also be a point of departure for students to explore how these themes play out in their own lives.



Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Author Agnes Smedley, photographed in 1948.

Materials Needed:

Copies of *Daughter of Earth* excerpt.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Read aloud the *Daughter of Earth* excerpt, either to students or with them. Even though it may seem like “kids’ stuff” to us, my students sometimes enjoy drawing pictures or images from a story as I read to them. Distribute crayons, colored pencils, or magic markers, and paper. Their illustrations can be metaphorical or simple depictions of an image from the story. If you choose this option, give them time to complete their drawings after you’ve finished reading, and ask them to write a brief narrative explaining what they drew and why.

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2. Some discussion questions on the story include:
 - Why could Marie, who narrates the story, “never dream of going to high school”?
 - Marie’s teacher is “kind” and well-meaning, but how does she make Marie feel inferior to the other children?
 - What is your reaction to the teacher using the book on “Manners” to instruct the children? Whose “manners” are being taught?
 - After Marie’s mother’s first visit to the school, she never returns, and yet the school remained a “sacred place” to her. (Remind students that earlier in the story, Marie’s mother had referred to the school as “holy ground.”) Why doesn’t she return? Why is the school sacred to her?
3. Some possible writing assignments after the story discussion include:
 - If you were Marie, why would or wouldn’t you want to attend this school?
 - How does Marie come to learn that some people consider her different and “less-than”? Does Marie accept their judgments?
 - How does life in school change Marie?
 - How does life in school teach Marie about social class? What is the “hidden curriculum” in the school?
 - Why does the “little white girl” invite Marie to her birthday party?
 - The excerpt from the novel ends, “And in case anyone I knew saw me with tears in my eyes I would say ...” But Marie doesn’t finish her sentence. What might she have said?
 - What kind of life is Marie going to have when she grows up? Why do you think this?
 - What will become of the “little white girl”?
 - Marie claims that “victory” was hers that year in school. In your eyes, was Marie a “winner” or a “loser” in her school life? Or was she both winner and loser?
 - If you were Marie’s parents, would you have sent her to this school?
 - What might be a good title for this story?
 - In your school experience, have you ever felt like Marie felt in her school?

Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1 (2nd ed.) <http://rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1/roc1.shtml> or “Two Young Women” [p. 152, Rethinking Globalization, <http://rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/index>].

- Write an interior monologue from Marie’s mother’s point of view after her Mother’s Day visit to Marie’s school. (In the story, Marie indicates that her mother never returned to the school, although she continued to think of it as “a sacred place.”)
- Write a dialogue between the little white girl and Marie, 20 years later.
- Imagine that you are the teacher in Marie’s class. Write about your class. Why do you teach here? What do you think of Marie? Of the “little white girl”? Of Clarence? Do you have different hopes for your children?
- As the teacher, write Marie’s mother a letter about Marie and your hopes for her. ■

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AN EXCERPT FROM

Daughter of Earth

A NOVEL BY AGNES SMEDLEY

WE WERE NOW CITY PEOPLE. Trinidad had fully 5,000 inhabitants, but claimed ten. It had a grade school building, and a high school building reared its head among trees on the hill across the river; over there rich people lived. The high school and riches seemed to go together. Anyway we, who lived beyond the tracks, knew that we could never dream of going to high school.

The grade school building stood on the other side of the town, on a hill directly facing the old historic Santa Fe Trail that had first been traveled by the Indians, then by the early Spaniards, and later by the white pioneers to the great Southwest. It wound near the foot of a jutting peak on top of which slept one of the earliest pioneers of the West. The school was the first grade school I had ever seen. Each day I took my little brother George by the hand and guided him there and we knew that we were treading holy ground, for my mother constantly spoke of it as such. The teachers were clean and seemed smoothly ironed; they wore tailored suits and white waists and spoke a language that I could at first hardly understand. My mother had explained to one of them on the first day that I was near 10 years old and had been in the “third reader” in my last school. The teacher had gazed at her for a long time, her eyes traveling down over the calico dress, over the hands so big-veined and worn that they were almost black, and then to the wistful, tired face lit up by the beautiful blue-black eyes. The eyes were young—but the hands might have belonged to a scrubwoman of 50.

“Yes,” the teacher had remarked at last, “I understand.”

She was a kind, young teacher. When I read before her in a trembling voice she smiled encouragingly at my eagerness and at my attempt to forget the room filled with well-dressed little boys and girls. Then she sent me to the board and dictated figures. The fear of being sent to a lower grade drove me forward. Yet I was terror-stricken. Figures always were my enemies. I put down numbers at random ... a certain native cunning coming to my aid—I knew she would think I had only made a mistake. And so it was.

“How can you make such a mistake!” she protested. I gazed at her blankly but did not reply. She took the chalk and worked out the simple problem. I watched her hand so intently that even now, nearly 20 years later, I see exactly the figures she wrote and her long white hand with a gold ring on the third finger.

For weeks she continued this method. I memorized what she said and wrote, but I never understood. A row of figures held before my eyes was, and remains, like a row of soldiers standing before me ready to shoot when the top one gives the command, “Fire!”

I felt very shy and humble in that school. In the front seat on the outside row sat a little girl. Her skin was white, her hair was thick and nearly white, and her dresses, shoes and stockings were always white. When the teacher had asked about her father, she had replied, “My father is a doctor!” and I had stared at her fascinated. She sat very straight in her seat and the teacher always took her copy book and held it up for the class to see. The handwriting was as prim and clean as she was; the margins were broad and even; there was not one

mistake. One day after school my fascination led me to follow her home; she lived in a large, low brick bungalow surrounded by a lawn with many flowers. The grass was cut as smooth as a window pane, everything was peaceful, orderly and quiet. Even the fence and gate were painted white.

On Mother's Day the white girl's mother came and sat near the teacher and didn't associate with the other women. My mother had put on a new calico dress with a belt, and I had walked proudly by her side to the school. She stood in the back of the room, apart from the well-dressed women, and her frightened eyes watched as they talked so easily with each other. After that she never went again. Yet to her the school remained a sacred place to which it was an honor to send her children.

One day our teacher stepped aside while another one entered and read to us from a book on Manners. I learned about eating with a fork and keeping the mouth closed when you chew. Then she read something about washing the teeth, but I had never heard of that before except that my mother sometimes put yellow soap on her finger and washed her teeth with it. But I would have been ashamed to ask her to actually buy a brush for me to use only on my teeth! The teacher read about bathing daily. How that could be done I could not imagine. For my mother washed clothes only on Monday and we children had to bathe in the last, clean rinsing water; the oldest one bathed first and the youngest one last.

Then the teacher read a chapter about sleeplessness. If unable to sleep, one should get up and take a walk; or one should have two beds in a room and change from one to the other; the fresh sheets produced sleep! I had never seen sheets on a bed; we used only blankets. And to what bed I should change was a puzzle! For we only had four beds for eight people. Of course, I reflected, rich people like the little white girl did that. I pictured her arising in the middle of the night and crawling into

another bed. Rich people perhaps could not sleep at night; it was aristocratic to be unable to sleep. I watched the little white girl, and she seemed to understand everything that was read.

But for all her perfection, victory was mine that year. The school year was not half finished before I sat in the back seat on the far outside row—and she only sat in the front seat. The back seat was the seat of honor! The child who sat there was the best in the room and needed little help or correction from the teacher. When all other children failed to answer a question the teacher would turn with confidence to the seat of honor with the word—

“Marie?”

With eyes that never left her face I arose and answered. The whole schoolroom watched and listened, waiting for a mistake. I, for all my faded dresses and stringy ugly hair, who had never seen

a toothbrush or a bathtub, who had never slept between sheets or in a nightgown, stood with my hands glued to my sides and replied without one falter or one mistake! And the little white girl whose father was a doctor had to listen! Then it was that the little white girl invited me to her birthday party. My mother objected to buying bananas as a present, but after I had cried and said everyone else was taking things, she grudgingly bought three.

“They are rich people,” she protested bitterly, looking at

the precious bananas, “an’ there’s no use givin’ ‘em any more.”

When I arrived at the little girl's home I saw that the other children had brought presents of books, silver pieces, handkerchiefs and lovely things such as I had never seen in my life. Fairy tales mentioned them but I never thought they really existed. They were all laid out on a table covered with a cloth shot through with gold. I had to walk up before them all and place my three bananas there, covertly touching the cloth shot

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through with gold. Then I made my way to a chair against the wall and sat down, trying to hide my feet and wishing that I had never come.

The other little girls and boys were quite at ease,—they had been at parties before. They were not afraid to talk or laugh and their throats didn't become whispery and hoarse when anyone asked them a question. I became more and more miserable with each passing moment. In my own world I could reply and even lead, and down beyond the tracks no boy dared touch me or my brother George. If he did he faced me with a jimpson weed as a weapon. But this was a new kind of hurt. In school I had not felt like this before the little white girl: there I had learned an invaluable lesson—that she was clean and orderly, but that I could do and learn things that she couldn't. Because of that and because of my teacher's protecting attitude toward me, she had been ashamed not to invite me to her party.

"Of course, if you're too busy to come, you must not feel that you ought, just because I've invited you," she had said. She was not much over 10, yet she had been well trained. I felt vaguely that something was wrong, yet I looked gratefully at her and replied:

"I'll come. I ain't got nothin' to do!"

Now here I was in a gorgeous party where I wasn't wanted. I had brought three bananas at a great sacrifice only to find that no other child would have dreamed of such a cheap present. My dress, that seemed so elegant when I left home, was shamefully shabby here. I was disturbed in my isolation by a number of mothers who called us into another room and seated us at a long table covered with a white tablecloth, marvelous cakes and fruit such as made my heart sink when I compared them with my three bananas. Only my desire to tell my mother all about it, and my desire to know everything in the world even if it hurt, kept me from slipping out of the door

when no one was looking, and rushing home. I was seated next to a little boy at the table.

"What street do you live on?" he asked, trying to start a polite conversation.

"Beyond th' tracks."

He looked at me in surprise. "Beyond the tracks! Only tough kids live there!"

I stared back trying to think of something to say, but failed. He sought other avenues of conversation.

"My papa's a lawyer—what's yours?"

"Hauls bricks."

He again stared at me. That made me long to get him over beyond the tracks—he with his eyeglasses and store-made clothes! We used our sling-shots on such sissies. He was stuck-up, that was what he was! But what about I couldn't see.

"My papa don't haul bricks!" he informed me, as if to rub it in. Wherein the insult lay I couldn't see, yet I knew one was meant. So I insulted back.

"My papa can lick your papa I bet!" I informed him, just as a pleasant elegant mother bent over us with huge

plates of yellow ice cream in her hands.

"Well, Clarence, and what are you talking about?" she asked affectionately.

"Her father hauls bricks and she lives beyond the tracks and she says her father can lick my father!" Clarence piped.

"That doesn't matter, dear, that doesn't matter! Now, now, just eat your ice cream." But I saw her eyes rest disapprovingly on me and I knew it did matter.

Clarence plunged his spoon into his ice cream and henceforth ignored me. I picked up my spoon, but it clattered against the plate. A dainty little girl in blue, with flaring white silk ribbons on her braid of hair, glanced at me primly. I did not touch the spoon again, but sat with my hands under me watching others eating in perfect self-possession and without noise. I knew I could

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never eat like that and if I tried to swallow, the whole table would hear. The mother returned and urged me to eat, but I said I didn't like ice cream or cake! She offered me fruit and I took it, thinking I could eat it at home. But when the children left the table I saw they carried no fruit. So I left mine beside the precious ice cream and cake.

In the next room little boys and girls were choosing partners for a game, and the little white girl was actually sitting at the piano ready to play. My eyes were glued on her—to think of being able to play the piano! Everyone was chosen for the game but me. No little boy bowed to me and asked:

“Will you be my partner, please?” I saw them avoid me deliberately ... some of them the same little boys who were so stupid in school!

The mother of my little hostess tried to be kind:

“Are you sick, Marie?” she asked. “Would you like to go home?”

“Yes, mam.” My voice was hoarse and whispery.

She took me to the door and smiled kindly, saying she hoped I had had a nice time.

“Yes, mam,” my hoarse voice replied.

The door closed behind me. The game had started inside and the voices of the children were shouting in laughter. In case anyone should be looking out of the window and think I cared, I turned my head and gazed sternly at a house across the street as I walked rapidly away.

And in case anyone I knew saw me with tears in my eyes I would say ...