

Gender and Genre: Knowledge Transformation in Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

This article explores how liberal arts education leads students to critically examine their everyday experience of mass media and to creatively transform their observation into radical knowledge about social norms, especially gender identities. The first part of this article lays out the shared grounds and connections between genre and gender: both are repetitive performances that reflect cultural rationality and gather people into distinct communities. The second part illustrates the significance of relating genre studies with gender issues in the liberal arts classroom through the example of the genre parody assignment in my Mellon-funded course “Race, Gender and Media.” Through showcasing two students’ parodic works, my article shows how liberal arts education can cultivate students’ genre-gender awareness and transform their experience of mass culture into knowledge about social norms.

Keywords: genre studies, gender, parody, liberal arts education

As a popular topic of political importance, gender provokes heated debates in today's society. Students in my courses tend to associate gender with women's rights and with power relationships in both the public and private spheres. However, when studying literary texts, films, and other genres of cultural products, such as TikTok videos and news reports, students seldom think of them as heavily gendered. Neither do they detect the ideological and social conflicts embedded in them. Nevertheless, these genres in various media are social products that reflect the relationship between the producer and the consumer, or rather, between the creator and the receiver of knowledge. In today's multimedia world when everyone is able to produce and receive information via a variety of mass culture genres, it is important to critically think about the gender ideologies these genres carry.

In this article, I want to share one major assignment—genre parody—from the Mellon-funded course *Gender, Race, and Media* taught at a US university, and demonstrate how liberal arts education leads students to transform their lived experience into knowledge about gender issues in society. My article starts with an overview of genre studies and their relationship with gender. Then I use my course assignment to illustrate how in

teaching practice we can cultivate students' genre-gender awareness and prompt them to change their experience of mass media into radical knowledge about social norms. By radical knowledge, I mean a critical insight into the underlying assumptions, structures, and power dynamics that shape how established knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated. Students' parodic work produces such knowledge that exposes and deconstructs the power relationship underlying cultural representations of gender roles.

Genre Studies and Gender Issues: Not Merely Academic Topics

Genre in literary and cultural studies focuses on whether a text belongs to a given genre, how the genre comes into being, and why a genre is of importance to a certain community or situation. Jonathan Crimmins (2009) points out that there are usually two major schools of genre studies—the school of formalism and narratology that focuses on the formal, stylistic features of texts, and the school of speech act and rhetoric that regards genres as social practices in a specific historical and cultural context (p. 45). In “The Law of Genre” (1980), Jacques Derrida suggests the inseparableness of these two schools by tracing the semantic root of genre to