

## **Patriarchal Trauma and the Virtuous Archetype of the Mansplained Public School Teacher**

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I became an elementary school teacher to nurture “the vital spark that ‘wants’ to incarnate in the empirical personality” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 20). Eventually, I found that I could not prevent the system’s perpetual imposition of trauma on children. Ultimately, I left my beloved profession because it became too painful to participate in the psychological annihilation of my students and of myself. This essay explores, from a Jungian perspective, the archetypal underbelly of the patriarchal public school system that inflicts trauma upon children and female teachers.

With a master’s degree in instruction and curriculum and advanced certification in early childhood cognitive and academic language development, I was what the federal government designated a “highly qualified” English Language Learners (ELL) teacher. To comply with No Child Left Behind, the 2001 federal education reform act, a school district hired me to teach at an impoverished Title I school. I quickly realized that the adopted curriculum was educationally unsound for non-native English-speaking students, so I designed writing workshops to inspire and empower them to learn English as they developed sensory-based personal narratives. Surprisingly, colleagues devalued the projects I created and followed what I observed to be a meaningless, aggressively marketed, and expensive curriculum that obliterated children’s experiences. Several times a day, I entered K-5 classrooms and witnessed traumatizing incidents leading to dissociation as ELL students were denied affection, affirmation, and recess because they could not complete dull worksheets in a language they did not know. In such painful moments, vital sparks are extinguished. Souls cannot dwell. Aspects of a personality can split off or disassociate to protect a person from the full impact of such frequent dehumanizing episodes. Parts of these painful experiences become inaccessible to consciousness, encoded in different parts of the brain. “Afterward, we can’t tell our story as a coherent narrative” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 23).

From a Jungian perspective, trauma threatens to shatter “the psychosomatic unity of the personality to its very core” by overwhelming a person with “intolerable affects that are impossible to metabolize, much less understand or even think about” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 11). As Kalsched’s (2013) vision of the psychological wounding of children was enacted, my students and I felt confusion, anger, and pain. “Trauma constitutes an interruption of the normal processes through which an embodied, true self comes into being” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 19). I began writing a novel to address the cognitive dissonance I experienced when my attempts to advocate, educate, and care for vulnerable children were thwarted by

an authoritarian school system that valued standardized test scores more than soul and community. My novel, *Illusions of More: A Story out of Shadow*, is the story of 9-year-old refugee, Pilar, and her teacher, Sienna O'Mara, and reveals how teaching and learning become traumatic when patriarchal energy coerces educators into disregarding what they know about individual children, their development, their stories, and human and civil rights. A scene from my novel evokes the way patriarchal education forces children to disassociate from their lived experience:

“But the curriculum tells us what skills they need if they miss a question on the test,” Nancy said.

“The curriculum assumes that the kids already know the thousands of basic English words they need before they can even approach the skills the curriculum assigns to each question.”

“I think you are being too specific,” Deedee said.

Sienna clenched her jaw. Being specific mattered...*swap meet, hothouse, party favors.*

“And you are sabotaging our future test scores by coddling these kids.” Nancy glared at Sienna. “You can’t just do your own thing. You have to follow the curriculum.” (Anjali, 2022, pp. 80-81)

In the novel, Sienna’s colleagues insist that she disassociate from her advanced education and lived experience, telling her not to see, not to feel, and not to know what she knew. As a fictional character, Sienna held my experience of systemic pressure and what I believe to be other faculty members’ twisted concern for my well-being as I was directed to ignore the signals of distress I saw in my students. I felt disgust at being pressured to betray the trusting relationships I had cultivated with the children. I wonder if my resistance created cognitive dissonance for my colleagues—dissonance that, given our dependence on our jobs to support our families, may have felt intolerable and irresolvable.

### **Archetypes in Action**

Patriarchal and colonial oppression have demanded the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual subjugation of women for centuries (Gilligan & Richards, 2014). Jung (1954/1969) proposed that perhaps some archetypes “are no longer the contents of the unconscious but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition” (p. 5). A survey of educational history shows that the archetype of the female elementary public school teacher has been consciously formulated. In her book, *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*, Grumet (1988) described what happened when the United States moved from a rural to urban industrialized society. Social reformers such as Horace Mann reasoned that public schools could teach children how to become the workers and consumers industrialists demanded (Grumet, 1988, p. 39).

Simultaneously, religions, distressed by the diverse practices of newly arriving immigrants, found themselves concerned with promoting “American” or Christian virtue and morality. Public schools promised to assimilate diverse children into the way of life Christians and industrialists desired (p. 39).

Catherine Beecher, the daughter of a Calvinist minister, made a case for “placing educational responsibilities into the hands of women” (Grumet, 1988, p. 40). Beecher

believed in education and economic opportunity for women but given the attitudes of her time could only expand career options by advancing the archetype of a submissive elementary school teacher who modeled “feminine sacrifice, purity, and domesticity” (p. 40). This formulaic apolitical archetypal being would never question socio-economic or curricular “authorities” such as school board members, capitalists, clergy, or politicians. Scholars have called the result of Beecher’s campaign Republican Motherhood.

Pestalozzi, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century man, was credited with promoting “the maternal model of instruction” (Spring, 1994). This label was misleading, of course, because early teachers had to be unmarried and could not be mothers. The archetypal American elementary school teacher is therefore a virginal maiden—a woman who could never have had the opportunity to develop the authentic maternal epistemology that comes from doing the actual labor of nurturing a unique child. Ruddick (1995) called what arises from such hands-on practice authentic Maternal Thinking:

A mother caring for children engages in a discipline. She asks certain questions—those relevant to her aims—rather than others; she accepts certain criteria for the truth, adequacy, and relevance of proposed answers; and she cares about the findings she makes and can act on. (p. 24)

When a district director ignored indicators of ample student progress and asked me what I could do to better to improve next year’s standardized test scores, I replied in all honesty, “I can’t do anything better. If you want to improve test scores, change the test.” His sneering reaction demonstrated that teachers, like “mothers have been a powerless group whose thinking, when it has been acknowledged at all, has most often been recognized by people interested in interpreting and controlling rather than in listening” (Ruddick, 1995, p. 26).

In 2023, we might look back on Beecher’s or Pestalozzi’s image of a teacher and call America’s foundational archetypal female elementary public school teacher, *Mansplained* (Solnit, 2014, p. 13). In Solnit’s essay, she shared an experience of meeting an affluent man who presumed he could explain to her a “very important” book he had heard about but not read. Solnit’s friend interrupted him more than once, informing him that he was speaking to the author, yet he continued. Solnit noted, “Men explain things to me and other women whether or not they know what they are talking about” (p. 4). “Every woman knows what I’m talking about,” Solnit continued.

It’s the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. [Mansplaining] trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men’s unsupported overconfidence. (p. 4)

From what I have observed in my 15 years of teaching, my sense is that many female teachers in the United States have been forced to identify with and enact a male-defined role as the “virtuous” archetype of the Mansplained Teacher—women who are not allowed to know what they know or to re-create and then sustain a system that cultivates and supports their agency, talents, and desire to serve. When I brought to a district office director evidence of the educational malpractice and trauma my ELL students were experiencing, he told me, “It never ends well when teachers get political.”

### Maternal Practice

In a patriarchal educational system, trauma is perpetuated by silencing the voice of the female teacher and corraling female power into male-defined caricatures that “force women to act as if they don’t have or need a self” (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 6). What would it look like if female teachers were, instead, valued for running the archetypal energy of a critically conscious, authentic Maternal Thinker? Ruddick (1995) identified authentic Maternal Thinkers as people who practice preservative love that recognizes children’s “vulnerability and responds to it with care, rather than abuse, indifference, or flight” (p. 18). Authentic Maternal Thinkers practice creating and maintaining conditions “to nurture emotional and intellectual growth” and development for specific and real children (p. 19). Yet, as Ruddick noted, this practice becomes problematic because so many Mansplained individuals and institutions thwart the creation of a “world in which maternal training can effectively yield the excellences and virtues for which an authentic maternal thinker strives” (p. 110). In other words, a teacher may be an authentic maternal thinker, expertly attuned to the needs of her students, but within the structures and dynamics of the school system she is expected to comply with authoritarian dictates created and maintained by people who collude with all the forms of violence patriarchy uses to sustain itself.

When I advocated for my Latinx students’ right to learn to write their own stories, I was devalued as a teacher and a person. I witnessed the archetypal energy of the Mansplained Teacher constellate among the staff. Although a few of my colleagues agreed with my child-centered approach, they remained silent or joined my critics when I was accused of wanting to sabotage the school’s efforts to increase standardized reading and math scores. The intra-faculty oppression of an individual teacher’s opposition to authoritarian mansplaining creates or reactivates relational trauma for teachers who embody the energies and practices of the Authentic Maternal Thinker. Between systemic patriarchal pressures and their commitment to their students, authentic maternal thinkers can rarely spare the energy it takes to risk calling attention to the role of individuals or the system in the constellation of unconscious material at work at the level of the group. Many of them become isolated.

In *Illusions of More* (Anjali, 2022) the cruelty of a Mansplained teacher and administrator allowed the ghost of Mexican folktales, *La Llorona*, the weeping woman, to come to school on *El Dia de Los Muertos*. In the novel, the mother who drowned her children after her husband rejected her represented the trauma of the Mansplained Teacher. In my case, I refused to drown my students. I left work I loved. Years and a second master’s degree later, with a robust psychotherapy practice, I am finally able to recognize exactly how much curricular and instructional patriarchal dynamics cost me personally, professionally, emotionally, and economically. Repairing psychic fragmentation and identifying its unconscious personal, cultural, and archetypal sources is tender, intricate work requiring moral courage (Jung, 1951/1968, p. 8). Exploring the real-time differences between the Mansplained and Authentic Maternal Thinking Teachers could contribute powerfully to healing and transforming school-based trauma. As one of my 4th-grade students said when I explained why I could not teach writing anymore, “What a rip off.”

### Contributor

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