Teaching (with) British Film: Sally Potter's Orlando

Adapted from Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel by British filmmaker Sally Potter in 1993, Orlando can be an excellent resource for both language and culture in the English classroom. Living through four centuries, two as a man, two as a woman, Orlando, the main character, studies the roles of men and women in whatever historical contexts/eras fall. Although the following lesson plans focus on the role of women in Victorian society, several other issues could be raised by viewing Orlando, such as its view of the English class system.

I.

Warming up

Students are informed that the exclusion of women from political citizenship was an insult that mobilised vast numbers of women; the demand for the vote was one among a number of campaigns, another was the struggle to change the law under which a husband took possession of his wife's property, including her earnings, when he married her.

BOARD PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary Box</th>
<th>The legal status of women in the Victorian age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>women did not have the right to own or inherit property;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>women could not vote or hold any office in government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>married woman</td>
<td>could not</td>
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<tr>
<td>sign contracts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>have their own money.</td>
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<tr>
<td>control whatever money they might earn, even though they earned it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>bring cases to court.</td>
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<tr>
<td>sue for divorce.</td>
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Women as second-class citizens when compared to men

Students are asked to consider the meanings attached to the word property:

- property is any object or right that can be owned; ownership involves possession; beyond possession, it implies the right to use, prevent others from using, and dispose of property, and it implies the protection of such rights by the government.

Conclusions are registered on the board.
Students:

- realise that until the turn of the 19th century property equaled male privilege;
- are asked to recall the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 as a milestone in the fight for equal rights, which allowed women to retain and acquire assets independently of their husbands and for the first time eradicated the notion that a wife was the property of her husband;
- are asked in what ways the status of women could differ if they were or weren't married in terms of property law;
- realise that both unmarried and married women couldn't legally own any kind of property because property could only be owned by men, either husbands, fathers or male children.

Development

Students:

- are asked to think about what would happen if, hypothetically, a man should suddenly change into a woman in terms of his/her property rights;
- are asked if they have ever seen the film Orlando directed by independent British film director Sally Potter in 1993;
- are informed that this film was adapted from a novel written by Virginia Woolf in the early twentieth century (1928), when society still regarded women as second-class citizens, not fit to vote, but when many women were energetically assaulting society’s quaint notions as quickly as they could;
- are told that the protagonist, Orlando, living through four centuries, two as a man, two as a woman, experiences life from the point of view of both sexes as s/he moves through social change;
- are informed that Orlando is granted the deed to a sizeable piece of property as a result of his relationship as the "son" of Queen Elizabeth I's old age and that after a long sleep following a battle in which he refuses to kill, he wakes up one morning as a woman;
- are asked to predict what could have happened to Orlando's property when he woke up as a woman;
- are handed in a worksheet on the film excerpt (DOC. 1) and are allowed a few moments to read it;
- watch an excerpt from the film Orlando (10 minutes) and solve the worksheet while viewing the excerpt for the second time.
Students and teacher correct the worksheet on the board (check DOC. 2).

Students:
- conclude that until the turn of the 19th century property is a male privilege: Orlando, who was born into wealth and social standing and holds a powerful position in society as a lord, loses all his/her worldly possessions when s/he becomes a woman in the 18th century;
- are alerted to the fact that if a woman does not 'fit' the predetermined identity constructed for her by law, her existence can become legally 'invisible' (as one man comments when the Victorian courts can't determine whether Orlando is dead or a woman, "They're pretty much the same thing"). In practical terms, this means that Orlando is coerced into fulfilling the legal criteria of the 'normal' woman in order to keep her property;
- are asked to think about the conditions h/she would have to gather in order to fulfill those criteria of property law and keep her estate:
  - h/she would have to marry;
  - h/she would have to bear a male-child heir.

Conclusion

Students:
- aware of the arbitrary definitions of masculinity and femininity as Lady Orlando, who is taken aback when pronounced legally dead after her transformation, observes "Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex."
- are asked to relate Virginia Woolf's biographical information with the central concerns of the film excerpt:
  - Virginia Woolf was a writer who herself tried to break free of sex and class restraints.

II.

Warming up

Students are asked to recall the activities done last class and explain who Orlando is.

Development

Teacher writes on the board the verse if married you are legally dead extracted from a poem by Adrienne Rich.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary Box</th>
<th>&quot;if married you are legally dead&quot;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adrienne Rich</td>
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</table>

Students:
- are asked to interpret this verse taking into consideration what was previously discussed in relation to Orlando:
  - by marriage, the husband and wife were one person in law; that is, the legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband; a woman, if married, had no legal independent existence;
- are asked to predict what the contents of Adrienne Rich's poem might be taking into consideration the title Heroines;
- are asked to think about who these heroines might be;
are asked to consider if these heroines might be the so called "great women" of history;
Teacher hands in the poem by Adrienne Rich (DOC. 3).
Students’ attention is drawn to the pre-question.
Teacher reads the text aloud.
Students:
- are asked to read the poem for gist;
- are asked to relate the poem Heroines with the excerpt from Orlando in terms of the common threads:
  - women had no right to property (line 5// Orlando’s lawyers tell her that, as a woman, she has no rights to her estate);
  - women were seen as their fathers’ and husbands’ property (lines 8-9//Pope’s reasoning that women, no matter how “charming” they may be, are “lost” without the guidance of fathers and husbands);
  - marriage was considered as a way of obtaining respectability and economical subsistence (lines 10-11//Archduke Henry’s proposal);
  - women often could not speak out, their husbands spoke for them (lines 14-15//Pope equals silent women with perfection);
- are asked to interpret the verses your husband has the right of the slaveholder/to hunt down and re-possess you/should you escape (lines 23-26);
- are asked to compare the situation of a married woman to a slave-like situation;
- are asked to divide the compound word slaveholder into two nouns:
  - slave + holder;
- are asked to think about the meanings attached to both slave and holder:
  - slave is a person who is the property of another and is forced to work for him/her;
  - holder is a person who has something at his/her disposal or in his/her possession.

**BOARD PLAN**

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<th>Vocabulary Box</th>
<th>Slaveholder (n) = slave (n) + holder (n)</th>
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<tr>
<td>somebody’s property; forced to work for the person who owns him/her;</td>
<td>a person who has something at his/her disposal or in his/her possession.</td>
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Students are told that the suffrage movement was connected with the abolitionist movement in America because when the latter started raising questions about the status and rights of individuals, women began to look at their own position and to speak out.

**Conclusion**

Students are asked to quote from the poem the restrictions imposed on women’s lives by their legal position in the 19th century; these restrictions are signalled by the negation or neutralisation of actions by what the law says:
- you can possess nothing (line 5); [you are] unable to earn/a workingman’s salary (lines 12-13); [you are] forbidden to vote (line 14); [you are] forbidden to speak/in
public (lines 15-16); you are legally dead (line 17); you may not bequeath property/save to your children/or male kin (lines 18-20); [you] have no power to free them [slaves] (line 26).

- Students' suggestions are registered on the board.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>restrictions imposed on women's lives:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- you can possess nothing [line 6];</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- [you are] unable to earn/a workingman's salary (lines 12-13);</td>
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Students are asked if they think the poem's form - its overall structure - is a suitable vehicle for the poem's meaning.

**III.**

**Warming up**

Students are asked to recall the ideas discussed in the previous class by means of dialogue with the teacher.

Conclusions are registered on the board.

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<table>
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<th>Vocabulary Box</th>
<th>&quot;Orlando&quot; and &quot;Heroines&quot;</th>
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<td>restrictions imposed on women's lives</td>
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**Development**

Students:

- are led to revise their idea of "heroines" as "great women";
- realise that women have exerted greater and more influence on the course of history than any of the so called "great women" of the ages;
- realise that Adrienne Rich in her poem is rewriting history/herstory, focusing her attention on the exceptional, even deviant, interrogating myths and restoring erasures;
- are alerted to the fact that, throughout history, women have suffered, often without hope of improving their situation; today they are demanding an end to discrimination.

Teacher writes the sentence Adrienne Rich promotes civil rights on the board.

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<th>Vocabulary Box</th>
<th>Adrienne Rich promotes civil rights</th>
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Apoio: PORTO EDITORA
Students:

- are asked to put this sentence into the passive voice;
- are asked to consider the deflection in emphasis introduced by this transformation (when we use the passive voice the focus is on the action performed).

Conclusion

Students are asked to practise the use of the passive voice.

References


DOC. 1

Orlando – Worksheet

Setting

Orlando holds a powerful position in society as a lord. When he becomes a woman in the 18th century he observes "Same person; no difference at all, just a different sex" standing naked in front of a full-length mirror.

1. Orlando returns to England to discuss the nature of women's role in society with 18th-century poets Swift¹, Pope² and Addison³. She is informed of the lack of autonomy attributed to women.

   (a) This scene serves as indicator of the restrictions placed upon women's social life, namely

   (b) At the end of this scene, why do you think Orlando fixes her eyes on the camera?

2. (a) As a woman, Orlando is informed by the authorities that she can no longer keep her estate. Why?

   (b) Why is she pronounced legally dead after her transformation?

   (c) What assumption about male privilege is behind Archduke Henry's statement "You're mine because I adore you"?

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¹ Swift, Jonathan (1667-1745), Anglo-Irish satirist and political pamphleteer, considered one of the greatest masters of English prose and one of the most impassioned satirists of human folly and pretension.

² Pope, Alexander (1688-1744), English poet, who, modelling himself after the great poets of classical antiquity, wrote highly polished verse, often in a didactic or satirical vein. He was a bitterly quarrelsome man and attacked his literary contemporaries viciously and often without provocation, although to some he was warm and affectionate.

³ Addison, Joseph (1672-1719), English essayist, poet, and statesman, whose work, particularly in the periodicals The Tatler and The Spectator, strongly influenced 18th-century English taste and opinion.
DOC. 2 – Orlando – Worksheet Correction

1. (a) This scene serves as indicator of the restrictions placed upon women’s social life, namely that they didn’t belong in the public world of intellectual life and that they should be guided, provided for and protected by husbands and fathers since they are “nothing more than children of larger growth”.

(b) To let us in on the joke – she (when she was a man) didn’t need any kind of male guidance.

2. (a) Because women couldn’t legally own any property – only men had property rights in the 18th century.

(b) Apart from the fact that she has lived for 200 years and ‘must be presumed dead’, she is a woman, which ‘amounts to the same thing.’

(c) The assumption behind this statement is that property equals male privilege – he says that Orlando belongs to him on the grounds that he adores her. As a woman, Orlando finds that she cannot conform to what is expected of her as female, so she refuses the Archduke’s proposal.

DOC. 3 – Heroines – Adrienne Rich

In what ways can we relate this excerpt with the film Orlando?

Exceptional

even deviant

you draw your long skirts

across the nineteenth century

The law says you can possess nothing

in a world

where property is everything

You belong first to your father

then to him who chooses you

if you fail to marry

you are without recourse

unable to earn

a workingman’s salary

forbidden to vote

forbidden to speak

in public

if married you are legally dead

the law says

you may not bequeath property

save to your children

or male kin

that your husband has the right

of the slaveholder

to hunt down and re-possess you

should you escape

You may inherit slaves

but have no power to free them

Adrienne Rich, 1981 (shortened)