



# Contemporary Cultural-Social Approaches in Non-Formal Education: Three Representative Examples from the Fields of Medieval Literature, Theatre of the Absurd, and Modern Cinema

Paraskevi Chourdaki<sup>1</sup>

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 17 February 2018 Revised: 29 April 2018 Accepted: 5 July 2018 online: 9 August 2019</p>	<p>Contemporary cultural-social approaches in non-formal education is an interesting as well as intriguing area for modern research in the context of education, culture, and society. The arts, literature, new technologies, pop culture, theatre, cinema, and mass media are considered, among others, very important factors/agents of modern non-formal education internationally. In this context, it is strongly highlighted that literature, theatrical plays, and cinema can play an important role in contemporary cultural-social approaches to non-formal education nowadays. Based on the latter fact, this study presents examples from all three aforementioned fields: a case study on Medieval Literature, the poem of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' with a connection to the issue of anti-feminism, a case study on Harold Pinter's play 'The Birthday Party' whose title is further discussed and a case study on Paul Verhoeven's film 'Basic Instinct' with a view to present gender stereotypes in the cinematic sphere.</p>
<p><b>KEYWORDS</b> Non-Formal Education Medieval literature Modern cinema Theatre of the absurd</p>	

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, Department of Primary Education, University of Athens, Athens, Greece, Email: [voulahourdaki@gmail.com](mailto:voulahourdaki@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

It is known that Non-Formal Education (NFE) is any organized educational activity that takes place outside the formal educational system. Usually it is flexible, learner-centered, contextualized, and uses a participatory approach. There is no specific target group for NFE; it could be kids, youth, or adults. Thus, the area of non-formal learning can help explain the diverse ways of education via literature, plays, and cinema. This is the reason that the NFE is often used under the influence of the discourse of lifelong learning and includes different activities, actions, cultural events, human cultural works, and art in everyday life. In addition, in modern bibliography, literature, plays, cinema, music, art in general, new technologies, family, mass media, etc. do play a very important role for the culture and education of modern citizen of the 21st century. They can create attitudes, values, and beliefs, construct behaviors and actions, and cultivate a value system that non-formal education can promote, even better than the formal one (i.e., educational system). In this context, our study tried to analyze three different types/agents (i.e., literature, play, cinema) of modern non-formal education, showing in this way specific values and beliefs in the framework of non-formal education of our days.

### **First Example: the Medieval Poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

In the Arthurian Romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, although the reader meets the male protagonist of the story, Sir Gawain, and views the plot from a rather masculine side, it is undeniably true that, behind all this, a feminine side is being hidden; one which involves strong feminine figures who reveal their superiority in the end. Despite the common belief, which was dominant in the Middle Ages, that women cast spells upon men to seduce them, men themselves were actually responsible for their own actions. This fact, of course, does not erase the possibility that female intelligence may sometimes “deceive” men so as for the latter to be led to a certain course of action.

With regard to Geraldine Heng’s “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (1991), it is obvious that she indicates that the protagonist of the poem is not as courteous as he appears at first; since, when he discovers the real identity of the Green Knight as well as the role both of them were playing in Morgan Le Faye’s game, “[...] ,Gawain in self-defensive fury attributes all responsibility and power to women, in what is commonly cited as his “antifeminist diatribe”, a tirade witnessing the belief that women dominate and shape the destinies of men” (Heng 1991, 501). She is right to suggest that Gawain ought to claim responsibility for his actions, since he made his own choices without being forced to by

anyone. Heng also supports the view that Gawain was in fact tricked by the Lady, concerning the girdle, since the latter one made the object seem quite innocent to the knight's eyes (Ibid, 506). One problem with Heng's argument is that she fails to take into account that Gawain agrees to receive this so-called "love token" not for the Lady's sake, as he lets her believe, but for his own benefit to use its magical power. This behavior could not possibly be characterized either courteous or be excused due to the "so-called" bewitchment of Gawain by the Lady. Gawain tries to deal with the unexpected truth, which is revealed by the Green Knight in the end when he claims that he himself was only "Morgan's obedient creature" and admits Morgan Le Faye's "overarching authority and powers" (Ibid, 508).

Given "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space", Catherine Batt (1992) underlines the antifeminist spirit which, according to her, is part of the protagonist's persona, even though this is not clearly shown. She ironically wonders "If Gawain is so persuaded of his own guilt, why does he deliver, and not later retract, lines in which he abnegates responsibility for his own actions?" in order to make the readers ask themselves whether the established opinion they have of Gawain should be altered or not. As it is pointed out in the source, Sir Gawain should not be approached neither as an integral character nor as a "fixed" literary entity; to support this position one only need to think of Gawain's supposedly courteous behavior towards the Lady of the castle - he argued that he wanted to remain pure and devoted to the Virgin Mary and not give up his chastity - in contrast to his words later on "[...], when he accounts for his actions by blaming women, [and] he is seen actively to construct the tradition that associates him with misogyny" (Batt 1992, 119). In addition, based on Gawain's encounter in the hall with the young and the old lady and on his completely different attitude towards them, "the knight's sexual preference" is clearly illustrated, a fact that is not agreeable to his supposedly maintenance of his chastity (Batt, 1992). Batt insightfully also claims that "Gawain does not later show regret for his illogical calumny of women, because its expression exists as a discrete encoding of received wisdom, for "us" as well as for Gawain, a commonplace that, by virtue of familiarity in sermons and other literature, needs neither justification nor examination"; in other words, according to the medieval belief, Gawain can be excused for his mistakes and his seduction by the Lady, since many others before him, such as Adam, Solomon and David were "bewitched" by the evil creature called woman. Of course, this medieval antifeminist view of women becomes more apparent if one considers that "[t]he "testing" of Gawain has been incidental to a plot the central purpose of which was to terrorize Guinevere" and everyone was in fact manipulated

by Morgan Le Faye (Batt, 1992). Concerning this last argument, what is obvious, though, is that women could indeed be in charge of serious situations, even if men dominated the society of that era.

In conclusion, one could say that both sources point to the same direction, which is that of Gawain's persona to be seen as an antifeminist and of women as strong independent individuals, such as Morgan, who is actually shown through the poem as an evil and mysterious female figure who tricks men; however, this exact fact shows not her "wickedness" but her power over men at a difficult time for women. Even if some critics disagree with the opinion that Sir Gawain is closely connected to misogyny, what is known from medieval history is that in that patriarchic society of the time, women were not only "imprisoned" but also condemned for men's errors. Therefore, it is not unusual to see views such as Gawain's about women and their role if one takes into account that medieval women were discriminated against, but this cannot be used as an excuse for the establishment of beliefs such as these expressed in the poem discussed.

### **Second Example: Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party**

In the sphere of Theatre, it is clear that words like "sense", "logic" and "real" are colored with a different meaning than their usual, especially if one focuses on the specific genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. The latter firmly holds hands with the "senseless", "illogical", and "surreal" characteristics easily found in Harold Pinter's pieces of work, such as *The Birthday Party*. A "comedy of menace", as it has been characterized by many critics, could be viewed as an actual farce to the audience itself, whose expectations--created at the beginning and based on the very title--finally collapse when it becomes more than obvious, throughout the play, that the title is not only tricky but also ironic; the party which was supposedly organized to celebrate the protagonist's birthday, in fact, celebrates his spiritual as well as physical death.

The word "birthday" is generally associated with positive meaning: literally, someone new has been brought into the world and, figuratively, something afresh that is now beginning. An image of an infant may instantly appear before us, when thinking of the word, and feelings of tenderness, care, and joy emerge. Likewise, the word "party", meaning a gathering of people in order to celebrate an occasion leads to mental images of fun, music, festive atmosphere, and general happiness.

Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, though, is far away from those terms and all of the above is totally reversed in this play. The protagonist's –Stanley – birthday party is “a horrible parody of celebration and fun” (Barnet, Burto, and Berman, 1985, 710). Meg, Stanley's landlady, decides to organize him a party for his actually nonexistent birthday, which will lead him and the other characters of the play through a series of actions to the ultimate transformation of their known reality; as Martin Esslin (1973) has claimed, the party consists a ritual of the protagonist's destruction – or death, one might add – by the figures of Goldberg and McCann.

At a first level of interpretation, Stanley may seem re-born, a whole new man, after the party and at the end of the play, with bourgeois clothes and style, shaved, no glasses, and nothing that could link him to his self as was at the beginning of the play or his own past. Upon a second look, though, one realizes that behind this “re-birth” hides “death” in the sense that “[i]n order for the new Stanley to be born, the spirit of the old Stanley first had to be killed” (Dukore, 1962). He is forced to abandon everything he believes in, his values, his dreams, and his own self, so as to “fit” the system's model. In the interrogation scene, during which Goldberg and McCann move rapidly from question to question without giving Stanley the time and space to answer, his true identity is mercilessly shot to death by his two pursuers and he even ends up being deprived of his ability to express himself through language. He “lapses into the silence of the infans” while the murderous duet pronounces him a dead person and nothing more than an odour (Silverstein, 1993).

In this party, Stanley's friends or family are not invited, since they do not exist, there is no glowing atmosphere, not even a birthday cake. It is a funeral, wearing the mask of a birthday party, where, paradoxically enough, Stanley is present at his own burial. The deathly environment is highly emphasized by symbolic objects and actions that indicate the gradual fragmentation of the protagonist with the result of him becoming a living corpse.

One of the symbols which functions as a hint of Stanley's potential physical and mental death is a boy's drum that Meg buys him for his supposed birthday, as a result of her exaggerated affection for whom she partly views as her son. The latter not only “[succeeds] in making him regress to the status of a little boy, a child” (Esslin, 1973) but it also reminds us of the drums being played at people's executions in the past. It is suggestive of an upcoming war; its primitive, repetitive sound prepares the audience for what is going to follow. During the party, the drum is broken, implying that Stanley's own “primitive instincts” are sacrificed, by force, on the altar of his so-called civilization process.

Furthermore, the issue of Stanley's vision, and his final loss of it, is a very important element of his spiritual death. Focusing on his glasses, it is strongly believed that, the moment they are broken, Stanley can no longer see clearly, not only literally but also metaphorically: his vision of people and society changes and becomes distorted. He is a blind man, now, and darkness is a kind of death. Whatever he perceives through his eyes will probably not be real and that is the reason why he becomes dependent on others to tell him what he sees exactly. Thus, his independence is also taken away from him.

Extremely significant role in the deprivation of Stanley's vision (and the deprivation of his life altogether) plays the blindfolding game, too. This game has a double meaning, since it contains a connotation for childhood and innocence (like the drum) but, simultaneously, stands for the notion of winning against losing. Stanley plays with the hope to win but, without knowing the rules which others have set for him, it is inevitable that he will be the loser. It is obvious that, again, he is involuntarily "blinded", needs the guidance of others to find his way, and finally becomes "[a] trapped, naked, frightened animal [who] tries to strangle Meg [...] and rape Lulu" (Schechner, 1966). These actions are a consequence of the "murder" of his true self, something which brings to the surface a vicious, mad creature who tries to escape from everything.

Another thing which contributes to the deathly atmosphere of the play and the irony of its title is Stanley's reference to the wheelbarrow. As Esslin (1973) correctly claims, "[t]he van with the wheelbarrow in it, [...] is a hearse with a coffin" and Stanley's attempt to scare Meg may hide his very own fear of him being taken away – from the boarding house or the world of the living. Of course, the boarding house, of which Stanley has been the only lodger for a long time, could be regarded as a coffin as well: Stanley always remains in it surrounded by its four walls, never sees the light of day and constantly "sleeps".

Based on all of the above, it is safe to suggest that Stanley's pursuers, Goldberg and McCann, could both serve as angels of death, ready to do whatever it takes to achieve their goal of transporting Stanley into the world of the dead (Ibid, 84). By "dead" it is meant that the protagonist will become one of the mass and lose his individuality altogether and, as a result, will resemble a robot in society, not a human being with feelings and personal views. Goldberg and McCann, representatives of the society's system and metaphors for religious forces, instead of being victims (as the history of their names implies: the former Jewish, the latter Irish) they appear as "[...] the immoral agents that destroy the individual" (Cohn, 1962).

In conclusion, as Harold Pinter (1997) has underlined in one of his letters to Peter Wood, “[c]ouldn’t we all find ourselves in Stanley’s position at any given moment?” (82). At some point or another, we could identify with the character of Stanley, who is afraid of losing his place in the world and is, finally, led to a breakdown by the pressure he has received. Despite the fact that the audience, before watching *The Birthday Party*, anticipates a light and joyous play just by reading its title, which gives away no hints for its actual plot, people become witnesses of a man’s mental death before re-entering society as a pawn of the system. Pinter’s play has been greatly discussed and can be attributed many interpretations but it is undeniable that the main theme is exactly the opposite of what its sarcastic title indicates: death instead of birth; the end of everything alive, including the play itself which is born every time it is staged and dies the moment of its finale.

### **Third Example: Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct***

Sexuality and its divergent forms has always been a taboo for society and its members. Similarly to other social issues, different sexuality is quite often viewed with a critical look and, at times, a hostile one. This is evident not only in real life but also in the domain of popular culture and, more specifically, in the world of cinema: many films. Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* stands out as an example of subtle homophobia of the ‘90s decade – something which was fuelled by the spread of the AIDS virus – with its female protagonist, Catherine Trammell (played by Sharon Stone), being bisexual and suspected for gruesome murder(s). Catherine’s figure is presented in a framework of danger and paranoia, things which primarily seem to derive from her sexual preferences, thoroughly depicted in the film. The latter presents a rather distorted and unrealistic image with an emphasis on gender: a non-straight woman equals not only threat but also monstrosity.

Before focusing on the character of Catherine Trammell, the distinction between the category she belongs to – 1970’s and onwards neo noir femme fatale – and the one preceding it – 1940’s femme fatale – should be mentioned. The traditional depiction of the 1940’s femme fatale is that of a “mysteriously seductive but evil” woman who bewitches the male hero with the power of her own sexuality and is punished in the end (Tasker 1993, 120). The neo noir femme fatale, on the other hand, may share some characteristics with this representation, but she simultaneously differs from it: this new version not only escapes any kind of punishment for her actions but also is a more independent figure “whose threat quite overtly lies in the context of work” (Tasker, 1993) and does not hesitate to cross the limits of heterosexuality.

What is more, the neo noir femme fatale is colored with an ambiguous mental state; she is usually presented as a psychologically disturbed individual with neurotic impulses whose “[...] will and pleasure are the supreme law” (Karpman 577, 1929). She will stop at nothing until she reaches her only goal which is that of personal satisfaction, something that is often achieved through murderous actions. This portrayal of the femme fatale as a “crazy bitch” is found in many films of the 90s decade, such as *Fatal Attraction*, *Disclosure*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Dangerous Liaisons* (the first two directed by Paul Verhoeven).

With regard to the main heroine of Verhoeven’s film, Catherine embodies successfully the modern femme fatale with killer instincts and manipulative tendencies. She derives great power from her workplace since it actually offers her an alibi: the fact that one of her own books involves the description of the murder she is accused of makes her look like a victim, though she holds tightly the position of the villain throughout the film.

What is of great importance is the fact that Catherine is “doubled” by the female figures mentioned above: Roxy resembles her like a twin, Hazel has similar characteristics with her and Beth is almost identified with her (in their college years, the one had tried to look exactly like the other, regarding appearance), they are both erotically involved with Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) – the detective that investigates Trammell’s case – and they end up confusing the audience as to “whodunit” plot (Hart 129, 1994). It is not clear whether Beth or Catherine committed the murders – alone or together – but one thing is clearly shown: the Woman or Women did it (Hart qtd. in Williams 163).

If one considers the whiteness of *Basic Instinct*, it is not difficult to “accuse” it of racial prejudice, too. The film not only stresses white color in general but also promotes the stereotype of the seductive white woman who, in order to get what she wants, is restless and uncontrollable but gets away with the crime in the end. A black woman, for example, would almost never play the role of the so-called “spider woman” – too active and non-submissive to the white patriarchal society she lives in – because she simply does not fit the white and blonde portrayal who has, also, broken the glass ceiling in the workplace.

The fear is instilled in the “masculinity-in-crisis paradigm” (Andrews 2006, 68) of Nick Curran who is afraid of losing not only his male power by Catherine but also his nickname Shooter. Verhoeven puts Douglas’ character in the position of the victimized heterosexual white male. Even though he does not realize it, Nick is a kind of alter-ego to Catherine in many aspects: both have the ability to harm others, both have successfully passed a lie-detector test. One the

one hand, there is Nick who insists on his masculinity and on the other hand, there is Catherine who does everything in her power to shout it aloud. The director puts emphasis on Catherine and, in general, on all the women of the film when it comes to the matter of sexuality, which are only indirectly stated. Despite the fact that Verhoeven dismisses any misogynistic charges against his movie, one cannot help but noticing that its misogyny also “lies in its insistence that men’s deaths (and male victimization) matter but women’s do not” (Williams 2005, 169); Roxy’s as well as Beth’s deaths are treated very differently in contrast to Boz’s and Gus’s murders which are more than underlined.

Sharon Stone’s character may represent a sort of demonized vengeful woman. Her getting away with the crime, in the end of the film, is perceived by some as a triumph of the female gender. Her intelligence is admired and her power over men and women is envied. Even if these interpretations may seem truthful, Catherine Trammell is in fact “punished”: due to her beautiful physical appearance and her personal success as an author; thus, she had to be presented with “flaws” as a payback for her de-marginalization in the modern society.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, more specifically, the three examples have shown that important values that do play a crucial role in our society in general, can be developed via literature, plays, and cinema. Especially, in our case, the first example focused on stereotypes, misogyny, human relations and humanist approach of society (medieval literature), the second example discuss the social relations, the philosophical aspect of human being, the social alienation of modern times, and the pressure that humans feel in their socio-cultural and educational environment. Finally, the third example analyses the theme of gender stereotypes, gender issues, and the viewing of woman in modern world as well as in popular culture. All these three examples- in the context of non-formal education- could contribute to the development of a modern culture and education in terms of promoting equality, human relations, freedom, antiracism, human rights, and beliefs. Based on the above, teachers of different grades and levels from all over the world could use these and similar kind of examples from the aforementioned fields even when they teach in what is called formal education.

## References

- Andrews, D. 2006. "Sex Is Dangerous, so Satisfy your Wife: The Softcore Thriller in Its Contexts." *Cinema Journal*, 45.3: 59-89
- Barnet, S. Burto, W and Berman, M. 1985. *Types of Drama: Plays and Essays*. USA: Little Brown and Company
- Batt, C. 1992. "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and the Narrative". *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Medieval Narrative Special Number, 22, 117-139.
- Cohan, S. 1998. "Censorship and Narrative Indeterminacy in Basic Instinct: 'You won't learn anything from me I don't want you to know.'", Steve Neale and Murray Smith, (Eds). *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, London: Routledge, 263 - 79. Print.
- Cohn, R. 1962. "The World of Harold Pinter." in Joelle Roumani (2012), *Political Tension and Existentialist Angst in the Drama of Harold Pinter and 'Isām Mahfūz'*, M.A. Thesis in Comparative Literature, Lebanese American University, Retrieved 6 June 2018 from [https://laur.lau.edu.lb:8443/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10725/1458/Joelle\\_Roumani\\_Thesis\\_Redacted.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](https://laur.lau.edu.lb:8443/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10725/1458/Joelle_Roumani_Thesis_Redacted.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y).
- Dukore, B. 1962. "The Theatre of Harold Pinter." *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6.3 (Mar.): 43-54. JSTOR Website. 13 Nov. 2012
- Esslin, M. 1973. *Pinter: A Study of His Plays*. London: Eyre Methuen, Print.
- Hart, L. 1994. *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, Print.
- Heng, G. 1991 . "Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *PMLA*. 106(3), 500-514
- Jenkins ,P. 2003. *Monster*, [Video file], Media 8 Entertainment and New market Films. Number (1992): 117-139. JSTOR. Web. 08 December 2018.
- Karpman, B. 1929. "Impulsive Neuroses and Crime: A Critical Review." *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 19(4), 575-591. Available at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1134618?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1134618?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)
- Pinter, H. 1997. The Birthday Party, Sylvan Barnet, et. al. (Eds). *Types of Drama: Plays and Contexts*, New York: Longman

- Schechner, R. 1966. "Puzzling Pinter" *The Tulane Drama Review*, 11 (2): 176-184. JSTOR. Web. 13 Nov. 2012
- Scott, M. 1986. *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, the Caretaker, the Homecoming: A Casebook*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, Print
- Silverstein, M. 1993. *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*, Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell University Press; London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses,
- Tasker, Y. 1993. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London: Routledge
- Verhoeven, P and Caton-Jones, M. 1992. *Basic Instinct*. [Video file], British Board of Film Classification, Retrieved April 19, 2018
- Whatling, C. 1997. *Screen Dreams: Fantasizing Lesbians in Film*. Manchester University Press
- Williams, L, R. 2005. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press,