

**Reading and Teaching the Modernist Aesthetics and Identity Politics  
in Kay Boyle's "The White Horses of Vienna"**

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**Abstract**

In teaching the "The White Horses of Vienna" (1935), perhaps Boyle's most anthologized text, I emphasize the modernist elements in that short story, and I pair it with short stories by Hemingway in order to put into relief Boyle's own modernist aesthetics in conjunction with realism. Students enrolled in my 300-level modern and contemporary American literature course explore formulations of and responses to modernism, modernity, and contemporary issues by a diverse array of authors, including some of the most well-known (read: canonical) writers in American and transatlantic history. They become familiar with artistic movements, particularly in regard to the American tradition. The goals of this course are met when students are proficient in their abilities to analyze and discuss literature in sophisticated ways and to contextualize their own and the primary writers' responses to literary history and tradition, modernity, and the modern world. In this vein, my students approach Boyle's short story as one that embodies the modernist moment, and they consider how this text can be opened up by modernist manifestos. In my article, I will underscore the successful strategies my students use in interpreting work by Boyle, specifically in connection with how they approach modernist texts and identity politics in her award-winning short story.

In teaching the "The White Horses of Vienna" (1935), perhaps Boyle's most anthologized text, I emphasize the modernist elements in that short story, and I pair it with short stories by Hemingway and Steinbeck in order to put into relief Boyle's own modernist aesthetics in conjunction with realism. Students enrolled in my 300-level modern and contemporary American literature course explore formulations of and responses to modernism, modernity, and contemporary issues by a diverse array of authors, including some of the most well-known (read: canonical) writers in American and transatlantic history. They become familiar with artistic movements, particularly in regard to the American tradition. The goals of this course are met when students are proficient in their abilities to analyze and discuss literature in sophisticated ways and to

contextualize their own and the primary writers' responses to literary history and tradition, modernity, and the modern world. In this vein, my students approach Boyle's short story as one that embodies the modernist moment, and they consider how this text can be opened up by modernist manifestos and other modernist literary texts. In this paper, I will underscore the successful strategies my students use in interpreting work by Boyle, specifically in connection with how they approach modernist texts and identity politics in her award-winning short story.

One way to immerse students in the ideologies and aesthetics of modernism is to assign modernist manifestos. The manifestos contextualize literary texts in delimited ways: they allow students to make connections and establish (even if not originally present) conversations among works that speak to each other in fresh ways. And, in order to get discussion going (because research shows that students learn better with discussion because they are actively constructing knowledge by building upon what they know and taking a role in the academic conversation: see the work of Jay Howard and Stephen Brookfield), there are several strategies that researchers like these in the field of SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) recommend. One is what I call a "reading check quiz"; others call it a "just in time quiz." The purpose of these tools is to foster reading to promote discussion and learning in the classroom. The way that I design mine is as a simple check of students' reading, usually as an open-ended prompt. Students figure out what they think of an aspect of the text as they respond to the quiz. Sometimes it is useful to ask students why they do or do not like a certain text: that can be very revealing of attitudes and ideologies. Since I have employed this strategy, the majority of students do read (even a nominal 4 points per class session is motivating, as it turns out), and we have productive discussions as a result. Shortly, I will cover the kind of material on the reading check quizzes that serves as a springboard into classroom discussion. For Boyle's short story, I might ask students to tell me what strikes

them as political in the story and whether it is a story that is relevant to twenty-first-century readers.

One of my aims in having them read Boyle is for them to articulate why "this" story: why is "The White Horses of Vienna" anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, the only piece of hers included in Volume D? How is it every bit as modernist as the work of Hemingway, with whom we read alongside of Boyle? These connections require critical thinking, which is the principle of undergraduate learning assigned to the course by Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC) and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). The pairings of Boyle's short story with one of Hemingway's (like "Big Two-Hearted River," which is also about dealing with a world torn apart by war, ideas about masculinity, and healing from the trauma of World War I by retreating into the countryside, or "Indian Camp," which treats racist attitudes and practices and undercuts, arguably, racist ideology by foregrounding the brutality and insensitivity such a worldview begets) invite students to consider the connections between Hemingway and Boyle before we articulate them together. Reading modernist manifestos as a backdrop or subtext or context to any modernist work allows for an investigation of how the works are similar, how they differ, and how they might be made to respond to each other.

Many of my students assume that much of modernist literature is non-political or apolitical. They do not think of Eliot, Fitzgerald, Stein, or Faulkner as political writers, for example. Until they read the headnotes, they have no expectations when it comes to Kay Boyle. One point that we emphasize in our unit with Hemingway and Boyle is that modernist writers are political writers in a sense: they harbor ideologies that resonate in texts, and the works may resonate in ways that the writers never intended. They write in and of a world that is always political, if we understand politics as meaning power in the English Studies sense.

In "The Manifesto of Futurism," which my students read before Boyle, F. T. Marinetti declares, "We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy

and fearlessness" (1501). Continuing, he writes, "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, the beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman" (1501). Marinetti asserts that he and others like him will "fight moralism, feminism" (1501). Boyle's "The White Horses of Vienna" can productively be opened up in comparing and contrasting it to Marinetti's vitriol. Because in Boyle's short story, we empathize with the young Jewish student doctor, Dr. Heine, and we feel ashamed of the older doctor's wife, who is not named, perhaps to make her more of a type than an individual character. Unlike Marinetti, Boyle implicitly argues for and champions morality and a type of feminism that engages in an analysis of power relations so as to enlarge the profile and sympathy for the underdog and downtrodden. According to Joan Mellen, Boyle did not consider herself a feminist because she did not understand feminism as a movement of equality and integration; she thought it required separatism instead: "Feminism to Kay was *mistakenly* synonymous with separatism....Kay held out long and hard against supporting women struggling to live independent creative lives" (emphasis mine, 486-87). In a reductive and yet perhaps helpful sketch, I will define feminists as they are understood in women's studies: feminists desire, advocate, and make choices that empower women and all people (especially marginalized or disenfranchised people). Typically, feminists tend to identify and engage in analyses of power relations.

What Marinetti stands for in his manifesto, Boyle stands against, making the comparison of the two texts an enjoyable experience for students—and allowing them something to say, a stepping stone into Boyle's work, which is not easy for them (with her wide-ranging allusions and dependence upon historical and social contexts). While Marinetti glorifies war, Boyle condemns what it does to innocent people: in the case of "The White Horses of Vienna," the oft-imprisoned doctor is being carted off to prison yet again (for what may be trumped-up charges), and he is separated from his family, who depend upon his livelihood. He also acknowledges that the conditions are harsh: he asks his

student doctor to throw him peaches over the wall and into his cell at a future time because he will be both hungry and thirsty, and peaches will address both of these wants. We also know, as twenty-first-century readers, the extent to which Dr. Heine is in danger—what Marinetti claims should be the purpose of modernist, and, specifically, futuristic art: "We intend to sing the love of danger." While the soldiers do not sing of the news of danger to the doctor's family and Dr. Heine, they announce it, nevertheless: "There's a swastika fire burning on the mountain behind you" (2044). And from the outset of the story, Dr. Heine signifies as an outsider with "his long, dark, alien face," which is in marked contrast to the older doctor's blondness and whiteness. Rarely, do we get Dr. Heine's private thoughts about himself, but we are privy to one such moment in which Dr. Heine silently watches the burning swastika: "He felt himself defenseless there by the window, surrounded by these strong, long-burning fires of disaster. They were all about him, inexplicable signals given from one mountain to another in some secret gathering of power that cast him and his people out, forever out upon the waters of despair" (2044). Angrily, he bursts out, "The whole country is ruined by the situation.... Everything is politics now. One can't meet people, have friends on any other basis. It's impossible to have casual conversations or abstract discussions any more" (2044). Our sympathy immediately attaches to the young, naïve Dr. Heine, who feels himself to be an outsider but does not suspect that the doctor's wife is staunchly anti-Semitic. We will see in this passage that the doctor's wife has placed Dr. Heine on a taxonomy: he is not a person but a thing to be typed and categorized and stereotyped, as she will do throughout the story in assigning him interests, intents, and pursuits that are not necessarily his but ones that have been associated with Jews in anti-Semitic and stereotypical fashion.

'What are we going to do?' said his wife's voice in a whisper behind him in moment.

'What do you mean? About what?' said the doctor...the lines of patience and love were scarred deep in his cheeks....

'About *him*,' said the doctor's wife in hushed impatience.  
'Send one of the boys down for his bag at the station,' said the doctor. 'Give him a drink of *Apfelsaft* if he is thirsty.'  
'But don't you see, don't you see what he is?' asked his wife's wild whisper.  
'He's Viennese,' said the doctor, working.  
'Yes, and he's Jewish,' said his wife. 'They must be mad to have sent him. They know how everyone feels.'  
'Perhaps they did it intentionally,' said the doctor.... 'But it wasn't a good thing for the young man's sake. It's harder on him than us. If he works well, I have no reason to send him back. We've waited three days for him. There are people sick in the village.'  
'Ah,' said his wife in anger behind, 'we shall have to sit down at table with him!' (2040)

With this passage, I would recommend introducing the concept of identity politics to students. In her co-signed "The Revolution of the Word" manifesto, Boyle et al distance themselves from "sociological ideas," and yet they agitate for a revolution of the word, a revolution that would reconfigure the way we understand subjectivity, embodiment, experiential reality, and perception. These facets are all components in identity formation/articulation and identity politics. Dominick LaCapra defines "identity politics" as involving "a grid of subject positions," wherein a person often "remains within that grid" through "processes of identification or excessive objectification" (175). The political attitudes of various social groups become apparent in investigations of identity politics. The goal of scholarly study and teaching in the area of identity politics, as I see it, should lie in cultivating our abilities to identify and explicate the markers, structures, or behaviors in artifacts, like literary texts, that allow us to see how identity politics function. According to LaCapra, the challenge of such study "is somehow to try to test critically, perhaps in certain ways validate, or perhaps

transform one's subject position, so that one doesn't end up where one began" (175). Inviting students to critique the uncomfortable and race-coded passages in "The White Horses of Vienna" encourages them to consider, analyze, and reflect on racist ideologies and how expectations of race are activated and dismantled in the text by Boyle. Students can also reflect on and consider how characters, situations, attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies are similar or dissimilar from their own, prompting them to think critically of the world they inhabit.

Even though the doctor's wife insists on applying Jewish stereotypes to Dr. Heine (who is only ever called by his proper title and last name as a measure of respect by our omniscient narrator), he does not fit into the racialized expectations neatly, and even the doctor's wife comes to LaCapra's desirable position in which she has to examine her own thinking about how identity is constructed and the power dynamics associated with identitarian categories: she puts out the fire on Dr. Heine's coat and begins to reflect on how she could fix the coat with another panel of cloth when "she bit her lip suddenly and stood back, as if she had remembered the evil thing that stood between them" (2042). She silently accuses Dr. Heine of the ability to "poison my sons with the poison of money and greed" when he is telling a story about the white horses of Vienna that has more to do with love and possession than money and greed (2042).

And the story of the white horses of Vienna becomes heavily symbolic. The doctor gestures to Dr. Heine's story in his puppet play and delivers a dark, political satire in what is otherwise a sweet, lovely domestic setting. The grasshopper of the doctor's play is the inhuman but charismatic proxy for Adolf Hitler and the bumbling clown is a proxy for Austria's ruler, Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. The rest of the actual story parallels this dark satire: the doctor is removed from his home because, after Dollfuss is assassinated, the soldiers explain that they are "rounding them all up tonight [presumably each of the eight Austrian Nazis that was part of the historical event—but the doctor strikes me as neither an assassin nor a Nazi]. Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow" (2048). The final note of the story is one of despair at the political climate of the

modern world, one ravaged by politics and war: ultimately, Dr. Heine concludes, the beautiful white horses of Vienna, that have been trained to bow to royalty, now will bend their legs "where there was no royalty any more" (2049). On one hand, we can interpret this dismal note to be a literal mourning for the deceased Austrian Chancellor. On the other, we can read it as a broader, metaphorical commentary: there are no rulers who are deserving of respect in the modern world—not in this place and time.

Altering and expanding public perceptions are part of the cultural operations or business that literary texts should perform, as the work of Boyle attests. Boyle condemns literature, specifically poetry, that is not tied to the world outside of the book. According to Boyle, "That 'I am a poet, a bard, a singer' attitude has disposed many people to view poets as flighty creatures incapable of observing reality or of coping with actual experience. It is an attitude that has bred a spirit in the universities which makes very precious lads and lassies indeed of young people who, if they must be poets, would be much better off making use of the idioms and symbols of their own time" (*Being Geniuses* 165). Boyle, it appears, yearns to see art connect with the real world, and her contributions to modernist literature deliver insightful critiques on real-world matters like race and identity and what those mean to different people. Reports Boyle, "[The modern world] may appear to have been a time without much humour in the *avant-garde* literary movement, but it must be remembered that it was a time of gravest crisis in letters, of furious schism and revolution in the arts...." (*Being Geniuses* 214). Boyle adds later, in 1985, that the young generation of modernists advocated "revolt against all literary pretentiousness, against weary, dreary rhetoric, against all outworn literary and academic conventions" (Boyle qtd. in Benstock 458 n. 2). These statements highlight the importance that Boyle and other modernists placed on the new directions the arts were taking; the new art, of which "The White Horses of Vienna" is a part, could revolutionize literature, rhetoric, and academic conventions, to paraphrase Boyle, but also, perhaps, it can prompt us to interrogate the dynamics of race and race



relations, as her short story asks us to do. With "The White Horses of Vienna," we are asked—and we ask our students if we assign them the story to read and to study—to consider how race matters in the literary world of the story and in the historical world of the 1930s. And we are left to reflect upon the importance of this short story to its contemporary readers (who awarded it the O. Henry Prize) and to readers of our own day, who see fit to anthologize and teach it.

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