

## “Coming Out” in a Feminist Classroom

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**Abstract** Ideological differences in a writing class evoke the passion of political sensitivities. A graduate student tells of “coming out” as a pro-life advocate in an essay before his feminist classmates and professor. The exchange created instant and irreconcilable enemies, but he also found some unexpected support from a hesitant voice within that classroom.

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Before my classmate had finished reading, I knew there would be trouble.

“Trouble” in a graduate English seminar usually means little more than arguing over whether the ghost of Hamlet’s father is real or imaginary. Such disputes don’t normally end friendships or make lifelong enemies of strangers. But this one had that potential.

“Today’s memoir disturbed me in many ways,” Susan read aloud to the ten of us clustered around a long wooden table. She was a tall woman with dyed-red hair and a tattoo of a long-feathered bird on one shoulder. I’d chatted with her a few times on the elevator, about the program, our research, the eccentricities of our professor—commiserations of grad students the world over. The “memoir” she referred to was our reading for that week, a book by a French woman, Annie Ernaux, who had been shattered by the experience of a late-term, illegal abortion.

For me, part of the horror of Ernaux’s story came from my own moral qualms about abortion. Not that I’m an expert on the subject—my pro-life arguments, even at their sharpest, are really just rhetorical flourishes that sit lightly on top of gut feelings. But Susan had different reasons for feeling uncomfortable.

“Most disturbing of all,” she said, “is the thought that many women today do not have access to legal and safe abortions. I had an abortion when I was in college, and it was safe and easy. I don’t feel guilty about it, and I didn’t experience any physical or emotional trauma. But when I hear lawmakers in South Dakota talk about taking away this right, it traumatizes me as a woman. Their hatred and ignorance feels like a personal attack.”

She finished, and another classmate read a paper that ran along the same lines—the evil ignorance of those right-wing cretins. But I continued to hear only Susan. She’d *had an abortion*, I thought; the mere discussion of a South Dakota law *traumatized* her; she felt *personally attacked*.

And I was next in line to read.

My own paper was far more impersonal, but suddenly it felt explosive. It was a response to another reading for that week, an essay by the philosopher Judith Butler, who argued that Americans accept war in the Middle East because, subconsciously, we view foreigners as less than human, not worthy of being mourned when they die. I suggested, in response, that the same argument would apply more convincingly to unborn babies. After all, pro-choice advocates *openly* view fetuses as less than human, as unworthy of human rights or grief, though they die by the millions.

In other words, one of my smart-sounding arguments draped over gut feelings. It was certainly more logical than the two that preceded it, but still... *abortion... trauma... personal attack...* My fingers twitched as I prepared for the spotlight.

This had been, without doubt, the most unusual class I had ever taken. I usually focus on medieval literature, but this subject, “representations of trauma in the 20th century,” sounded so intriguing, I took a gamble. I hadn’t known beforehand that the professor was a well-known feminist critic. I also hadn’t known that all of my classmates would be women.

The second reader had stopped talking. Was I really going through with this? The professor called my name. Faces turned. *Traumatized...*

“Before I begin,” I said, my voice wavering with my heartbeat, “I should probably let you all know that I am a pro-life advocate.”

Faces around the table instantly froze. A couple widened their eyes, as if confused, or waiting for more. So I gave it to them. “That is, I believe that abortions should be banned, or at least heavily restricted, as they are about to be in South Dakota.” Cold looks gave way to disgust and open hostility. One woman’s jaw literally went slack, like a cartoon of rage. With two sentences, I had gone from harmless intruder in their feminist haven to enemy combatant. I hadn’t just come out of my conservative closet—I’d swung the door open in their faces.

But no one spoke. I raised my hands in mock self-defense—as if I could play this off with humor. “I know, suddenly I’m the villain!” No one laughed.

After that came the easy part: reciting my fancy argument. I read fast enough to keep the quiver out of my voice, and paused only briefly for persuasive effect. The blessing of this method was that I didn’t have to look up. At her.

The end of my paper was met with further silence. No indignant retorts, no rebuttals, not even a “hmm.” So I kept talking. In the vacuum, my voice went on autopilot. I said something pedantic about religion and the question of who gets included in the human community, but truthfully, I wasn’t listening to myself any more than they were. So I stopped.

The silence couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but it hurt. A dark cloud of righteous fury seemed to have settled over the circle.

"Thank you," the professor said in a clipped voice. Like many academics, she put great stock in appearing open-minded; I knew she would refuse to take sides, even if her sacred cow were burning. "Does anyone have a comment?"

The silence expanded again, like a tense balloon. A woman to my left cleared her throat, and everyone turned—thankfully, away from me. "First of all," she said, choosing her words, "I think it was brave of you to come to class today and read. It would have been much easier to stay home."

I nodded my thanks. She was suddenly my best friend, this woman I hardly knew, but she couldn't know the depth of my ignorance. I had expected my writing to provoke controversy, sure, but should I really have been tempted to stay away? It hadn't occurred to me to anticipate quite that level of malice.

She continued less cautiously. "What you're glossing over in your analysis, though, is the question of exactly when a fetus becomes viable." Now we were back in familiar analytical territory, and I was further thankful. "A lot of people think the fetus doesn't fully develop until it can live independently of its mother's body."

I nodded, as if conceding the point. I could have argued with her, could have pointed out that viability and value are separate questions. But really, who wants to argue with his new best friend? I still hadn't ventured a look in Susan's direction.

Eventually, the group discussion regained some normalcy, but the elephant never quite left the room. Susan and the other woman who had read didn't say another word. I lingered after class, thinking they might want to talk, but they fled like hit-and-run drivers.

When they were gone, the professor complimented me in an overly cordial tone. "I have to say I disagree with your politics," she said, "but you appropriated Butler's argument quite well." To my surprise, another classmate also approached me, one who had remained quiet earlier. Silence was not her usual m.o.—she was a petite, animated woman who had vigorously defended her views in the past. Now she seemed uncertain, almost bashful.

"You make some good points," she said softly. "I wonder if it's really a good thing that abortions are so common. I'm not pro-life or anything, but I can see why people would think it's wrong." Then she shrugged. "It's a difficult issue to sort out."

I agreed that it was. She made awkward small talk then, as if waiting for me to confirm something more. I don't know if I did. What I felt, as she talked in her nervous way, wasn't exactly vindication or relief, but rather a sense that I actually had it pretty easy. I was such an outsider to this world of feminist scholarship and politics, it was no trouble to play the *provocateur*. I was free to stir the pot, with nothing at stake but a few hurt feelings.

This quiet woman, on the other hand, had much to lose. What happens, I wondered, when a person loses faith in something her friends and colleagues consider essential? When she starts to question the assumptions that, for reasons unknown, underlie so much of her chosen field? I suppose she might drop everything and turn around, or try to start a revolution. More likely, though, she'll end up like this grad student, whispering encouragement to the enemy and speaking noncommittally about "difficult issues."

For myself, I still had to decide how, and whether, to approach Susan. “Just leave it alone,” a conservative friend advised. “You don’t owe her anything. *She’s* the one who dragged her sex life into the classroom.” In the end, though, I think my better instincts prevailed. I sent Susan an e-mail, thanking her for sharing her deeply personal piece of writing in public. I hoped there were no hard feelings, and offered to meet and talk further. In a return message, she said there was no harm done. We never spoke again.

I know that I had every right to express my views in the classroom. If I can’t defend an unpopular position in an academic setting that prides itself on open inquiry, then where else? I know, too, that emotions can’t be allowed to make a hostage of intelligent debate. One can’t simply feel offended, announce it, then expect all objections to be dismissed.

All the same, in those classroom moments, I couldn’t keep my hands from shaking.