

Classics, True Lovers, and Texts in Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*

Nancy Garden's 1982 novel is written mostly in the voice of the character Liza as she reflects on key events that took place during her senior year of high school: conflicts with the headmistress, a chance encounter with a girl named Annie which leads to a friendship, and Annie and Liza's move from friends to lovers. Currently a first-semester student at MIT, Liza has been out of touch with Annie for some months. Annie is now at Berkeley, but physical distance isn't the cause of the gap in their relationship. Rather, Liza remains uneasy about a tangled situation they were involved in near the end of their senior year. Liza had volunteered to cat-sit for two of her teachers—Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson—over spring break. Liza and Annie enjoy having a private space, and they make love there for the first time. When a student, Sally, and another teacher, Ms. Baxter, show up at the house and find Liza and Annie partially dressed, Ms. Baxter reports the incident to the headmistress, as well as the fact that Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson are a couple, a suspicion of Ms. Baxter's that her intrusive inspection of the house confirms. Liza is temporarily suspended from her school and is called before the board. Although the board decides to take no action against her, there are more serious immediate consequences for Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson. They have to leave their teaching positions, and Liza's lingering guilt for her unwitting part in their dismissal has kept her from communicating with Annie. By the end of the novel, however, Liza is able to separate her love for Annie from the injustice done to the teachers, and Liza and Annie make plans to see each other during winter vacation. Ending on this up-note, *Annie on My Mind* is considered a milestone text: "*Annie on My Mind* is notable for being the first YA novel to portray lesbians in a positive light. They were not cured or killed, although they certainly were persecuted" (Gillis and Simpson 112). Garner's novel is celebrated

for giving a full-hearted view of Liza and Annie, Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson. They, their love and relationships, transcend the difficulties and discrimination they face.

I had *Annie on My Mind* on my to-read list because of its ground-breaking status and my general interest in how gender and sexuality are presented in literature for younger audiences. Nothing about the marketing of the book—nor, indeed, in my summary above—suggests that the novel engages with Classical material. What a happy surprise to find that it does! The most significant appearance of Classics is Liza’s discussion of Aristophanes’ speech from Plato’s *Symposium*, but Classics arises in a few other instances, and—to provide context—I’d like to survey those first.

- Liza plans to become an architect, and Garden weaves references to architecture throughout the novel. Classical architecture in particular comes up three times. Imagining places they could travel to together, Liza says that she and Annie could visit the Parthenon in Athens, where Liza would teach Annie about architecture. Annie’s family is Italian-American, and Liza notices that their apartment contains a photograph of the Colosseum in Rome, a marker of their heritage. The Parthenon daydream gestures to a possible future for Liza and Annie, while the Colosseum photograph connects Annie’s family to the past. In these passing references architecture is used to articulate who people are or would like to be. Something similar, but with a twist, is at play in the other nod to Classical architecture in the novel. Liza is the president of the student council, and her vice president is Angela Cariatid. Liza explains that Angela’s last name usually strikes her as apt; Angela “reminded me in more than name of those graceful, self-possessed Greek statues that hold up buildings” (38). However, when Angela is

tasked with presiding over a student council meeting in which Liza's leadership is being questioned by the headmistress, Mrs. Poindexter, Angela's typical bearing deserts her. In this case, Classical architecture is benchmark for what Angela both is and isn't. The fact that Angela has lost her caryatid composure is perhaps a sign that something is amiss with Mrs. Poindexter's heavy-handed part in the council's proceedings.

- Liza's private school—Foster Academy—was founded by Letitia Foster. The founder's first name comes from the Latin *laetitia*, meaning “joy,” and the image of fostering joy seems propitious for the progressive institution. Although the school was good for Liza for many years, Mrs. Poindexter has become overbearing, and even the portrait of Letitia Foster is so dour that Liza wonders why she founded a school since she doesn't look like someone who liked children (38). Letitia's Latin name becomes ironic in context.

- When Ms. Baxter describes the state in which she found Liza and Annie in the other teachers' house, she uses Latin, saying that they were “practically—in *flagrante delicto*” (168, literally “in blazing fault”). Ms. Baxter may use Latin partially out of modesty, but in this instance the Latin phrase also brings with it an air of assumed authority and judgment, which accords with Ms. Baxter's general officiousness.

- One of Liza's schoolmates, Walt, thinks he is being sympathetic when he explains to her that he considers her sexual orientation a “handicap” (217). Their conversation is cut short—before Liza has a chance to reply—because she's reached her chemistry classroom, and Walt needs to head off to Latin. Here, the

mention of Walt's taking Latin seems to underscore his antiquated view of Liza's sexuality.

- In her English class with Ms. Widmer, Liza reads "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley, and Ms. Widmer gives the class the assignment of finding out what the Latin word means ("unconquered") and thinking about its appropriateness for the poem. Henley's poem was written in the late 19th century, but its Latin title conveys a bid for timelessness and helps establish the poem as a sort of verbal talisman. Liza recalls lines from it to gather her resolve during the uncomfortable student council meeting about her leadership. She tries the same thing when she has her hearing in front of the school's board, but finds it less efficacious in fortifying her spirits. Liza feels that "Invictus" resonates with the challenges she is facing, but she also discovers that it's not a cure-all charm.

Though I'm focusing on uses of Classics, Garden works other and various cultural touchstones into the novel—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters, Shakespeare's sonnets, Schubert's songs, and more. Garden's network of references creates a conceptual landscape in which Liza lives, grows, thinks, and tells her story. Classics isn't always benign, and it doesn't have all the answers, but it's part of picture.

The most sustained engagement with Classical material comes at the midpoint of the novel. As the relationship between Liza and Annie deepens, Liza remarks:

We didn't always use words when we were together; we didn't need to. That was uncanny, but maybe the best thing of all, although I don't think we thought about it much; it just happened. (115)

Their ability to understand each other's thoughts brings a Classical passage to Liza's mind. Liza continues with an account of Aristophanes' speech from Plato's *Symposium* (189c-193e):

There's a Greek legend—no, it's in something Plato wrote—about how true lovers are really two halves of the same person. It says that people wander around searching for their other half, and when they find him or her, they are finally whole and perfect. The thing that gets me is that the story says that originally all people were really pairs of people, joined back to back, and that some of the pairs were man and man, some woman and woman, and others man and woman. What happened was that all of these double people went to war with the gods, and the gods, to punish them, split them all in two. That's why some lovers are heterosexual and some are homosexual, female and female, or male and male.

I loved that story when I first heard it—in junior year, I think it was—because it seemed fair, and right, and sensible. But that winter I really began to believe it was true because the more Annie and I learned about each other, the more I felt she was the other half of me. (115-116)

Liza's summary is, of course, a condensation of the story as it is appears in the Platonic text, where it is presented as one of a number of speeches given in praise of love by different dinner-party guests. Garner has Liza present the aspects of Aristophanes' speech that are most meaningful for her and her situation. For instance, Liza doesn't discuss the hierarchy among pairings in the original, a hierarchy that celebrates male/male relationships over the others. Nor, for that matter, does Liza explain that Aristophanes' story is just one view of love among many in Plato's *Symposium*. Garner also has Liza modulate, rather than simply omit, details. In the *Symposium* speech, Aristophanes presents the conflict between divinity and the doubled humans

as caused by humans' attempt to overthrow the gods; Liza mentions a "war" and the gods' decision to "punish" humans as a consequence, but she is vague about the details. It is, however, a productive vagueness: it emphasizes the violent action of the divinities, which reinforces the novel's theme of suspect, potentially overblown exercises of authority. My intention here isn't to criticize Liza's (and Garner's) selection, de-contextualization, and modification of the Platonic source material. Rather, I think that noticing such processes at work helps us to see that cultural touchstones—Classical or otherwise—are partially of our own making. Our reception of them, our reading and representation of them through the lenses of our own experience, is part of what they are for us.

Liza reflects that the story struck her from the first as "fair, and right, and sensible." Its inclusion of three kinds of original beings naturalizes different kinds of sexuality, and the gods' splitting of the early humans—something beyond human choice or control—is the cause of desire. Different sexual orientations are not coded as "preferences" here or as aberrations in need of special pleading or extraordinary explanation. Unjudgmental acknowledgement of sexual diversity becomes a matter of justness and common sense. Such an unfreighted framing of same-sex desire is important for Liza at this point in her relationship with Annie, as they "realize more and more" (116) that they want to be more physically intimate with one another. Garner presents Liza's thoughts about the Platonic story at a strategic point in the novel—when it helps Liza, as well as the reading audience, to conceive of her increasing desire for sexual contact with Annie as something organic and understandable rather than anomalous.

Liza introduces her account of the Platonic tale by mentioning that it is "about how true lovers are really two halves of the same person." The phrase "true lovers" is telling. The use of "lovers" conveys a sexual connotation, which reinforces Liza's growing awareness of (and

potential concerns or wonderment about) the physical trajectory of her relationship with Annie. But “lovers” is importantly paired with “true,” making “true lovers” an instantiation of “true love.” This phrasing and the selective recounting of Aristophanes’ speech together make sex an integral part of “true love”—physical intimacy isn’t a debasement of true or pure love but rather a manifestation of it. In an essay about *Annie on My Mind*, Frankie Thomas meditates on the extreme, even impossible romance undergirding Annie and Liza’s relationship. They find themselves touching without realizing it, kissing without premeditation, and—though they had talked about sex—when it finally happens, they don’t discuss it with one another (or with us). Liza just says, “We went up to the living room...” (146) Garden places Liza and Annie’s physical interaction, the expression of their love, beyond words. Their relationship, including its sexual component, becomes a given, as fundamental a fact as the posited original unity of “true lovers.”

In its effort to naturalize or normalize the sexual activity of young people, *Annie on My Mind* has some kinship with another YA classic, Judy Blume’s *Forever* (published in 1975). Like *Annie on My Mind*, *Forever* is considered ground-breaking: “*Forever* was the first novel for young adults that accurately portrayed responsible teenage sexual behavior” (Gillis and Simpson 61). Unlike *Annie on My Mind*, however, *Forever*’s project is to show a sincere and sexual relationship between young adults that does not develop into a lifelong partnership of “true lovers.” The title of Blume’s novel becomes gently ironic as its protagonists separate by the end of the book. By contrast, although we don’t know that Annie and Liza will remain together forever, Garden’s novel ends with the couple’s affirmation of their love and relationship. Nothing about *Annie on My Mind* casts an ironic light on Liza’s desire to “give Annie all of myself, forever” (140) or Annie’s declaration to Liza:

I want to hold on to you forever, to be with you forever, I ... I want us to be a couple of passionless old ladies someday together, too ... sitting in rocking chairs, laughing over how we couldn't get enough of each other when we were young
(154)

The other love relationship between women which we see in the novel is also presented as a true-love pairing: Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson, who function as a kind of model couple, have been together since their teenage years, weathering various storms together. Their long-term commitment demonstrates that same-sex love can last and isn't a passing "phase." The difference between *Forever* and *Annie on My Mind* reflects the different cultural work that each novel and its author undertake. Blume demystifies and destigmatizes sex among heterosexual young people, even sex that isn't going to lead to a long-standing relationship. *Annie on My Mind* presents same-sex love as genuine and legitimate, and Garner accomplishes this partly by showing love between women as something that can last forever.

Liza's invocation of the *Symposium* participates in the novel's pattern of presenting texts that have special relevance in a person's life. We've already seen "Invictus" as an example of this trend, and every year at Foster Ms. Widmer supposedly gives each graduating senior a poem she considers particularly appropriate for them. As Annie and Liza's relationship develops, they exchange poems that they've read, poems which, Liza remarks, "seemed written especially for us" (107). When they become more sure that they want to make love, Annie shares a copy of Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah* with Liza, and the novel helps them to talk about their desire. *Patience and Sarah* reappears on the bookshelves in Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson's bedroom, along with *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* by Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love (153). Seeing these and other titles in a shared bedroom, Liza

and Annie realize that Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson are a couple. Throughout *Annie on My Mind* texts function as a kind of connective tissue among people, their experiences, and the wider world, past and present. Garden's novel both quietly celebrates this textual work and also participates in it itself, helping many readers to strengthen their senses of identity and community.

Garden nevertheless shows that texts aren't always right. They may give an incomplete picture, as Liza dismayingly discovers when she reads the entry on "homosexuality" in her family's encyclopedia and notices that it doesn't mention love at all. We also see that texts may be used punitively or judgmentally: after Sally and Ms. Baxter find Liza and Annie at the teachers' house, Ms. Baxter shows Sally some Biblical condemnations of same-sex relations, and Sally subsequently refers Liza to the Book of Leviticus and Romans 1:26. Even a text that has been helpful and personally resonant is shown to have limits—remember that the words of "Invictus" can't dispel Liza's worry at her board hearing. And Liza comes to realize that the vision of "true lovers" found in Aristophanes' speech insufficiently encapsulates her own experience of love. Despite the desire of the lovers in the speech to find their other halves, and despite Liza's earlier feeling that she and Annie shouldn't be separate people (91), Liza eventually prizes the fact that she and Annie are distinct individuals who can be intimate with each other (146). Liza's departure from the Platonic script is a positive move. Suzanne Obdrzalek discusses the pessimism and tragic outlook underlying Aristophanes' *Symposium* speech insofar as it posits a desire that can't be realistically satisfied and that doesn't allow for the recognition of another person. When Liza embraces Annie's otherness, seeing her as someone else, as something more or different than a completion of herself, she opens herself up to a fulfillment unavailable to the true lovers of Aristophanes' speech. In showing us that texts

have limitations—that they aren’t infallible or exhaustively descriptive, that they can be misused—Garden suggests that a text’s richness is not simply in what it says but in how we interact with it dialogically, gauging how it is both similar to and different from our own circumstances.

I’ll close with one more textual reference. In an unsent letter to Annie from college, Liza writes:

“Know the truth,’ Ms. Widmer used to quote—remember we used to say it to each other?— “and the truth will make you free.” (161)

We get to hear Ms. Widmer herself say this in a final, farewell conversation with Liza and Annie (231), and Liza repeats it to Annie in their reunion phone call at the end of the novel. Garden doesn’t have any of the characters identify the source of the quotation, but it’s from the New Testament, John 8:32—so in a sense it’s both Biblical and Classical (in that it comes to us via Ancient Greek). Unlike Sally’s judgmental Biblical citations earlier, this one affirms rather than condemns; we could also see it as quietly subverting the explicitly negative stance on same-sex desire set forth by many Christian institutions. For me, the talk of freedom resonates with the conversation between Annie and Liza after they see the glass-doored bookcase in Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson’s bedroom. Annie remarks that she doesn’t want the two of them and their relationship to be like the books: “We can’t close ourselves in behind doors the way these books are closed in” (154). In *Annie on My Mind*, Garden gives us a view of the social pressures and personal doubts that have kept Liza metaphorically “closed in.” But the novel also gives us Liza’s journey of setting herself free, seeing and owning the truth of her experiences, her love for Annie, and herself. No text, Classical or otherwise, can—or should—provide a comprehensive

map for that journey, but Garden has shown us how texts, Classical and otherwise, can be meaningful milestones or even companions along the way.

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