

Gender in Children's Literature: Through or Beyond Conventions?

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Abstract

Gender has always been considered as a basal issue in the field of Children's Literature. Since children are receptive to the values and impressed by the ideas expounded in what they read, literary texts addressed to children are not just simply for entertainment; they also reflect positively all of society, especially the marginalized. Children's Literature should inspire and enthuse its audience, while it could be a means of escape, a sanctuary from repression, and a "secret garden" within which children can identify with and rejoice in themselves. In order to illustrate how gender is used both negatively and detrimentally to the perception of the self, and then to examine whether the "sacrifice" of the story for socially correct writing is acceptable or desirable, we will examine in this paper indicatively, but representatively, the presentation of gender in various texts for children, from fairy tales and nursery rhymes to classic or modern novels and adolescents' fictions. Finally, as this brief study shows, though Children's Literature cannot on its own subvert ideology, gender definitions, or gender stereotypes, it could shape a new basis for thinking about individuality and humanity, by challenging children to question and to cogitate.

Keywords

Gender, Children's Literature, Self-Perception

1. Introduction

As an oppressive political tool, a social construction dictating a set of culturally defined characteristics which define what we will be, gender is the chief cause of the evils of stereotype and sexism. Its aim is to ensure the preservation of society by coercing the suppression of our essential natures and forcing us to embrace our culturally defined selves (Goodman, 1996: p. vii). However, it is much more

that arise when you don't fit in, when you contradict your definition. The politics of the hen yard can be seen as a microcosm of society. The ugly duckling is rejected by his family and the society of the hen yard. There is no room for this outsider whose strangeness ostracizes him, as a freak he has no utility, he cannot be humored. "He's big and he doesn't look like anybody else", replied the duck who had bitten him "and that's reason enough to beat him" (p. 40). The tale has a happy ending; the ugly duckling metamorphoses into a swan, a noble beautiful bird. This, however, is the privilege of fantasy, while the politics of the playground are intractable. If children fail to adopt the dictated characteristics of their gender, they become marginalized, figures of fun. A crisis of identity can result if children are unable to find a positive reflection of themselves. This is very destructive, marginalization as a misfit is not excusable as a character building exercise (Flanagan, 2010: p. 37).

3. Transcending or Perpetuating Prejudices and Marginalizations?

Writers of children's fiction have a moral responsibility to their audience. They must be accountable for the effect their writing has upon children. Thoughtless writing which encourages prejudice through the espousal of intractable, unrealistic ideals of gender is inexcusable (Flanagan, 2010: p. 37). There is presently a real dilemma of definition within Children's Literature. Should literature be a work of imagination, a fantastical escape from reality or an instrument of education? Some socially correct writing, whilst being inoffensive with regard to gender issues is bland, staid and uninspiring. It fails to enthuse or to encourage reading. The problem is one of striking a balance between writing that doesn't engender prejudice and marginalization but is still exciting and readable (Ernst, 1995).

If children are introduced to writings which are solely a mirror of the real world, what will happen to their imagination? Fantasy and mystery are essential forms of escapism, without which we risk creating myopic, "inverted" children. The ramifications of too much reality are seriously limiting if children are to see beyond the thing itself. A life without uncertainty, devoid of the crock of gold beyond the rainbow lacks possibility, lacks horizons. It is important that children are encouraged to think beyond the parameters of their own existence (Zipes, 2006; Peterson & Swartz, 2008).

In *My Dad Takes Care of Me* by Patricia Quinlan (1987) we have a piece of writing which challenges stereotypical gender roles. The father is the career and nurturer, traditional roles are inverted, but at a cost. Since a factory closed and the dad lost his job, the family has to move to a new house, while dad becomes "home dad" taking care of a child. The writing, whilst unquestionably educational in terms of economics, market forces and gender roles, is both stark and uninspiring. This might be reality but who wants it? It is most striking for being utterly depressing, it smacks too much of education. The sacrifice is the charm

of subtlety, the merits of good story telling.

The costs of harnessing imagination through pursuing a philosophy of education are well exemplified in *Charles Dickens' (1854/1987) Hard Times*. The novel is memorable for the starkness of the lives of the children, for the absence of beauty and the depressing certainty and monotony of the future.

“You are not, Cecilia Jupe, [...]. You are to be in all things regulated and governed,” said the gentleman, ‘by fact’” (p. 52).

“Now, what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Plant nothing else and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and that is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, sir!” (p. 47).⁵

In *Asha's Mums (Elwin & Paulse, 1990)*⁶ the gender roles embodied in the traditional family unit are challenged, Diane has two “mothers”, the women are not defined in relation to their marital status but are ambivalently entitled “Ms”.

“You can't have two mothers living together. My dad says it's bad”, Corren insisted, “It's not bad. My mummies said we're a family because we live together and love one another”, I said.”But how come you have two?”, Judi asked.

Before I could answer, Terrence said to Ms. Samuels, “Is it wrong to have two mummies?”

“Well”, Ms. Samuels began, but Diane yelled “It's not wrong if they're nice to you and you like them” (*Elwin & Paulse, 1990*).

Whilst this writing may be well intentioned exposing the marginalized invisible groups within society, its education aim is too overt. We do sanction the exposure of prejudice in writing, but not so blatantly. Actually, we should strive to combat the destructive limitations imposed by gender definition, but must avoid sacrificing the story and reading Children's Literature like an improving moral tract. Even today there is a sense that we have come to an impasse. Although we feel very strongly that gender as a social construct is through its rigidity of definition destructive to the identity of self, we are unable to advocate well intentional writing that sacrifices creativity for political correctness. This seems to be a substitution of evils (*Butler, 2004; Butler, 2006*).

Education is a very powerful tool and Children's Literature plays an integral role in the education of children. If literature is censored to ensure that children

⁵However, if we sacrifice fantasy in a strive for political correctness, we risk nurturing automatons, devoid of vision and individuality. For example, during the final voyage of the protagonist in Jonathan Swift's (1726/2005) *Gulliver's Travels*, the classic book of English literature, a fictional race of horses called “Houyhnhnms” represent pure unadulterated reason, as they lack imagination and life.

⁶*Asha's Mums* was one of the many banned titles in 1997. In 2002, the Supreme Court of Canada declared that such a discrimination couldn't be legally supported. (For more information see: <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/challenged-works/ashas-mums/> & https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asha%27s_Mums).

change the philosophies which dehumanize us, and through us to dehumanize individual children. Children's Literature should inspire its readers with confidence, confidence to be proud of their individuality, to rejoice in themselves. If literature is challenging, it will in turn teach the reader to challenge the dubious morality which confers normality upon unrealistic gender definitions, whilst defining anything other as unnatural, deviant, and emphasizing the "trans-sectional" and "transcultural" perspectives of gender (Jamison Green et al., 2019: pp. 44-45). Literature should never patronise self. In fact, as Karin Fry (2005: p. 156) states, "Children's books become interesting sites for gender studies, because they sometimes provide models for what girls and boys should be like in a given culture". Writers of children's fiction cannot be on their own subvert ideology which defines what we must be. They can however challenge children to think for themselves, to encourage their readers to discriminate between good and bad, to let them wonder!

Summing up, in Victoria Flanagan's (2010: p. 37) words,

"If we are to encourage children to see masculinity and femininity not as inherently binaristic and oppositional, but as relational and fluid, then writers, readers and critics need to be aware of how particular genres are gendered, of how narrative discourse can be used to privilege particular models of gender and how texts endorse or interrogate dominant cultural constructions of gender."

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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