

Last semester, I took an English class with Professor Bethany Schneider entitled “American Girl,” where our syllabus included Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*. My experience with both books was fascinating because I was reading as an adult through the critical lens of a Bryn Mawr class, while simultaneously envisioning what lessons my younger self would take from these works. I found myself feeling a mix of intrigue and disturbance at the discrepancies that emerged when viewing the novels from these two perspectives.

The projects at hand in these two novels have the potential to carve out distinct trajectories for its readers, particularly in regard to the formation of gender identity. In Alcott’s *Little Women*, Jo’s struggles for self-identity and self-purpose are ultimately whittled down so she can fit into the reductive space of dutiful daughter and wife. Her mother, a woman who claims to have once had the same traits as Jo, facilitates this project of gender formation, thus trapping Jo in a cycle of motherhood that eliminates the possibility of an alternative gender. In Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*, the pedagogy of the Ingalls parents limit the space, in both the interior and exterior worlds, that their daughters occupy, ensuring they remain little girls who don’t contribute to building this New World. This project is mainly facilitated by the girls’ father; he closely monitors (and quashes) any development of self that extends beyond the parameters he has established.

While all of this is something that I can recognize as an adult, it made me wonder how these plot lines, both subtle and blatant, impact its young readers. What cultural work is being done in these novels? What are the ultimate fates of girls in fiction who attempt an alternative gendered trajectory? In the above two novels, it is a parent who orchestrates the gender development of the daughter. This fact makes me wonder about popular young adult novels where girls do not have parental forces. What is the fate of girls in these stories who attempt alternative gendered trajectories but don’t have a parent to monitor the journey? Can a girl successfully create an alternative gender for herself when the parental force is absent?

These experiences in class and subsequent questions have inspired my proposal for the Hanna Holborn Gray Undergraduate Research Fellowship. I want to further explore young adult literature where gender formation is occurring for young girls with the absence (or essential absence) of a parental figure. The proposed texts I would like to examine are L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1909), Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (translated edition, 1945) and Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964). I have chosen these four texts because they were all written for a particular generation of young adults in distinct times and cultures (Canadian, British, Swedish, and American), but they are still widely read and referenced today. Each novel tells the story of a girl who is orphaned in some manner, and so I would like to examine how each novel's female protagonist enters gendered trajectories, and then explore how this gender identity develops when parents are not in the picture. Do any of these characters successfully create an alternative gender? If so, how? If not, why can't the alternative gender be allowed to exist? Is an alternative gender able to endure beyond adolescence, or *must* it be extinguished? Is it cultivated only to be funneled into a traditional gender identity? Because these girl characters endure still today, their journeys are worth examining because the gendered trajectories in these novels send messages to its readers about acceptable development and formation of gender identity.

I plan to investigate these questions through examination of the texts and researching the literary criticism and theory surrounding the issues at hand in these specific texts and the genre of Children's Literature as a whole. If I were to receive the grant, I also hope to fund some trips to children's libraries in the country; in addition to access to sources that could enhance and aid my research, many of these libraries have exhibits and events pertaining to young adult literature throughout the year. As the time gets closer, I hope to find some exhibits that pertain to the issues of gender projects in Children's Literature.

To be able to have a summer to do this specific research would be an incredible opportunity because it would allow me to apprentice myself to Children's Literature as a field of critical inquiry. Looking at Children's Literature through a critical lens is not common in our course offerings at Bryn Mawr, so having a summer for this research would help me to delve deeper into this intriguing academic area. I have taken English courses that have been cross listed as Gender and Sexuality courses, so I would like to bring this lens to the field of Children's Literature. I sense that there is an intersection between the two fields, and I want to see if I am able to make a contribution to this intersection. I am a rising junior, and engaging in this English research now will help me to understand my major more fully. This work could perhaps develop more fully into a senior essay and give me a sense of how I might want to continue studying English after Bryn Mawr. I am eager to engage in research because it would add a new, exciting dimension to my current critical thinking and writing skills, thus enhancing, shaping, and deepening my future work in the field of English.

Working Bibliography

Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden*. Penguin Books: New York, 1999.

Cullingford, Cedric. *Children's Literature and its Effects: The Formative Years*. Cassell: Washington, 1998.

Ewers, Hans-Heino. *Fundamental Concepts of Children's Literature Research: Literary and Sociological Approaches*. Routledge: New York, 2009

Fitzugh, Louise. *Harriet the Spy*. Yearling: New York, 2001.

Foster, Shirley. *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of "Classic" Stories for Girls*. University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, 1995.

Gammel, Irene. *Looking for Anne of Green Gables: the Story of L.M. Montgomery and Her Literary Classic*. St. Martin's Press: New York, 2008.

Gavin, Adrienne and Routledge, Christopher, eds. *Mystery in Children's Literature: from the Rational to the Supernatural*. Palgrave: New York, 2001.

Gerzina, Gretchen. *Frances Hodgson Burnett*. Chatto & Windus: London, 2004.

Hammill, Faye. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*. University of Texas Press: Austin, 2007.

Hoffeld, Laura. "Pippi Longstocking: The Comedy of the Natural Girl." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 1977.

Inness, Sherrie A., ed. *Nancy Drew and Company: Culture, Gender, and Girls' Series*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press: Bowling Green, 1997.

Keith, Lois. *Take up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls*. Routledge: New York, 2001.

Laffrado, Laura. *Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writing*. Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 2009.

Lerer, Seth. *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2008.

Lindgren, Astrid. *Pippi Longstocking*. Viking: New York, 1950.

Lundqvist, Ulla. "The Child of the Century: The Phenomenon of Pippi Longstocking and its Premises." _____ 1979.

Montgomery, Heather and Watson, Nicola, eds. *Children's Literature: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Houndmills: New York, 2009.

Montgomery, L. M. *Anne of Green Gables*. Ryerson: Toronto, 1942.

Montgomery, L. M. *The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside: Ontario, 1974.

Orenstein, Peggy. "What's Wrong With Cinderella?" *The New York Times*. 24 Dec 2006.

Rollin, Lucy. *Psychoanalytic Responses to Children's Literature*. McFarland: Jefferson, 1999.

Silvey, Anita. *100 Best Books for Children*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 2004.

Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine. *The Feminine Subject in Children's Literature*. Routledge: New York, 2002.

Wolf, Virginia L. *Louise Fitzhugh*. Twayne Publishers: New York, 1991.