

## The Fictional Hero in Children's Literature And His Apprehension by Students according To the Feminist Theory

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**Abstract.** The narrative character's sex carries significant weight in the approach and thorough understanding of literary texts, examined from a re-visited perspective. This research paper examines whether human sex is a significant factor, which influences and affects significantly the notions perceived by a child-reader during the process of emitted meaning reception, and consequently the relation between the child-reader's sex and the way the sex assigns meaning to the literary context. Within the research methodology process, the literary preferences of students attending the last two grades of Primary School and the first two grades of Junior High-school (K5-K8 levels) were investigated via questionnaires. On the basis of the research findings, the conclusion was drawn that sex is a critical variable affecting literary readings, whereas place of residence (urban, suburban, rural residence) as well as education level are not significant stakeholders as regards to attitudes towards children's and teen literature employed by readers. Moreover, students are not particularly interested in the literary character's, the author's or the implied reader's sex, whilst they seem to prefer action heroes or heroines.

### 1. Introduction

Feminism has spread across all manifestations of everyday life. The feminist movement has "infiltrated" the literary world and literary texts, as an interpretation of this world, have been associated to the development of female demands and the recording of female experiences. Literary works offer abundant and valuable information on society, "cultural conventions" as well as on the socialization of the two genders. Every individual, through literature, is given the opportunity to record his/her consolidated viewpoints, to explore and develop his/her sympathy on life's critical issues and to reflect on a wide variety of puzzling for him/her matters.

Contemporary researchers have studied the relationship between children's literature and feminist criticism, which is quite evident by the vast number of publications and researches related to gendered dimensions of children's/teen literature. Feminist criticism is a literary approach which has gained a respectable place in literary theory and criticism over the last few decades. Within this time, feminist criticism has highlighted significant issues concerning female depiction in literature (children's/teen) as well as the female role in literary space, as a writer, reviewer, reader and fictional character.

The realization of female and female experience exclusion from the literary world has lead feminists towards undoing this status quo. In other words, feminists realized that the "female image" is not represented vis-à-vis in literature; thus, they have struggled towards upturning this situation (removal of any gendered representation and image and of all social inequities) and claiming a redefinition of the "female role" in literature and, thereupon, society. Consequently,

children's and teen literary texts have been re-approached and revised (revision as a term suggested by feminist criticism) under the scope of feminist criticism, irrespective of the writers' influences, patriarchic or matriarchic.

Approaching literary texts within the school environment is a means of "viewing" the world. Through their contact and dealing with literary texts, students as readers realize, examine closely, explore and understand gender relations as they unfold in their specific social framework. In addition, students have direct contact with gender roles, as they are depicted in literature, social inequities, cultural values, female role, and unequal labor distribution bearing on female characters; moreover students have the opportunity to discover, through literary text analysis, the real life conditions females have been living in as well as the latent perceptions of their gender. Often enough, the way in which a story's characters are depicted contributes heavily on the development of a gendered subject-reader identity along with the role he/she is supposed or expected to assume in society. The wide and extensive dissemination of stereotypical and traditional perceptions on gender roles, as they are depicted in literary texts, are often quite restrictive on both genders (for example girls feel entrapped in passive submissive roles whereas boys are expected to assume roles which do not leave space for emotional expression and sensitivities).

Relevant analyses on children's and teen literary texts have revealed that girls, in their majority, are presented as naïve, dependant and innocent, whereas boys appear dynamic, independent, aggressive, adventure seekers and discovery lovers [1,2] (Diekman & Murnen 2004: 373-74, Maragkoudaki 2005: 107-8). Furthermore, a lot of researches on students-readers' literary engagement and student's congruence with children's and teen literature heroes often get in the spotlight. In 1972 a research on students' "literary response" was conducted. Lenore Weitzman, Deborah Eifler, Elisabeth Hokad and Catherine Ross claimed that via literary texts "boys and girls socialize and learn how to cope with social definitions and the relative value of each gender as well as adopt personality traits strictly limited within the members of each gender" [3]. Thus, children "learn that boys have greater "value" compared to girls" and, most importantly, children's books become "a means of social value representation for younger children" (ibid.). In their research, Jerri Kropp and Charles Halverston [4] concluded that pre-school children enjoy listening to tales in which the opposite sex characters act according to the stereotypes attributed to their gender instead of listening to tales in which both sex characters can act in manners that overturn their gender's stereotypes. Moreover, Sally Koblinsky, Donna Cruse and Alan Sugawara have come up with some quite significant results. Their greatest conclusion has been that ten-years-old children of both sexes were able to "remember male gender characteristics of the male characters and female gender characteristics of the female characters much better" [5] than they remembered characteristics that did not fall into gender stereotypes.

## 2. Literature review

Children's and teen literature is a special literary section, as its audience-readers includes people who are in the process of shaping their character attributes and developing consciousness and perceptions which define and reinforce their personality traits. Thus, developing characters-heroines/heroes according to contemporary perceptions of the individual has become a great challenge for literature writers as well as for researchers who explore literature in relation to the writer/narrator and the reader.

International literature raises questions in regards to stereotypical perceptions dissemination and their extinction in children's-teen literature as well as in the theoretical background of literary theories. An essential stance of feminist criticism is that in children's and teen texts there is an open, free reproduction of anachronistic perceptions and engendered prejudice against female gender [6]. Children's literature theorists' preoccupation with feminist criticism is quite evident and supported by numerous researches and publications. Moreover, highly acknowledged scientific journals (such as Signs, Children's Literature Association Quarterly, The Lion and the Unicorn etc.) publish research papers on feminist criticism in children's literature whilst the content of course

syllabi in study programs related to gender in various universities worldwide further support researchers' and scholars' vivid interest in this particular theme.

Feminist criticism "infiltrated" children's/teen literature, which is considered one of the most significant contributors in establishing female role and place in society, because this literature has the power to create favorable conditions and mood for females in schools. A kind of literature which presents male subjects as humane, segregates the male *Self* from the female *Other*, divides human experience in public and private spheres, detaches the political from the personal cannot possibly be considered a neutral category of political expression.

On these premises, the fictional character's management by the author and his/her attitude towards gender along with the fictional character preferences based on the readers' gender were studied and potential relationships between the fictional character's and the reader's gender were further explored. In detail, this research studies whether gender is a factor which significantly influences and affects the child-reader's perceptions while in taking a transmitted message; thus, it studies the relationship between the child-reader's gender and the way in which the child-reader give meaning to the content of the literary text. In addition, it was deemed interesting to explore whether gender is a substantial factor shaping a child-reader's behavior and his/her attitude in everyday life and whether a literary text's ideology caters for and reinforces stereotypical perceptions.

This research is considered significant as it is amongst a few researches conducted in Greek public schools of Primary and Secondary education, including a vast number of participants-respondents, which explores the gender factor as well as the students' "gender's" role whilst reading literary texts. Thus, for the first time there is an attempt to connect the feminist theory with the aesthetics perception theory and the literary response criticism. Furthermore, this research sets out to fill in the gap in Greek bibliography, as studies and researches on feminist criticism approach are scarce, especially in such young ages.

### 3. Theoretical framework

Children's literature studies over the last three decades have paid grave attention to representing and constructing gender, as various studies reveal and great theorists on children's literature, such as Clark, Trites, Clark & Higgonet, Lehr, Stephens, Cart & Jenkins [7-12] and Greek scholars admit. In this light, the authors and their researches have revealed important information on heroes and heroines.

In particular, through children's books studies a lot of significant findings on fictional characters have been recorded. The most complete study of children's books in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ever conducted in the U.S.A. drew the conclusion that there is a definite prejudice in stories whose male characters (men and boys) are central fictional characters or protagonists. Oddly, researchers concluded that even when the fictional characters are animals they tend to be males. The findings, which are published in *Gender & Society* journal (issue April 2011), are based on a research of about 6.000 books published between 1900 and 2000. Though previous researches have examined male and female character representation in children's books, they were of limited scope and size. Janice McCabe, Emily Fairchild, Liz Grauerholz, Bernice A. Pescosolido and Daniel Tope [13] recorder significant results on their research, such as that a) males are represented more often than females in book titles as well as central protagonists, b) boys appear as central characters in 26.4% of children's books whereas girls in 19%, c) male animals are central characters in 23,2% of the books whereas female animals in 7,5% and d) out of the total amount of books examined 3.418 books are characterized by something masculine whereas 2.098 books by something feminine (analogy 1,6:1).

After careful consideration of the facts previously presented, we observe that female characters are rather scarce in literary texts when compared to male characters. Since many researchers support the idea that children's books are in fact a popular means of transmitting cultural values and social expectations, it can be deduced that the unequal gender representation "carries" to children

the message that females are also less important in society. The manner in which literary characters are depicted vastly contributes to young students-readers' understanding of what society expects from them whilst it helps in the shaping of their self-definition in the world.

Therefore, literature authors define the characters' kind and form according to age interests of children and youth, taking into account the readers' reading and in taking skills. After all, it has been widely acknowledged that readers, both children and teens, tend to identify with same age literary characters, as they wish for heroes who act in familiar and similar manners and behave rationally and predictably [14]. Researchers have shown that most fictional characters in literature who address school-aged children (7-11 years old) are flat, as they are more palpable. These findings can be explained on the grounds that readers at that age are more interested in action and can't really examine closely the fictional characters. On the following age group (11-14 years old), young readers, regardless of their gender, can adopt more rational and analytical behaviors [15]. Thus, they can understand overall aspects of a character much better along with any emotional and behavioral changes the characters are going through.

According to Lois Tyson [16], "whenever a literary text depicts characters who adopt traditional gender roles or female characters in patriarchal stereotypes, then this text represents a patriarchal ideology". However, as Stevenson [17] claims, girls' depiction in literature is part of a greater and more complex cause-effect relationship with the culture those girls (and all of us) are living in. Feminist theory supports the view that these traditional gender roles are produced by patriarchy, not nature. Though these views are mostly valid for adult literature, some of them could apply to children's/teen literature, but not in the same degree. Still, feminist criticism, as a different approach to literature, has adapted to the demands of children's/teen literature, similar to other literary approaches.

As female roles in society are gradually and slowly moving away for past stereotypes, female characters in children's literature are also beginning to reflect this shift. Contemporary realistic fiction definitely includes more solid female characters. Girls are "allowed" to be brave, more masculine and, perhaps, unorthodox. Mothers in contemporary realistic fiction take on several roles, quite often work outside their home and potentially can have more professional responsibilities than their husbands. These roles assumed by female characters in realistic or social fiction are quite differentiated in comparison to previous and more current works of children's literature.

#### **4. Method**

The research methodology is as follows: in order to develop the study 600 questionnaires were distributed to 600 students attending the last 2 grades of primary school and the first two grades of junior high school. Specifically, 200 students attending public schools in Rhodes Island (both in the city and the villages), 200 students attending public school in Drama and 200 students attending schools in Thessaloniki (students from three areas in Greece, over wide geographical distribution) took part in the survey. The specific school grades were selected on the premises that last primary school grade students have, to a large degree, acquired reading experiences and preferences in literary texts-authors. Furthermore, since changes in reading experiences, stances and attitudes during the transition from primary school to junior high school were a primary object of this study, the two first grades of junior high school were also selected; thus, not only the reading attitude changes from primary school to junior high school were studied but also the shift in stances and preferences manifested by the students. Finally, whether country planning and geographical location alters students' perceptions was also studied, given the fact that in two out of the three areas there are universities where literature and children's literature is an object of study, as well.

Methodology includes all essential actions that are required during all stages of research and begin with an initial planning, survey implementation until data analysis and findings discussion. Specifically, these stages are: a) research questionnaire design, b) database design, c) sample design methodology drafting and d) data collection, processing and analysis methodology drafting. All data were processed in a database, design on S.P.S.S. v.17. All data statistical analysis was performed

via Descriptive Statistics and Multidimensional Data Analysis. Descriptive analysis led to frequency distributions, in simple or composite double entry tables and respective figures and graphs.

## 5. Results

Research findings have revealed that there is a long way to go towards a complete overturn of traditional gender roles, as they are depicted in children's and teen literature. Through consecutive statistical analyses, the recorded findings have pointed out the degree in which feminist criticism supporter's theories can be true or not. Taking into account four essential factors (gender, county and place of residence, respondents' grade in school) an attempt was made to discover the existing relationships and the degree in which each factor influences the students' literary stances.

In specific, "gender" was the first and most essential factor closely related to the data under examination. "Gender" mostly addresses the fictional character's gender, without excluding the respondents' gender and the gender of the implicit child-reader, along with their mutual relationships. Based on the research findings, the respondents' gender is a crucial factor affecting literary readings, which is in terms with feminist literary criticism considerations. However, there was insignificant differentiation among students when it came to the author's gender. Research findings have revealed that, irrespective of gender, the respondents in their vast majority (exceeding 75%) have no particular preferences in the author's gender. This finding could be interpreted as "indifference" for the author's gender and leads to the assumption that young readers are mainly attracted by other literary elements.

Similarly, respondents do not appear to be interested in the fictional hero's/heroine's gender either. Though some students choose to identify with a same gender character, in their majority they do not show any particular preference in a gender for the fictional characters. In this case, too, young readers' preferences in fictional characters do not abide by the hero's/heroine's gender, but by other elements, such as that distinctive traits heroes and heroines seem to have.

Still, gender is a decisive factor closely related to literary choices made by the students. In terms of book worming habits, female students are keener on reading children's/teen literature than male students. In other words, the differentiation between male and female students showed that gender is a decisive factor (significant statistical correlation) of literary stance towards age-appropriate literary readings. The respondents' gender was further studied in relation to the choices in fictional characters. Though the majority of students are not affected by the fictional character's gender, still female students who selected a male fictional character (that is, the opposite gender) are double in number when compared to the choices made by male students. Moreover, the relation between the students' gender and the implied readers' gender was examined. Research findings resulted that there isn't any influence on behalf of the authors in writing and selecting fictional characters, whilst those two factors are directly related.

Another interesting issue coming up from the students' answers involves the traits that make up the hero's and heroine's personality. In particular, students choose personalities that are highly dynamic and adventurous. Students' preferences are strongly affected by the hero's and heroine's activeness. Taking into account the restrictive models in which girls-heroines are caught in according to the supporters of the feminist theory, the importance of the hero's/heroine's "action" element during the intake by the students can be remarked. In other words, since students choose to identify with energetic/active fictional characters, the very existence of such representatives of both genders in children's/teen literature can assist students' expression. This fact is also supported by the upcoming reason in hero/heroine preference, which is gender. Students choose to identify with same gender fictional characters. Thus, when combining the two preferences, it can be concluded that the presence of active heroines will aid female students in identifying with such characters, as those students will be able, through the heroine, to recognize and apprehend parts of their own personality.

On the other hand, respondents' gender is significantly correlated to fictional characters' traits, as they are perceived by students. In terms of the characters' dynamic personality, research findings revealed that students consider their own gender fictional characters more dynamic. Within this framework a great variety of other personality traits of the fictional characters have been examined, such as sympathy, sensitivity, love for adventure, involvement with technology, the ability to carry out various tasks, rule-breaking, dress-code and book worming.

According to the research findings, students consider girls-heroines more cute, sympathetic and sensitive than boys-heroes, but those girls-heroines do not use technology much in their everyday life. Meanwhile, heroes and heroines can perform the same task with equally successful outcomes whilst they have a gender-appropriate dress-code. A significant element is that all students, regardless of gender, believe that boys-heroes are more adventurous than girls-heroines. In fact, female students stated that boys-heroes break the rules easier and more often than girls-heroines. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that boys' "disobedience" allows them to be more adventurous whereas girls-heroines are more book worming types of people in relation to boys-heroes.

Another object of investigation in this research is the implied reader's gender; whether students believe that the author had a specific child (boy or girl) in mind, which he/she thought would read his/her story. According to research findings, students believe that the implied reader's gender does not affect the writing of the story or the author's selection of a hero or heroine. After all, one can never be absolutely certain of the gender, age, nationality etc. every author has in mind when writing a story. There is no version of an implied reader mentioned in literary response theories which mentions in absolute authoritative manner the implied reader's identity. Based on sophisticated statistical analyses, research has shown that the respondents' gender is highly relevant to their literary choices. In some elements, girls' choices were differentiated from boys' choices. Specifically, students' gender affects their love of reading, not only individually but in groups, as well. After all, this research has revealed that gender is absolutely related to choices in authors and fictional characters.

In terms of stereotypical characteristics in fictional characters it is observed that some students adopt traditional features of both genders, whereas others distance themselves from these features and prefer a rather neutral stance. The "change of course" in Greek children's literature, in which authors tend to represent females and girls in roles contradicting traditional social orders, has contributed greatly towards this direction. It is this exact point, in which literature's role is highlighted, as literature tends to shape children from early ages and mold stances and attitudes, as the child-reader/listener identifies him/her with its favorite fictional character; thus the child might not necessarily reproduce stereotypes, points of view and beliefs on gender issues, as it will listen to or read stories which turnovers in relation to gender roles.

On the other hand, the variables "county" and "place of residence" come out that have no affect on students' literary stances. Thus, though geographical distribution had been designed as a variable which could highlight potential influences in students' literary readings, it turned out that this assumption was not verified. In general, students are able to develop their own literary stances without being significantly affected by their place of residence. However, as research findings have revealed, irrespective of the place of residence most mothers tend to motivate their children to develop a special connection to children's literature. Based on this finding, one could assume that females as mothers aspire a loving relationship between their children and children's books. This can be easily understood by their motivating their children towards this direction.

In addition, the variable "school grade" doesn't affect students' literary preferences, especially in regards to the author's gender and the fictional character's gender. In other words, as students grow up their preferences over gender do not change greatly. The transition from childhood to puberty does not affect the students' "neutrality" in regards to the author's gender or the hero's and heroine's gender. Still, the grade the students are in appears to have an impact on their book worming habits. In other words, results have shown that primary school students have a better

relationship with children's literature than junior high school students. Therefore, the transition from primary school to junior high school appears to be accompanied by a shift in students' relationship with children's/teen literature but it bears no change in the fictional character's gender.

In conclusion, it could be assumed that students who responded in the survey do not appear influenced by the gender variable, as their answers, in the majority, revealed that they were not really interested in the fictional character's or the author's gender. However, following many statistical analyses and correlations, it has been revealed that gender strongly affects students' stereotypical assumptions, embedded in some literary texts, and tends to bind students in their own stereotypical behaviors.

## 6. Conclusion

Research findings have revealed that the fictional character's gender highly affects students' literary stances. In many occasions, the literary text's hero or heroine becomes a "role-model" for students whilst quite often the fictional characters appear to be full of stereotypical behaviors.

According to feminist literary criticism supporters, female characters should not be presented as passive and traditional figures. Depicted heroines as trapped in traditional stereotypical role-models can have a great impact on the development of a child's personality. This research has shown that feminist criticism scholars could explore in greater depth the literary hero's/heroine's depiction and focus towards this direction. Still, scholars could go a step further by trying to find ways in which literary characters' engendered differentiation based on traditional, old-fashioned models could be eliminated. In addition, feminist criticism supporters, through dissemination of studies and researches (which have vastly increased over the last few years), could sensitize and mobilize a greater part of the academic and literary society.

In relation to the reading audience, students could "escape" impermeable behavioral models imposed by society and develop an advanced multidimensional personality, more suitable and fit to contemporary society. After all, taking into account this research's findings, students do not enjoy identifying themselves with passive heroines but seek action and adventure, which is quite evident in their choice to identify with another gender's character, as long as he/she takes action within the plot. The very existence of male and female characters of various dynamics could add on another point of view, in which literary characters are set free of obsolete fetters of engendered behavior imposed on them for a great length of time.

So, on behalf of the young readers, another attitude could be adopted, aided by parents, guardians and educators. Young readers could train in strategies of selecting children's literature, thus discarding the books that insist on perpetuating anachronistic models on gender roles. In addition, the readers themselves could practice in becoming more critical towards any literary text and acquire a differentiated approach to literary characters, both male and female.

Through the identification of stereotypical behaviors (not only in the text but also within the pictures and drawings in the book), students could wonder about the goals of any engendered representation and seek ways to constrain engendered inequalities from whoever they may be expressed. It is highly important for students to realize that the way in which fictional characters are depicted/portrayed can often lead to misleading conclusion on the elements constructing an identity, such as gender, race and social class.

Towards this shift in attitude, students, in collaboration with their teachers, could start reading texts from various points of view, including a feminist reading and literary response, and discussing the reasons why stereotypical engendered identities still exist in children's/teen literary works and how can they be constrained. Of course, educators need to go through literary theories' training programs, and especially feminist criticism, which is a theory focusing attention in this paper. Furthermore, after careful examination and updating on literary texts used in their class or suggested to students for further study, educators could select literary texts in which gender roles (though the specific characteristics of fictional characters' personalities) are free of traditional stereotypical representations. In other words, educators can spot literary texts which promote

equality, otherness and which present heroes and heroines free of social stereotypes. In this manner, educators can contribute towards avoiding “wrong choices” and eliminating unequal engendered representation on literature.

Educators should move towards this direction. Education is expected to draw examples from the various cultural contexts it belongs to and become a steering wheel towards accepting differences and acknowledging gender equality. However, the educators’ change of attitude towards gender and gender equality embedment in children’s literature does not suffice. There is a need for State policy revision towards gender and new Curricula, which would promote gender equality. Especially given the fact that current school books and curricula reproduce gender inequality, which can be easily perceived by specific role-models promoted in school books and curricula.

Education is an essential socialization institution along with family. Family which is the primary “social cell” of personality development remains the root of the phenomenon’s continuation. School is also a micro world of a patriarchal constructed society which, according to feminists, is responsible for perpetuating a hegemonic and sexist ideology, as it adopts and teaches values according to social accepted gender roles. However, according to feminists, both family and schools need to reconsider their attitude towards gender.

Undoubtedly, school ought to ensure and promote these stances and attitudes which highlight the equal presence of genders not only in school but everywhere else, as well. Gender equal rights and treatment can be achieved through meticulous school organization, school books and other material, educators’ attitudes and equal opportunity provision for all students regardless of their gender.

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