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Gender Bias and Stereotyping in Young Adult Literature

Janet Peterson
Student
Department of English
Brigham Young University

In Reviving Ophelia, author Mary Pipher (1994) says American society is a girl-destroying society. Young women have "long been evaluated on the basis of appearance and caught in myriad double binds: achieve, but not too much; be polite, but be yourself; be feminine and adult; be aware of our cultural heritage, but don't comment on the sexism." She notes adolescent girls face enormous pressure to obtain social acceptability which causes them to split into false selves. Pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements, and movies to define themselves solely on the basis of appearance. All of these sources provide rigorous training for the female role: be attractive, be a lady, be unselfish and of service, make relationships work and be competent, but not too competent. Young adult literature is an especially powerful source that promotes stereotypical role models, and the growing influence of this literature on teens makes the issue of gender bias and stereotyping a concern that merits careful attention.

For decades, textbooks and literature available to young adults have generated bias against females. History books contain essentially a record of men's lives, and women's lives are ignored except as they influence the course of men's lives. Many more biographies of men are available than women, and science reference books rarely include women. For example, of the 1,195 scientists in Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology, only ten are women (Nobles 1996). In the past women authors were rare, and most books about women placed them in stereotypical roles. Fiction shows this same inequity. Many studies of young adult literature show that most books have male protagonists and relatively few strong realistic female characters.

Pipher (1994) believes that "It's important for girls to be exposed to more women writers, but it's equally important to change the way women are portrayed." Most have been depicted as weak, needing to seek solutions to problems from others rather than finding the answers within themselves. Overstreet (1994) notes, "The ubiquitous stereotype of a female victim as a damsels-in-distress, passive and waiting for a prince to rescue her, has its roots in the centuries-old tall tales that dominated early oral traditions." Disney movies and storybooks, along with popular fiction, continue this idea that females are waiting for a strong man to rescue them.

The young adult horror book is one genre that often portrays females as terrified and terrorized usually by a male. Nick Adam's Horror High series, for example, exemplifies the physically weak, hysterical female who is unable to formulate or execute a plan for her defense. This male rescue communicates a not-so-subtle message to the female audiences—you don't have to use your wits or your strength. Just endure long enough, and eventually someone—probably a man—will save you (Leiberman). Mystery novels also tend to feature a hapless female protagonist who is saved at the last moment by the boyfriend, husband, father, or nearest available responsible male character from the evil intelligent antagonist. (Overstreet 1994)

Romance series for young adults also promote sexism and gender stereotyping. For example, in the Sweet Valley High series, the heroine is usually beautiful and finds her sense of identity and the answers to her problems in a
romantic relationship. She uses her feminine wiles to attract and trap young men—tears, fluttering eyelashes, and appearing less intelligent than she is. Many times these books classify girls as "admirable" or "not-admirable" based on either selfishness or concern for other people. Mitchell (1995) points out these same standards do not appear to apply to males who are allowed to think mainly of themselves. Girls are condemned if they make mistakes, and males are excused from mistakes because they are allowed the "boys-will-be-boys" maxim. These conventional images raise the concern that young women will measure themselves against the girls shown in the books and harshly judge themselves against a false standard.

Most educators agree that these popular romance series fall short of the literary criteria for good literature. A comparison of contemporary romances with those of the 1940s and 1950s found that "the new novels, with some notable exceptions, are as stereotyped in their own way as those of the earlier period. . .For the most part, the newer novels do not present more positive women role models. The mother-daughter relationships in the newer books are more contentious than those of the older period. Authors still rely on stereotypes like the dumb blond flirt" (Litton 1995, 46). However, Litton, like many educators, sees some positive trends in certain books. "Some girls in a few of the more recent books are brighter, stronger and career-oriented" (46). The Freshman Dorm series focuses on romantic relationships, but the female protagonists are not usually dependent in these relationships, nor do they use their femininity to try to trap young men as they do in the Sweet Valley High series. They make non-traditional career choices and most are struggling to attain their own identities. The Sunfire series portrays strong heroines who want men with qualities that will not dampen their high aspirations, and each book in the series concentrates on the emergence of one young woman.

Many educators would also agree that suspense novels contain stereotypical characters, and most victims are overwhelmingly female. However, Kies (1996) notes that during the last decade young adult horror books have decreased the number of female victims, and in many books, the victim uses her own brain, brawn and nerve to escape. Michael Scott's October Moon, features a smart teenage heroine, Rachel, who combines forces with her boyfriend to overcome an ancient cures. In The Spell by Bill Byers, Becca uses courage and prayer to combat the powers of evil. Lois Duncan's female protagonists also do not fit the stereotype of the female victim. These girls are not meek, passive, or foolish and usually outsmart the antagonist with bravery and clever decisions. Overstreet (1996) reports that "in reading these novels, young women can find other young women to be proud of."

In the article "Choosing Books for Today's Women," Maples and Newman discuss other young adult literature that shows trends toward the portrayal of young women as strong characters. They refer to books written by such authors as Lynn Hall, Vera and Bill Cleaver, and Cynthia Voigt as reliable choices. In Hall's A Killing Freeze and Denison's Daughter, the heroines think independently to solve serious problems in their lives. The Leaving and The Solitary feature female characters who become self-reliant as they leave their families to go out on their own. Hall seems to encourage her female readers to find what they really want and not settle for less. Cleaver's Where the Lilies Bloom and Sweetly Sings the Donkey feature teenage girls who possess inner strength and are wise beyond their years, resourceful, and enduring. Cynthia Voigt's books also provide readers with primary female characters who are both independent and courageous, and who show individuality, intelligence, and determination. Among a multitude of young adult books in which female characters are absent, secondary, or dependent, books such as these offer refreshing examples of young females who are independent and self-reliant (Maples and Newman 1995)

The past decade has shown a trend toward promoting this type of gender equality in young
adult literature, and many authors are using female protagonists who are confident, determined, and intelligent. The move away from female stereotyping is slow especially in suspense and romance fiction. However, a look at prominent magazines that discuss and review young adult literature reveals a growing awareness of this issue not only on the part of educators, but authors and publishers as well. Hopefully this awareness will encourage those who influence young adults to introduce them to quality novels about adolescents, particularly independent females. Mitchell (1995) even suggests using romance novels as a way to confront gender stereotypes. She says we can "learn to use these books in ways that can provoke thought and encourage readers to look closely at what these novels really say, especially about male and female roles. By helping students become conscious of such issues as the gender expectations shown in the books, [we] can help them think about their own values and expectations for males and females."(89) Conceivably, heightened student awareness of sexism will encourage the trend toward positive female role models in young adult literature and increase the choices and opportunities that gender stereotyping limits.

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Works Cited

Mitchel, Diana. 1995. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em; using the romance series to confront gender stereotypes. The ALAN Review 23 (winter): 89.