

COURAGE, CHARM, AND COMPASSION:
GENDER ROLES IN NEWBERY MEDAL WINNING BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

Children learn behaviors through media examples, including behaviors tied to gender. Girls can be presented as domestic and passive; boys are seen as adventurous and active, with reinforcement even in Newbery Medal-winning books for children. Past studies discovered the discrepancy between male and female roles in Newbery Medal winners, but none have updated these discrepancies since the last major study (Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements 1998). This project used content analysis to analyze gender roles and stereotypes in Newbery Medal winners from 1998 to 2009. Within the theoretical framework of sociologists Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Candace West, and Don Zimmerman and educational theorist Paulo Freire, this study examined the number of well-developed and total characters in each book by gender. In addition, it used Perry Nodelman's *home/away/home* model of children's literature to focus on critical points in the narrative and assessed each protagonist through descriptions, actions, and dialogue. From this methodology, common themes emerged pointing primarily to the evolving roles of male protagonists and the static, traditional roles to which female protagonists are relegated. This study is essential in beginning to understand the complexity of the creation and reification of gendered stereotypes in children through award-winning literature.

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THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

The Media and Gender Stereotypes

Contemporary media presents children with a vast amount of words and images that teach them various behaviors and rules for survival in our fast-paced society. Within the media, stereotypes are frequently used that send a common message to children: stay within the limits that we have defined for you. In the medium of children's literature, these limits are rigidly defined when it comes to gender roles.

According to experts on children's literature and gender, the results of studies on gender stereotypes in children's literature have not varied much over the past forty years. Females are presented as quiet, caring, emotional, and dependent. Males are stereotyped as being strong, independent, bold, adventurous, and decision-makers (Kortenhaus 1993; Powell *et al.* 1993; Turner-Bowker 1996; Hourihan 1997; Lehr 2001). These stereotypes are consistent with those in the original groundbreaking studies on children's literature and gender that were conducted in the early 1970s. While the feminine stereotypes presented in children's literature ascribe passive, domestic roles to young girls, boys are typically described with active words that fit into the model of the consummate example of children's literature: the hero story. Although the traditional hero has begun to evolve, its characteristics still affect the masculine stereotypes presented in literature today (Hourihan 1997).

Sociology of Children's Literature

Within the field of the sociology of literature, a recent focus on children's literature has appeared. As scholars and parents seek to understand what children are reading and what effect it has on them, they look to sociology for the answers, as sociologists conduct empirical studies to scrutinize the contents of the books that large populations of children across the nation read. One of the most prominent topics in the studies is perceptions of gender in children's books and its effects on the identity formation of young readers. As children learn to identify themselves as males or females, they take cues from the world around them, with studies suggesting that books play a large role in this process: "The manner in which genders are represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society" (Singh 1998: 3).

Additionally, respected scholars in the field write of the power of literature in the identity formation of children. Diane Turner-Bowker, for example, argues that texts "are highly interactive; they mold and construct us by presenting images of ourselves. They define what it means to be female or male in our society...Texts have often served as a vehicle for the acquisition of gender stereotypes" (1996: 463). With a vehicle that is so established and respected as an educational tool – as opposed to the frequently-heard complaints of sexism in television and movies – it is no wonder that parents and teachers have taken little notice of the gender bias and stereotyping that occurs in the books that children are reading, including award-winning books such as Newbery or Caldecott Medal winners.

Children's Literature and Gender Studies

In the past forty years, gender roles in children's literature have been studied in a variety of ways by many different scholars. These studies range from qualitative to quantitative methods, from small to large samples, from picture books to novels. Some of these studies of award-winning books have become the standard for current research in the field, such as the Feminists on Literature study of 1971 that studied Newbery Medal winners (Kinman and Henderson 1985; Creany 1995) and the Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross study of 1972 that studied Caldecott Medal winners (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Creany 1995; Turner-Bowker 1996).

Following the example of Weitzman and his colleagues, scholars have continued to construct in-depth examinations of gender roles in Caldecott Medal-winning books. These analyses of illustrated books, including a 1995 study by Anne Creany and a 1999 study by Anita Davis and Thomas McDaniel, scrutinized the characters of each gender in both writing and pictures, often using quantitative methods to determine their results. The results of these studies substantially agree with the original findings of the Weitzman study: there is a "dearth of females" as well as "differentiated roles for boys and girls" (Creany 1995: 290).

Gender Studies on Newbery Medal books

Although there have been many studies on gender roles in Caldecott Medal winners, fewer have been conducted using winners of the Newbery Medal as the unit of analysis. Newbery Medal books, which are "awarded annually by the American Library Association for the most distinguished American children's books published the previous

year,” tend to be longer, more difficult books aimed at a higher age range than Caldecott books (American Library Association 2009a). Their content has many more subtleties and is more complex, requiring more intensive studies of gender roles. Since the Feminists on Literature study, very few researchers have followed in their footsteps. There have been some notable exceptions: Judith Kinman and Darwin Henderson (1985) analyzed sexism in eight years of Newbery Medal award winners and honorees, and Janet Powell, Cindy Gillespie, Rebecca Swearingen, and Nancy Clements have studied multiculturalism and gender in Newbery books in three separate studies (1994; 1993; 1998).

This study will primarily be based on and draw its starting point from the latest study, entitled “The History of Gender Roles in the Newbery Medal Winners,” which builds on the authors’ comprehensive 1993 look at progressive and traditional characters in every winner between 1922 and 1992, adding the years of 1993 to 1997 and summarizing the findings of the previous study by decade.

Unlike the other works cited here, the 1993 study by Powell *et al.* was the first to observe the characterization of both males and females in the selected books. The authors conclude in the first study that “the number of traditional portrayals of males and females since the 1970s is disturbing...It would seem that given today’s standards, more if not all, of the books should be labeled progressive” (Powell *et al.* 1993: 111-112). Their updated study sees more progressive characters in the 1990s, bringing males and females into more equal representation in the sample of award-winning books. Since the 1998 study, none have emerged to fill the gap and modernize the results of Powell and her colleagues to bring the question of gender roles in children’s literature into the 21st century.

The Next Step

In this study, I use the techniques laid out by earlier studies of portrayals of gender in award-winning children's books, combining their research questions and methodology to analyze stereotypes and gender roles for both male and female characters in Newbery Award winners from 1998 to 2009 (see Appendix A). I continue the work begun by the Feminists on Children's Literature study, Kinman and Henderson (1985), and Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements (1993; 1998) to update their groundbreaking work. This study will utilize the theoretical lenses of sociology and education in order to situate it within the relevant scholarly literature. Specifically, the sociological theories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Candace West and Don Zimmerman will primarily address the concept of gender in US society. In education theory, the work of Paulo Freire will place the results of the study within the context of educational systems struggling to achieve gender equality. In the next section, three research questions with five hypotheses are presented for the reader to understand the guiding motivations of this study and my expectations for the results.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

- What language has been used to describe male and female protagonists in Newbery Medal books since 1998?
 - Females will predominantly be described in the “passive dependent” model, while males will predominantly be described in the “instrumental independent” model (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993).
 - These models will not exclusively define the characterization of protagonists, reflecting the current social climate that encourages gender equality and continuing the trends visible in previous studies.
- How many characters of each gender are there within the books? How many protagonists?
 - While the numbers of characters will be approximately even, following the trend seen in previous analyses, male characters will be more richly developed than female characters. More male than female protagonists will appear; moreover, they will be more substantial characters when females are the protagonists than female characters in books with male protagonists.
- Are the protagonists of these books confined to stereotypical gender roles?
 - The majority of both female and male characters will be portrayed within the stereotypical boundaries of their respective genders, including their “physical traits, character and personality, roles, social status” and other factors (Brugeilles *et al.* 2002).
 - Stereotypes will be subtle in an attempt to make the books appear to portray gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Stereotypes in the Media

From a young age, children are presented with stereotypes in various forms of media, teaching them supposedly appropriate gender roles. Scholars have compiled these stereotypes and analyzed their effects on children in nearly every study on children's literature and gender that exists. Linda Wason-Ellam, for example, writes of the dualistic roles of males and females throughout the history of children's literature, which reify girls as submissive and sweet and boys as initiating action and displaying strength (1997: 430). Similarly, Leslie Dawn Helleis explains that females are often "passive and emotional" while males are "seen as being active and brave," which can affect children as they formulate their gender identities and learn to associate behaviors with acting masculine or feminine (2004: 1).

One of the most frequently used narratives in children's literature is the "hero story," which has led to a plethora of studies being conducted on gender roles within these tales. Margery Hourihan (1997) writes of the roles of men and women within hero stories, which have evolved from traditional tales but still have entrenched gender stereotypes that have spread throughout children's literature. Her analysis of stereotypes such as the "gentle mother" or a female in a "conventional heroic role" notes how far these stereotypes have spread and their effects; the latter, for example, leads to the inference by readers that "if they wish their lives and deeds to be worthy of notice, women must strive to behave as much like men as possible" (166; 206). These stereotypes limit females to traditionally passive roles unless they are acting "like men,"

in which case they are not seen as being truly feminine, according to societal conventions embraced by the media.

Sociology of Children's Literature: The Power of Literature

The ability of literature to convey stereotypes and teach children gender roles has been repeatedly proven by scholars of both sociology and literature. Studies speak to the various functions of children's books, including playing "a significant part in transmitting a society's culture to children...How genders are portrayed in children's books thus contributes to the image children develop of their own role and that of their gender in society" (Singh 1998: 2).

These studies provide the background for further analyses of gender roles in children's literature by giving researchers the sociological foundation of their work. Singh, in his summary of previous studies regarding the significance of gender roles in children's literature, continues by reasserting that how genders are represented "impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society" (1998: 3). Singh's analysis represents one method of proving the importance of positive gender role models in children's literature; another method is empirical studies.

Mary Trepanier-Street and Jane Romatowski's 1999 study of literature's effects on children's perceptions of gender roles is one such example. Their study was conducted with 74 children between preschool and first grade. It consisted of three stages: **first**, the children were asked whether a series of occupations were appropriate for men, women, or both; **second**, the intervention stage involved six carefully-selected books with nonstereotypic gender roles being read over a two month time span and

followed by classroom activities for each book; **third**, the children were asked the same questions as the initial stage of the study (1999: 156). Over the course of the study, the percentage of occupations that the children classified as being appropriate for both men and women rose from 49.4 to 78.4 percent (1999: 157). Trepanier-Street and Romatowski suggest that their results show that children's literature, when selected for its nonstereotypic gender roles, can be a valuable classroom asset for providing children with positive male and female role models and influencing their ideas regarding gender (1999: 158).

Children's Literature and Gender Studies

Over the last twenty years, scholars have been studying gender roles in children's literature more frequently and thoroughly than they had previously. These studies use different sample sizes, methodology, and theoretical bases, which can make their results difficult to compare. In 1998 May Narahara reviewed a decade's worth of studies on gender stereotypes and how sexism in books affects children's identity. The author compiles and analyzes the studies to find their similarities and discover a more general truth about gender roles in children's literature than each individual study can proclaim. In this review, Narahara discovers more evidence of *subtle* gender stereotyping, a problem that forces future scholars to analyze characters in children's books more carefully than their predecessors (1998: 16).

Two studies utilize less common approaches to examine gender roles in children's literature, and for this reason both are essential to the field. Leslie Dawn Helleis' dissertation examines gender roles in both past and present children's books, including

classic tales and current award-winners (2004). With this technique, she is able to compare today's books to those of the past, using a thorough analysis of both the frequency of appearances of characters of both genders as well as determining and analyzing the traits that characters display.

In the second article, Linda Wason-Ellam conducted a two-year ethnographic study in an elementary school researching "how young girls responded to and constructed meanings for more liberated females" in illustrated books (1997: 430-431). This researcher's unique approach allowed her to study the effects of choosing different texts to read to children, with distressing results: the children would frequently fit the stories into the dominant cultural narrative instead of rewriting the narrative with powerful female roles. For example, she notes that they equate beauty with deserving romance, idealizing the beautiful character more than the heroine of the story, or placing value on clothes, jewelry, and being thin. Wason-Ellam concludes: "Although feminist stories provided an alternative to the sexist world, they were not powerful enough to disrupt it" (1997: 436). While the results of this study are disheartening, they only reassert the need to continue with this line of work and attempt to provide children with positive role models in many aspects of their lives, not just through literature.

Gender Roles in Caldecott Medal Books

In the last fifteen years alone, there have been multiple studies researching gender roles and construction in Caldecott Medal-winning books. The prestigious Caldecott Medal is presented annually to "the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children" from the preceding year (American Library Association 2009b).

Choosing the popular Caldecott books as a sample ensures that researchers are using “accurate representations of children’s actual reading material” (Turner-Bowker 1996: 468). One of these studies, conducted by Anne Creany, undertakes a novel approach to its analysis: instead of counting character appearances, the researcher uses a “holistic” approach; however, she does admit to one of the main flaws of the study, that “such an interpretation is weakened by its subjectivity” (1995: 292). Creany notes that slightly more male than female main characters persist in the award-winning books between 1980 and 1995 but finds that “more female characters in award-winning picture books are behaving actively and adventurously even if few male characters are adopting traditional female traits” (1995: 293-294).

In contrast to Creany’s study, Diane Turner-Bowker (1996) uses a more thorough approach in her attempt to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in analyzing gender in Caldecott Medal and Honor books from 1984 to 1994. Turner-Bowker counted the number of characters of each gender as well as the number in central roles, then had student raters identify and tally adjectives (1996: 468). The third step to this study involved 50 randomly selected participants who were given the most commonly used adjectives for males and females and asked to rate them according to criteria for evaluation, potency, activity, and gender association (1996: 469-470).

Turner-Bowker’s basic findings are consistent with those of Creany; she concludes that males and females are represented nearly equally in central roles but that males are in significantly more titles (1996: 474). With regard to her second level of investigation, a discrepancy arises between the two studies: Turner-Bowker finds that both male and female characters are described according to gender-stereotypical

behaviors. Though she finds that females are described more positively than males, they are still most frequently described as “beautiful, frightened, worthy, sweet, weak, and scared.” Males are commonly “big, horrible, fierce, great, terrible, furious, brave, and proud,” among other adjectives that were judged to be more potent, active, and associated with masculinity (1996: 475).

The studies conducted by Creany and Turner-Bowker represent the largest and most comprehensive of the past fifteen years that focus on the Caldecott Medal. Since then, there have been a few smaller studies, none of which are as thorough or have the same quality of methodology as Creany and Turner-Bowker. For example, one study by Anita P. Davis and Thomas R. McDaniel (1999) states that it is replicating an earlier study but does not explain the methodology used. Additionally, the findings are simply quantitative, counting the number of male and female appearances in the text and illustrations of Caldecott Medal books. Without the additional level of analysis that qualitative methodology provides, this study does not provide nearly as much useful information as the two other studies.

Gender Roles in Newbery Medal Books

In contrast to the relatively large number of recent studies examining the role of gender in Caldecott Medal books, some of which were featured above, there have been very few studying the Newbery Medal winners. Since the landmark 1971 study conducted by the Feminists on Children’s Literature group, a handful of researchers have continued with their work and begun to modernize the results of that early study.

Kinman and Henderson examined the Newbery Medal winners and honorees from 1977

to 1984 (1985). While the Feminists on Children's Literature study determined a three to one ratio of male to female main characters in the first 49 Newbery Medal winners (from 1922 to 1971), Kinman and Henderson found 18 female and 12 male protagonists in the eight years of books they studied (1985: 887). According to the researchers, these books represent more "egalitarian" literature where female children can find positive role models (1985: 889).

However, a 1993 study discovered that Newbery Medal winners had not advanced as unquestionably as Kinman and Henderson's small sample found. This study, first conducted in 1993 and then updated in 1998 by Janet Powell, Cindy Gillespie, Becky Swearingen, and Nancy Clements, contains a methodical analysis of every Newbery Medal winning book from 1922 to 1997. The researchers identify whether each book is traditional or progressive, and then continue by breaking down the percentages of traditional and progressive gender labels and male and female main characters by decade (1998: 111). This two-pronged analysis is similar to that done by Diane Turner-Bowker on the Caldecott Medal winners; it provides a more meaningful analysis than simply tallying the characters of either gender.

Powell and her colleagues also take their study further than any of their predecessors by studying the roles of both male and female characters in the Newbery Medal winners, ensuring that both boys and girls are exposed to positive role models (1993: 97). The results of this study show a marked improvement in the portrayal of female characters over the years, with less progression for male characters (1998: 51). Numerically, males still outnumber females in terms of total characters and central roles,

but the 1980s and 1990s saw a significant improvement in bringing these numbers closer to equal.

Having assessed all of these studies, their methods will have a clear influence on those chosen for this project. The methodology utilized by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements especially will play a strong role in how the present research will be conducted, particularly their breakdowns of total number of characters and analysis of main characters. The next section will discuss in further detail the methods that were chosen for this work and the reasoning behind those decisions.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of texts chosen for the data in this research is directly based on the texts chosen by previous studies. Because so much research has been conducted on winners of the Caldecott Medal for illustrated books, I determined that a project using Newbery Medal winners, awarded annually to the best book for children published in the previous year, would be more beneficial for an audience of both scholars in the field and parents (American Library Association 2009a). Newbery Medal books, in addition to being the subject of previous studies, are a useful sample because "the books have met the highest standards set by the publishing industry. In addition, the distinction of the award ensures increased circulation because many parents, teachers, and librarians will purchase and select them to be read to children" (Narahara 1998: 13). While these books are held to high standards and should therefore be of a higher quality, this has not always held true in regard to gender stereotypes, as evidenced by the results of past studies discussed in previous sections.

This study will examine whether the last decade's books have improved to portray gender equality in an era where gender issues are viewed less as a pervasive problem in our society than they once were. For all of these reasons, the sample for this study consists of the twelve Newbery Medal winners between 1998 and 2009, continuing in the line of work most recently undertaken by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements (1998; see Appendix A).

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, there are eight essential concepts that will be defined in the following manner:

Gender: The “behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex” (*Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*, s.v. “gender”). These traits fall into categories that are “socially defined through stereotypes, in terms of expected behavior, attributes, and values” (Lott and Maluso 1993, as cited in Turner-Bowker 1996: 461). As a sociologist, I would prefer to use a wider definition of gender, but for the purposes of this study I will remain within the boundaries of the binary male-female model that is presented both in the Newbery Medal books and the relevant literature.

Gender roles: Personality traits that children learn to associate with males and/or females and are “shaped by the universally shared beliefs about gender roles that are held by their society” that “often take the form of oversimplified gender role stereotypes” (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993: 220).

Stereotype: “Learned, widely shared, socially validated general beliefs about categories of individuals” that are “typically inaccurate. Stereotypes oversimplify and exaggerate attributions made to groups creating distinctions between categories which are greater than actual observed differences” (Turner-Bowker 1996: 461).

Traditional male/female: Traditional males are the “primary provider, physically strong, brave, adventurous, independent” who work in fields such as “law, business, and medicine.” Traditional females are the “primary caretaker of children and home, sensitive, comforting, dependent, physically weak” who work in “secretarial and clerical work or nursing” (Powell *et al.* 1993: 98).

Progressive male/female: Progressive males care for children, are involved in the home, are sensitive, and work in jobs described for the traditional female. Progressive females exhibit many characteristics of the traditional male, such as working outside the home in male-oriented jobs and being independent and courageous (Powell *et al.* 1993: 98).

Passive dependent: Model encompassing stereotypes typically associated with females; includes “actions that required little movement and/or more help from others” (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993: 223).

Instrumental independent: Model encompassing stereotypes typically associated with males; includes actions with “a lot of self-initiated movement, decision making, and/or creativity” (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993: 223).

Primary Analysis

This research was conducted using the unobtrusive measure of content analysis. While this method does not allow for the measurement of children's reactions to the gender roles portrayed in the books, its results will be scientifically assessed from a

sociological point of view. Furthermore, the studies detailed above – especially the one conducted by Linda Wason-Ellam (1997) – illustrate that children do not always understand or react to gendered descriptions and stereotypes in the way that researchers expect them to, even though studies show that their own gender identities are profoundly affected by what they read.

The first step in this research was the mathematical analysis of the characters in each of the twelve books in the data set. Upon first reading each book, the characters were tallied and separated by gender. The second measure that was taken involved identifying the protagonist, or the character in the central role. For books where it appeared that there were multiple central characters, the number of pages on which a character appeared was counted to find the protagonist. This technique is in accordance with the methodology of Turner-Bowker, who was the only researcher to explain her actions in this specific circumstance (1996: 468). Finally, well-developed characters were differentiated from those who were only mentioned and remained undeveloped characters throughout the book.

Secondary Analysis

The subsequent level of analysis of this study contains measures that are drawn from a combination of those found in the relevant literature combined with the use of a prevalent model of children's literature that incorporates the researcher's decisions on how best to identify character growth and portrayal.

Within the literature reviewed above, the strongest methodology is seen in the studies conducted by Turner-Bowker (1996) and Helleis (2004). Although Turner-

Bowker has the most explicit explanation of how books were coded, her methodology does not fit within the time and cost constraints of this study and for that reason was not used. However, the ideas behind her methods were recognized as being clear and logical, which legitimizes the study's results; a process that will be continued in this study.

In her dissertation, Helleis examines ten categories within which she evaluates books for “sexual stereotyping, gender bias, and/or frequency of sex representation...These categories include frequency of male and female representation, sex of the main character, beauty, brains, brawn, occupation, emotionality, and values and/or morals (2004: 26-27). Although she does describe her methods to this extent, which is more than most other studies, Helleis fails to explain how she assessed each category. Some of the more easily analyzed categories are directly utilized within this study, while the others will indirectly influence the measures taken.

In the field of children's literature, the *home/away/home* model has come to be seen as one of the most common formats in the literature. This model, constructed by Perry Nodelman, is explained by the author as follows: “A child or childlike creature, bored by home, wants the excitement of adventure; but since the adventure is dangerous, the child wants the safety of home—which is boring, and so the child wants the excitement of danger—and so on” (1996: 157). The model forms a continuous circle, but Nodelman adds that the child or creature typically ends the story by returning “to the security it at first found burdensome, concluding that, despite its constraints, home is best,” hence the model ending at home instead of away (1996: 147).

Within the framework of the *home/away/home* model and keeping in mind the methodology of Turner-Bowker and Helleis, the secondary analysis for this study will be

constructed in an original manner. This analysis will examine character gender portrayal through the character's growth in the story: specifically, the main character will be analyzed at the beginning and end of the book, or from *home* to *home*. Adjectives used to describe the character through self-reflection, supporting characters, or narrative depictions as well as the actions taken by the characters will be assessed. Changes in character portrayal from the beginning to the end of the story will also be scrutinized, whether or not they appear to be the author's intentions. With this method, the study will be able to construct a clear, unbiased picture of gender roles within the sample of twelve Newbery Medal winning books at critical points in the narrative. This framework will allow the researcher to conduct a thorough study and take into account the arc of the narrative instead of focusing on one moment.

The methodology of this study cannot be fully understood without understanding the theoretical framework supporting it. For the purposes of this study, certain facets of both sociological and education theory will be used to explain the approach of the methodology and the significance of the results. Specifically, the sociological theories espoused by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1898 and Candace West and Don Zimmerman in 1987 will provide a background on the sociological impact and meaning of gender. Additionally, Paulo Freire's 1969 theory of critical consciousness in education will address the implications of using the texts sampled here in the classroom and how to foster a productive school environment that helps children to reach their full potential without the limitations of stereotypical gender roles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Classical Feminist Theory

This study will be grounded primarily in the work of sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a classical feminist theorist who explored sex and gender in US society. While Gilman conducted her research over a hundred years ago – her signature sociological work, *Women and Economics*, was first published in 1898 – it remains an essential theoretical framework for conducting research on and understanding gender today.

In *Women and Economics*, Gilman introduces the concept of “excessive sex distinction,” a trait unique to humans that is a precursor to our current understanding of gender (Gilman 1966; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998). Excessive sex distinction, she contends, arises from women’s economic dependence on men, which is nonexistent in every other living creature (1966: 37). Gilman acknowledges sex distinctions among animals and humans, but carefully explains the difference, stating that the most excessive human sex distinctions “consist in all those differences in organ and function, in look and action, in habit, manner, method, occupation, behavior, which distinguish men from women... We have differentiated our industries, our responsibilities, our very virtues, along sex lines” (1966: 40-41). These qualities are those typically thought of in terms of gender, not sex, today, demonstrating how far Gilman was ahead of the thinking of her time, which tended to attribute all of these differences between men and women to biological sex. While modern thinking has distinguished between sex and gender, societal norms still accept gender differences as inevitable truths. This idea is perpetuated by the stereotypical gender roles that are

portrayed by children's books, which reify ideas of appropriate behaviors and actions depending on the gender of a character.

Within this critical text, Charlotte Perkins Gilman specifically addresses the manifestation of excessive sex distinctions in children. She criticizes adults who promote sex distinctions in children, such as complimenting them for acting like "mothers" and "fathers," as Gilman believes that these sex-instincts should not appear until the child reaches puberty. The author advocates for girls acting as tomboys and boys displaying gentler emotions, ideas which have reappeared within modern research on gender roles in children's literature as "progressive" characters (Gilman 1966: 56-57; Powell *et al.* 1993). While these two roles could ostensibly be seen as excessive sex distinctions that are simply different from the norm, Gilman here is suggesting that children experience a range of activities and emotions that allow them to mature without interference from adults reducing them to predefined gender roles.

The effects of excessive sex distinction on children, according to Gilman, are severe and immediate:

Even our little children in their play are carefully trained to accentuate sex; and a line of conduct for boys, differing from that for girls, is constantly insisted upon long before either would think of a necessity for such difference. Girls and boys, as they associate, are so commented on and teased as to destroy all wholesome friendliness, and induce a premature sex-consciousness. (1966: 309)

This "premature sex-consciousness" has a wide range of consequences for young children, and its replication and promotion by modern media have only served to strengthen its effects. In spite of recent efforts to move US society toward gender equality, Gilman's examples – praising parental instincts, learning to play as girls and boys – are as true today as they were one hundred years ago, proving that excessive sex

distinction has not been eliminated in the time since Gilman first brought it to light.

In her later writings, Charlotte Perkins Gilman expanded upon her theory to conceptualize ideas of culture and humanity. Her 1911 book *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* presents the titular concept of “androcentric culture,” by which “Gilman means a common consciousness in society—a system of concepts—patterned not by human understandings but by masculine interests and experience” (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998: 121). While it could be argued that the progress of the past century has eliminated this masculine cultural dominance from US society, the results of this and similar studies show that the effects of androcentric culture must be recognized in experiences and situations where their existence is indisputable, if covert.

One of the overarching themes of Gilman’s work is the role that gender plays in society. Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley explain, “For Gilman, humanity through its collective consciousness participates in its own making; one of the things it has made is gender, and gender has become the pervasive stratificational structure in social organization” (1998: 127). When gender gains enough power in a society to affect its overall configuration and its power is distributed unequally, it becomes a harmful concept in its excess. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s lifetime, this excess was due to the economic dominance of males over females; today, cultural norms stemming from that relationship are exerted in more abstract, less easily defined ways.

Modern Sociological Theory

More recently, the theory described in the article “Doing Gender” by Candace West and Don Zimmerman has become a well-known, frequently cited sociological

theory of gender (1987). West and Zimmerman argue that gender is “a routine, methodological and recurring accomplishment;” further explaining that “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’,” making the argument that gender is not only a descriptive category but a continuous set of actions (1987: 126). They expand on this argument to include the accountability of gender; it is determined through the eyes of others in society. For this reason, the authors argue that we can never *not* do gender within the current structure of our society (1987: 137).

This theory utilizes unusual definitions of sex, sex category, and gender that are useful in demonstrating the ambiguities of these categories. *Sex*, they argue, is decided by biological criteria *that are socially agreed upon*. *Sex category*, on the other hand, is the sex that a person is placed in through displaying social cues that identify them as members of one or the other group.

Most importantly for this study, *gender* is defined as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987: 127). Thus their definition of gender agrees with their overall argument of gender as something that is **done** instead of something that **is**. The other definitions serve to expand on the complexities of this issue and the mix of biological and social determinants that compose our common definitions of sex and gender, which the authors purposefully confuse here.

This theory, echoing the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, features a section focusing specifically on gender in children. Citing the extensive work of Spencer Cahill,

the authors claim that children are forced to choose between being a baby and a “big boy” or “big girl,” leading them to identify with their sex well before they would on their own. With this choice comes the acceptance by boys of the ideal role of being “efficacious,” or having the ability and strength to affect their environments; conversely, girls learn to attach importance to “appearance” and begin the transformation from active children to passive adult women (1987: 141). These roles reflect those determined by researchers of gender roles in children’s literature, including Kortenhaus and Demarest’s findings of portrayals of females as “passive dependent” and males as “instrumental independent” (1993: 223).

West and Zimmerman further argue that children then begin a *self-regulating process* where they judge themselves and others based on whether their actions are acceptable for their gender, according to what adults and society have taught them (1987). This process creates social norms that are converted into self-fulfilling prophecies of the differences between males and females, which are used to make the argument that these distinctions are human, even biological, facts and legitimize the dominant position of males in society (1987: 142; 146). Because of this process, media such as children’s literature have continued to reproduce distinct gender roles, which serve to aid in children’s self-regulation of gender by providing them with examples and justification for the different ways in which they have already been taught to act.

West and Zimmerman (1987) use their theory to show the continuous, active process of the construction of gender in modern society, beginning as early as a child’s first recognition of wanting to be a big boy or girl and not a baby and continuing throughout their life. They argue for a reconceptualization of gender in broader circles

than sociological ones, so that the overall society will gain a deeper understanding of sex, sex category, and gender and how these categories are enacted in our daily lives and rituals (1987: 147). This understanding, ideally, will set in motion a process of social change that could finally create equality between males and females.

Educational Theory

One well-respected theory of education that is applicable to this study comes from Paulo Freire, an influential Brazilian thinker of the 20th century. Among his many writings is the book *Education for Critical Consciousness*, first published in 1969.

Although Freire created his theory specifically within the case study of revolutionary Brazil as it struggled to become a democracy, his ideas have been applied to educational situations around the world and apply especially well to any educational system that is struggling to achieve equality in schools, as is the (largely unacknowledged) case in the United States. While administrators and schoolteachers may not admit to problems of inequality, issues of race, class, and gender no doubt exist in US classrooms today. Freire's theory of education is applicable to US schools overall, and to this specific research project.

While many problems of gender inequality in education go unnoticed, it does not negate the fact that they are real and present in classrooms. The very texts that are used in classrooms every day have serious, documented issues of gender bias and stereotyping, including Newbery Medal books, which are the subject of this and past studies.

Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973) directly addresses issues of literacy in education and how humans are influenced by their educational surroundings, stating:

Integration with one's context, as distinguished from *adaptation*, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he has adapted. (4)

In the context of the effect of books read in the classroom to children, this statement shows that students must be allowed the opportunity to make choices about the books and critically analyze them, instead of simply reading a book that may include some gender bias but would otherwise be a valuable text for the classroom. Teachers must foster critical discussion and provide students with the ability to *integrate* themselves with the books they are reading and the lessons they are learning, instead of merely *adapting* to the gender roles directed by the texts.

Freire's theoretical basis for a new system of education continues by illuminating his plans for a literacy program that goes beyond simply reading, as any school that utilizes texts that could influence a child's gendered development must. He writes that he supports a literacy program "with men as its Subjects rather than as patient recipients, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts, one in which students would develop the impatience and vivacity which characterize search and invention" (1973: 43).

Freire also advocates for dialogue in classrooms, which he defines as being a *horizontal* relationship instead of the vertical relationship between teachers and students that is most commonly seen in school systems (1973: 45). These changes in education

would permit teachers and students to have a conversation about the texts being read and turn them from a limiting, stereotyping device into an opportunity for growth, change, and a movement toward equality. By exposing the stereotypes in the texts and beginning a dialogue about gender roles, teachers will be instructing students from an early age about how to discover their full potential and look at their surroundings with a critical eye.

Between the sociological theories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Candace West and Don Zimmerman and the educational theory of Paulo Freire, the framework of the current research is constructed. This theoretical basis will provide the reader with a lens through which they gain the ability to more profoundly understand the results and implications of this study. The following section will describe the findings of the research: first, it will use a numerical breakdown to provide the reader with a clear overall picture; second, it will turn to the content within the texts and examine them both by book and by common themes.

RESULTS

This section will describe the results that were determined by the methodological practices previously explained in detail, as seen through the lens of the sociological theories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Candace West and Don Zimmerman, and the educational theory of Paulo Freire. First, the gender of the characters in all twelve Newbery Medal-winning books in the sample will be analyzed numerically. This initial section of the results will look at the total number of characters, protagonists, and well-developed characters. The second half of this section will feature the content of the books, with findings outlined by book and by common themes.

Results: Characters

The first stage of this study consisted of reading each book to tally the number of characters and the gender of each character, with some specific details examined more in depth: first, the gender of the protagonist, and second, the well-developed characters. The definition of a well-developed character is based on that of a round character, “a character in fiction whose personality, background, motives, and other features are fully delineated by the author” (*Dictionary.com Unabridged*, s.v. “round character”). However, for the purposes of this study, the definition of a developed character is widened and simplified to include any character who appears throughout the text and has a considerable effect on the story, as opposed to those mentioned only in passing who only appear in a few places and do not play a major role in the narrative or the life of the protagonist.

Of the twelve books analyzed for this study, eleven have a protagonist and follow Perry Nodelman's (1996) *home/away/home* structural model, which is introduced in the Methodology section of this paper. The twelfth, Laura Amy Schlitz's *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* consists of 19 monologues and two dialogues, meant to be performed by schoolchildren so that they can each play a substantial role (2007: viii). For this reason, it does not have a protagonist or follow the typical structure. Therefore, this book will be treated as an outlier and its analysis will differ slightly from that of the other eleven texts. Instead of looking at the beginning and end of the book, or from *home* to *home*, this book's short length allows for an analysis of the entire book.

The results of this component of the study yield some interesting patterns, as Appendix B clearly displays. In the sample, there are five female and six male protagonists, a nearly even divide. However, the total number of characters showcases a much larger split: there are 165 female and 262 male characters in the twelve books. Well-developed characters are displayed in a similar pattern with less significant results; 64 female and 96 male characters appear throughout the twelve texts. Although these initial results are revealing, an analysis of the percentages of well-developed characters will expose more than a simple comparison of the total figures.

Of all of the numbers presented in Appendix B, the most significant are the well-developed characters, because these are the characters that have an effect on the story – and its readers. In ten of the twelve books, there are more male than female well-developed characters; the only two exceptions are *Kira-Kira* (Kadohata 2004), where the

numbers are equal, and *A Year Down Yonder* (Peck 2000), which features three more female than male well-developed characters.

Another meaningful comparison is the number of developed female characters in books with male protagonists in contrast to the number of developed male characters in books with female protagonists. In the six books with male protagonists, there are 23 well-developed female characters, which is 30.2% of all the developed characters in only these six books. In the five books with female protagonists, there are 31 well-developed male characters, a considerably higher ratio of 43.7% of the 71 well-developed characters.

Results: Content

The research that encompasses the content of the books provides more complete, but also more opinion-based results than those described in the previous section. In order to combat the biases that all researchers must acknowledge in their work, this section will use the operationally defined *traditional* and *progressive characters* as explained by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements (1993). In addition, it will draw from Kortenhaus and Demarest's categories of *passive dependent* and *instrumental independent* (1993). These results will be described in two frames: first, broken down by each of the twelve books sampled; second, by the five most commonly found themes in the content and structure of the books.

Results by Book

Out of the Dust

In the 1998 winner, Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, the narrator relates short vignettes of her life in 1930s Oklahoma's dusty plains. She begins with her birth, where a significant story explains her name of Billie Jo: her father wanted a boy, as she explains: "He tried making me do. I look just like him, I can handle myself most everywhere he puts me, even on the tractor, though I don't like that much" (1997: 4). Over the course of the book, Billie Jo first leaves home mentally and then physically, running away from a once-loving home following an accident that left her piano-player's hands scarred and her mother dead. By the conclusion, however, she has returned home and begun to reconnect with her father and his new girlfriend Louise and form a family.

From the opening to the conclusion, Billie Jo gains confidence in herself and learns the value of home and even the dust. As she battles back to the piano and the music that she loved before the accident, she grows stronger both mentally and physically. Although she learns this important lesson, Billie Jo's happiness is still dependent on her father's romance and happiness. A physical description that Billie Jo provides at the end of the book mirrors the disappointment that her father felt in having a daughter at the beginning, as she states, "I may look like Daddy, but I have my mother's hands. Piano hands, Ma called them...My hands don't look real pretty anymore" (1997: 216-217). Now, however, she is talking to Louise, with pride in both her scarred but still functional hands and the traits she inherited from her father – even beyond their red hair.

Holes

Louis Sachar's 1999 winner *Holes* tells the story of Stanley Yelnats IV, who is sent to a camp for juvenile offenders for a crime he didn't commit (1998). At the camp, he is forced to dig a hole every day in search of a long-buried treasure, and eventually runs away to look for his friend Zero, who has already escaped into the desert.

Improbably, the boys find food and water and survive a variety of mishaps, eventually discovering the treasure and regaining their freedom along with the money the treasure brings.

As the book opens, Stanley is portrayed as an extremely atypical hero; he is poor, overweight, friendless, and lacks confidence. By the end, however, he has become rich, fit, has made friends – including his hero, a professional baseball player – and has learned self-confidence following his physically and mentally trying adventures. His patience and strength are highlighted in the book's conclusion, as is the importance that his family plays in his life: with the money from the treasure, Stanley buys his parents a house (1998: 132).

Bud, Not Buddy

Bud, Not Buddy (1999) follows the adventures of the titular character as he escapes an oppressive foster home and embarks on a mission to find the father he never knew in Christopher Paul Curtis' 2000 Newbery Medal winner. Guided only by a few prized possessions that belonged to his late mother and a formidable set of street smarts, which he has memorized in the form of "Bud Caldwell's Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself," Bud travels across Michigan in

the uneasy, difficult 1930s (1999: 11). His travels bring him from Flint to Grand Rapids, where he finally discovers Herman E. Calloway, whose flyers his mother had treasured. As it turns out, Calloway is not his father but his mother's, and Bud is finally reunited with his family – even though his grandfather turns out to be a tough, daunting man – and gains more family than he expected in the singer and other members of Calloway's band.

At the beginning of the book, Bud is a world-weary child who explains that a person becomes an adult at six, which is coincidentally the age he was when his mother died (1999: 6). While his mother's memory and possessions are of the utmost importance to Bud, he explains, "I don't know when it first happened, but it seems like my eyes don't cry no more" (1999: 3). By the end of the book, he has gained the ability to confront his emotions and truly mourn his mother: "I was carrying Momma inside me and there wasn't anyone or anything that could take away from that or add to it either" (1999: 234). With this admission, Bud is able to relinquish his mother's possessions, returning them to her childhood bedroom and to her father. He also has gained the courage to allow his newfound family to take control and be responsible for him, which gives Bud the chance to be a child again.

A Year Down Yonder

Mary Alice Dowdel is the protagonist of Richard Peck's 2001 winner *A Year Down Yonder*, set in a small town in Depression-era Illinois (2000). With her parents struggling to make ends meet at home in Chicago, Mary Alice is sent to live with her unpredictable grandmother for a year. Initially shy and fearful of what her Grandma Dowdel might do or say next, Mary Alice grows to appreciate her grandmother's carefree

spirit and the hard work that she puts into caring for her granddaughter and her community.

When Mary Alice first arrives from Chicago, she is viewed as an outsider, a “rich Chicago girl” in her traveling clothes (2000: 12). By the time she leaves, she is a member of the community, having helped her grandmother with everything from helping themselves to the neighbor’s pecans and pumpkins to checking on those same neighbors and cleaning up the town following a tornado. Throughout the book, Mary Alice is described as being awkward and sentimental, and her most frequent display of emotion is to sigh, a passive demonstration that she uses for a wide variety of emotions. In the end, this small town has become her true home, where she returns to get married and is given away by the grandmother she had been so ashamed of when she left Chicago for the first time.

A Single Shard

In 2002’s winner, Linda Sue Park’s *A Single Shard*, Tree-ear is an orphan boy living under a bridge with Crane-man, his guardian and mentor (2001). Set in Korea during the twelfth century, this book follows Tree-ear as he becomes the apprentice of a master potter and is tasked with bringing a precious, unique piece of pottery to the king to earn his master a valuable commission. Tree-ear grows and changes during this journey, but it is what he finds upon his return that has the largest impact on his life: Crane-man has died, and he is invited to live with Min, the potter, and his wife. He is given a new name, Hyung-pil, which honors the son that the potter and his wife had lost, and Min

ultimately agrees to teach him to throw pots, as Tree-ear looks forward to the future in his new home (2001: 146-147).

Tree-ear is a complicated character, one who values neatness and accepts his emotions. He is inherently intellectual and frequently ponders moral dilemmas with Crane-man, who has taught him most of what he knows about surviving with dignity and honor. He takes responsibility for his mistakes and pushes forward in the face of adversity. In these respects, he is primarily a static character throughout the book. Tree-ear remains true to himself and does not change much, though his home and family do: living under the bridge and scavenging for food with Crane-man for most of the book, in the end he moves in with Min and his wife (who is never given a name besides “Ajima”, an affectionate term for aunt in Korean) in their house and is given a name and a future in pottery.

Crispin: The Cross of Lead

The 2003 Newbery Medal winner is Avi’s *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* (2002). The book is centered on the life of the titular character immediately following his mother’s death. Crispin is forced to flee his hometown in order to save his own life, and joins forces with Bear, who makes Crispin his servant. At length, these two unlikely companions become a family, protecting each other and risking their lives for the other’s safety on various occasions throughout the book.

Even though this book is set in fourteenth century England, Crispin is a protagonist who has a clear appeal for modern readers. Like Stanley Yelnats in *Holes*, Crispin begins the book as an atypical hero; he is overweight, alone, impoverished, and

so fearful he must resort to hiding in the woods. At this point in the narrative, he is even nameless: his mother always called him “Son” and the rest of the village simply referred to him as “Asta’s boy” (2002: 10). Crispin is highly emotional as he grieves his mother’s death and fears for his own life (2002: 2). By the time he has created a new home with Bear – albeit a traveling home – Crispin is in good physical shape, well loved, has a means for making money, and challenges powerful soldiers and the same dangerous steward he once hid from in order to ensure Bear’s freedom. He is still fearful but has learned to control his emotions and actively command his own life. By the book’s conclusion, Crispin describes himself as having a heart “full of more joy than I had ever felt before. I was unfettered, alive to an earth I hardly knew but was eager to explore. What’s more, I knew that feeling to be my newfound soul, a soul that lived in freedom” (2002: 262).

The Tale of Despereaux

Despereaux Tilling is the protagonist of Kate DiCamillo’s 2004 Newbery Medal winner *The Tale of Despereaux* (2003). Despereaux is a mouse with “no interest in the things a mouse should show interest in” (2003: 17). He values light and displays an inherent intelligence when he chooses to read instead of eat a book. Despereaux is banished from his home after he speaks to a human, at which point he embarks on a series of adventures with rats, mice, and humans alike. Eventually, he rescues the princess of the castle from its dungeons, befriends her, and finds a home with her, having finally discovered the place where he belongs.

As a small, sickly mouse with big ears, Despereaux is ridiculed by his family and community for his non-conformist behaviors. His uniqueness is so unexpected that he is even seen as a disappointment by his parents in the opening pages of his *Tale*. The book's end showcases Despereaux in a different light, living happily with the princess and sitting in the "place of honor" at the royal table (2003: 269). His home has changed, as has his self-image; even his mouse family has changed its attitude about him, albeit from afar, as they speak of him with tones of respect instead of disdain, wishing him happiness for the first time.

Kira-Kira

Kira-Kira is Cynthia Kadohata's 2005 winner, set in Georgia in the 1950s (2004). Katie Takeshima and her Japanese family are forced to leave their Iowa home and move to Georgia so her father can find work, and the book depicts the family's struggles through Katie's point of view as they adjust to their new location. Eventually, Georgia becomes home, but another challenge confronts the family when Katie's idolized, beloved older sister Lynn falls sick and dies. While her parents struggle with their grief, Katie finally finds her role in the family and helps to create the sense of home that was lost when Lynn died.

When the book opens, Katie is a young child who is entirely dependent on her older sister to teach, guide, comfort and watch over her while their parents work. She is extremely passive and refuses to accept responsibility or take pride in her actions, including one telling story where she saved her sister's life but only remembers how Lynn saved her first (2004: 5). This trait does not change over the course of the book; the

end shows Katie not taking credit for either her newfound academic success or influencing her mother's vote on forming a union (2004: 229; 237). At the same time, Katie has become more active and independent, cooking and cleaning for her family, trying to protect her father, and dancing in a production with her friend (2004: 238). Most importantly, Katie is able to look at the world as a place that glitters – or, that is *kira-kira* – once again, regaining optimism and strength after the pain of her sister's death.

Criss Cross

Debbie Pelbry is the protagonist of the 2006 winner, Lynne Rae Perkins' *Criss Cross* (2005). The book uses varied formats, including haikus, pictures, and dialogues, to share the story of Debbie and her friends during one summer in their small town. As they become teenagers, these characters undergo unexpected changes and explore friendships and relationships with new people, taking them away from home and their comfort zone mentally. By the end, they have managed to find their way back to each other and back home, incorporating their summer adventures into their lives and learning about growing up in the process.

By the time she makes her way back to her friends and herself at the end of a summer block party that serves as the book's conclusion, Debbie has changed in her friend Hector's eyes: "Her loose hair, her summeriness, the existence of the back of her neck, and something she was in the process of learning made her look different than she had a few months ago" (2005: 334). This physical description highlights the inner changes in Debbie; at the beginning of the book, she was depicted as sitting around,

passively waiting and wishing for something good to happen to her. Now, the passive tone persists as she allows things to happen or not happen to her without her active involvement, but Debbie has finally begun the process of learning to create her own happiness. As a fourteen-year-old, she begins and ends the book thinking of boys romantically for the first time, being confused by how she suddenly can't speak in front of them or wondering if she's "not the kind of person anyone can fall in love with" (2005: 31; 318).

The Higher Power of Lucky

The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron (2006) focuses on the protagonist's struggle to define and find security in her family. This 2007 Newbery Medal winner introduces a spunky protagonist in Lucky, who is both fearful and fearless: when it comes to her guardian Brigitte leaving her, Lucky is terrified, but preparing to run away during a dust storm is no challenge, especially since Lucky keeps her survival kit with her at all times (2006: 6). Lucky is a contradictory character in more ways than one; she is willing to take action when she is eavesdropping on Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or cleaning up after them. However, she is entirely passive with Brigitte and refuses to confront her with her emotional issues when she believes Brigitte is returning to France and abandoning her. It takes running away and Brigitte coming to find her for Lucky to be honest, at which point Brigitte reassures her that she is staying – forever.

By the time she returns home, Lucky has become more confident and is actively controlling her own life, instead of allowing her decisions to be controlled by baseless fears. She has gained confidence in herself and security in her family life, explaining that

she was “feeling as if she’d come to the end of a long and difficult journey” (2006: 132). She also changes how she describes herself physically over the course of the book. At the beginning, her “way-too-curly hair” is symptomatic of her restlessness and discomfort with herself, while the end of the book reflects her newfound serenity, as she climbs into Brigitte’s lap with damp hair, knees “almost knobby enough to look like Brigitte’s knees,” and bare feet (2006: 1; 131).

Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village

Laura Amy Schlitz’s 2008 winner *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* has a different structure than every other book in this sample (2007). Instead of a *home/away/home* structure with a protagonist, this book features nineteen monologues and two dialogues set in medieval England. While the male and female actors are evenly split with twelve male and eleven female roles, the vast majority of the characters are narrowly defined within strictly traditional gender roles. In one especially striking example in the very first monologue, the lord threatens his nephew Hugo, who is retelling the story: “And as for you, you’ll hunt like a man, or be flogged like a boy. Help kill the boar, and I’ll give you the kidneys – turn tail and I’ll have the skin off your back” (2007: 2).

Beyond the descriptions of characters or their words, the way that the stories are told also falls within stereotypical gender roles. Male characters were mostly apprentices sharing one work-related experience or telling of their current and future work more generally. Females, in contrast, primarily shared descriptive tales of their lives or events

that happened to them where they were only passively involved, and they were far more likely to talk about love and relationships, whether familial or romantic.

The Graveyard Book

In *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (2008), Nobody Owens is an orphan raised by ghosts in a graveyard. This 2009 winner follows Nobody, or Bod, as he learns the secrets of both the graveyard and the world outside it. As a baby, he escapes the murderer that kills his entire family and wanders to the graveyard, whose residents take him in and raise him. As an inquisitive child, his adventures bring him into the ghoul's grave, to school with humans, and to the dance of the dead, among others. Eventually, an adolescent Bod must grow up and rejoin the human world, returning home to truly begin living.

Nobody Owens is an intriguing character whose traits often seem to contradict themselves. He is described as obedient, yet he is always asking questions. He is studious and quiet but still manages to frequently get himself into trouble. He is brave but still willing to display emotions, especially when it comes to his mother. Bod is a wandering, adventurous child who, as he is leaving the graveyard behind, explains what he believes he deserves: "I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands...I want *everything*" (2008: 304).

Results by Theme

Among the twelve books, five themes emerged after careful examination of the gender roles played by the protagonists. While some are more applicable to male or female characters, others were clearly visible in books with protagonists of both genders.

These themes, which center on emotions, lessons, antiheroes, first-person narratives, and the idea of home, occupy a wide range on the spectrum of traditional to progressive characters and allow for many interpretations. While the decision to analyze the results by book is drawn directly from the last major academic study, conducted by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements in 1993 and 1998, that study did not compile results by theme. I believe that the following sections will add a dimension of analysis to this research that was lacking in the previous study.

Emotions

One of the most readily apparent trends throughout the texts involves emotions, including which emotions the protagonists felt and which ones they displayed to others. Three of the most common emotions were fear, shame, and bravery, which often existed concurrently. In many of the books, characters were ashamed of their fear or afraid when they felt they should be acting bravely. Interestingly, all of these emotions occurred in both male and female protagonists, without significant differences in displaying and hiding emotions.

The final frequent emotion dealt with familial love, which in itself is one of the strongest unifying themes across all twelve books. In eight of the books, family drives the plot and is central to the book and the development of the protagonist; in the other four, it is a significant element that either acts as a catalyst or support system for the protagonist in a smaller role. Characters freely express the love they feel for their families, especially their mothers, throughout the books. They also express feelings of fear and grief over losing family members, even hypothetically. Although a variety of

emotions are clearly stated in the text, it is important to recognize that they are commonly told by the narrator to the reader, instead of being spoken as dialogue by the protagonist.

Both Katie in *Kira-Kira* (2004) and Bud in *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) experience the pain of losing a family member; for Katie, it is her older sister Lynn who passes away, and Bud is mourning the death of his mother when he was younger as he searches for his father. Katie deeply mourns losing Lynn, and continues to worry about Lynn's spirit after her death: "So even though I wanted her to keep watching me, I wished she would forget about me and never see me crying and never worry about me anymore, even if that meant I was now alone" (2004: 228). Bud is a character whose story is told in a first-person, stream of consciousness style, which frequently amounts to him sharing his emotions with the reader but not the people around him. He admits to remembering how it felt when he lost his mother out loud, but adds silently, "'cause it still feels the same" (1999: 225). These two protagonists illustrate the different ways in which emotions are showcased within the sample.

Lessons Learned

The second important theme in these texts focuses on the lessons that the protagonists learned over the course of their time away from home. While this is one of the more easily discernable themes in the readings, it is still very important to any analysis of gender roles in these texts. Characters learn to appreciate themselves, their homes, and their families across the board. One commonality that appears with surprising frequency in these texts is the appearance of non-traditional family structures. In these books especially, the characters had to learn to value and trust their families;

female protagonists appeared to be more settled within their families by the end of the book than male protagonists. Billie Jo in *Out of the Dust* (1997) fits this mold; she learns to take comfort in her father and accept his new girlfriend as part of the family following her mother's death. Male characters, meanwhile, learned confidence in themselves and frequently gained in popularity and self-assurance, changes that often occurred simultaneously with physical changes. In *Holes*, Stanley Yelnats is a perfect example of this theme, as his experiences at the camp brought him friends, inner strength, and physical fitness (1998).

Antiheroes

The physical changes that male characters experienced were also symptomatic of the third theme, which entails these protagonists being portrayed as *antiheroes*. This archetypal main character is defined as one “in a dramatic or narrative work who is characterized by a lack of traditional heroic qualities, such as idealism or courage” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “antihero”). For the purposes of this study, I expand this definition to include physical traits, such as being overweight or unattractive, and social traits, including unpopularity, to the fear and lack of idealism that are contrary to the traditional heroic traits. However, what I discovered through my research was that male protagonists or omniscient narrators gave a *self*-description of the character as an antihero.

In reality, over the course of the book it became apparent that they were or became traditional heroes. They displayed bravery, gained confidence, improved their physical fitness, and made steadfast friends. In *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, Crispin

matures from a nameless, timid orphan to a bold pipe player with a family and an identity (2002). Although this theme applies strictly to males, it also involves female characters in regard to their invisibility. Across these books, females were underrepresented and underdeveloped, existing primarily in obviously stereotyped roles: mother, witch, and princess are but a few examples. *The Tale of Despereaux* corresponds with this theme, as the protagonist becomes a stereotypical hero and the main female characters consist of his mother, a princess, and a girl who wants to be a princess (2003).

Narrative structure

While the previous themes deal with elements of the content within the sample, the fourth involves their structure. An unexpected number of the books were written as first-person narratives or focused on one character, the protagonist. In books with protagonists such as the “antihero” described above, this structure contributed to the lack of developed female characters, such as the sole female character in *A Single Shard*, who was identified for most of the book simply as “Min’s wife” and not by any name of her own (2001). The books featured little description, instead highlighting dialogue or stream of consciousness-style thoughts from the protagonist. Another effect of this structure was the relegation of all other characters to tiny, flat roles, where they were likely to be more outwardly progressive or radical than the protagonists, acting as their dramatic foils to showcase ways in which the protagonist could not or would not behave. The strongest example of this type of character is Mary Alice’s grandmother in *A Year Down Yonder*, who was far more progressive than her granddaughter and defied social

conventions for her own set of principles, whether or not the neighbors – or the law – agreed with them (2000).

Coming Home

The final theme highlighted across the sample engages with the idea of home and its many possible definitions, and suggests a broader interpretation of the *home/away/home* model that was so central to this study. Of the books that fit this model, a significant majority (seven out of eleven) involved the “home” that the protagonist returns to being a *different* home than the one they left in the beginning of the book. This home could be in a different location or involve different people, but the protagonist still came to see it as the comforting sanctuary that the first home once had been. Nobody Owens in *The Graveyard Book* fits this model, as his first home is the house where he was born but becomes the graveyard where he is rescued and raised, and he leaves the graveyard in the end to rejoin the living, stating that if he returned, “it will be a place, but it won’t be home any longer” (2008: 304).

Another avenue of exploration for deeper understanding of this model surrounds the mental and emotional journey away from home that some of the characters took, as opposed to the physical experience typical of the model. While this occurred in a small number of the books sampled, it is relevant because it was exclusive to female protagonists. Of the three female protagonists who did physically leave home, two traveled with family or to see family, and only one ran away alone. *Criss Cross*’ Debbie, for example, travels away from her friends and her family as she grows up over the course of one summer, but she physically remains in her hometown (2005). In contrast,

all of the male protagonists went on an actual, physical trip away from home. Some ran away, others entered forbidden locations or escaped from oppressive situations, and yet another undertook a dangerous voyage. Although their motivations varied, the male protagonists all shared the thrills and terrors of solitary adventures that only one female experienced.

DISCUSSION

To extract meaning from the results detailed in the previous section, it is necessary to eliminate the boundaries between the numerical and contextual results and discuss the underlying meanings that weave the results together. While previous studies, including those conducted by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements (1993; 1998) conducted their analysis by coding each book as progressive or traditional, I believe that this method obscures the complexities that exist within each book. My study will instead look at the number and development of characters as well as the portrayal of the protagonist at critical junctures within the text in the overall sample of twelve Newbery Medal winning books.

One of the most intriguing figures presented in the findings of this study involves the number of well-developed characters that are the opposite gender of the protagonist. Because this percentage is significantly higher in books with female protagonists, male readers have the opportunity to identify with characters of their own gender even in books where they cannot self-identify with the protagonist.

While almost one-third of the well-developed characters in books with male protagonists are female, a thorough analysis of the content and structure of these books reveals yet another concern. In four of the six books with male protagonists, the protagonist is clearly described as an “antihero” but becomes a traditional hero over the course of the text. The other two books with male protagonists fit this model to a lesser extent. Besides the depiction of the main characters, the structure of these books fits the model of the traditional “hero story” as well (Hourihan 1997). As in hero stories, there is

a nearly absolute focus on the protagonist and a narrative typically related in the first-person tense, which excludes and relegates secondary characters in these books to static roles. With this effect, readers are essentially forced into identifying with the protagonist as they read. For female readers, this reifies the notion that they must act like males in order to have worth and value in US society.

The change over time for males from traditional heroes to antiheroes as protagonists of children's books is a significant improvement that must not be overlooked. Male gender roles have changed dramatically in Newbery Medal books: for example, boys in this sample frequently lack confidence in their abilities and appearances and feel emotions including fear, grief, and love. At the same time, emotions were much more frequently felt than outwardly demonstrated: the reader was made aware of the emotions of the protagonist – especially those traditionally associated with females like the three described here – while the characters in the world of the protagonist were unaware of the emotionality of the protagonist.

As much as these clear trends signal an evolution in the portrayal of male characters in children's books, they are such a distinctive departure from traditional heroes of the past that it must be questioned whether they are purposive changes and thus superficial – and whether that even matters. If male characters are being written this way and filling a void of positive role models for male readers, then does the reasoning behind the writing matter? While these questions lack answers without a clear sense of the authors' motivations in writing, we must accept the improvements and continue to strive for a concurrent evolution of female characters that has not yet fully come to fruition in Newbery Medal winning books.

The five books with female protagonists in this sample feature characters that clearly demonstrate the advancements that women in US society have achieved in recent years, but these characters also demonstrate a higher ratio of traditional to progressive characteristics and activities than was expected. While the female characters frequently learn important lessons within the books about self-worth and the value of families – especially non-traditional families – they tend to react to events in a passive manner and allow them to happen *to* them instead of becoming active participants in their own lives. They were also far less likely than male characters to take actual journeys away from home, especially without their families. For this reason, bravery is a characteristic that is still predominantly male within the sample of children's books, as females do not have the opportunity or need to demonstrate bravery. Similarly, male protagonists were much more independent than females throughout the texts, embarking on solitary adventures and traditionally-heroic tasks in order to prove themselves – both to other characters and for their own self-image.

One aspect of many of these books that has not yet been taken into account in this study is the time period in which the narrative occurs. Because so many of these books are set in earlier times, it is tempting to explain them as just containing “historically accurate” gender roles. However, modern readers must be the focus of any study on texts that are being written and read in modern times.

How, then, can these books – or any containing traditional or limiting gender roles – be used productively? For an answer to this question, I return to the study by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements (1993) that inspired this research:

We do not intend to give the impression that all of the books labeled as traditional should never be used in the classroom. Many of these books are excellent. We

would like to suggest that teachers using these books should use a balance, perhaps having students compare the differences between gender roles between two books. Also, when an historical fiction book is used, students should be allowed to discuss the differences between the roles male and females took in those days and the more progressive views of today. (112)

These respected authors present a compelling argument for using even the books that they deem traditional. In this study, I hoped to expand beyond the traditional/progressive binary that they utilized in order to demonstrate the positive and negative qualities that exist within each protagonist and each book. As long as the students and teachers or children and parents are engaging with the texts and combating the limitations that stereotypes impose on children's perceptions of their gender roles, the stereotypes are exposed and less harmful. A combination of traditional and progressive characters will promote discussion and awareness in order to provide children with a well-rounded model of gender which they can emulate successfully to grow into strong, capable adults.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in order to fill a void in the literature regarding gender roles in children's books, which consists of a series of studies that have not been updated for over a decade. With the history of these studies as a starting point, especially the two conducted by Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, and Clements in 1993 and 1998, this research has analyzed how each of the last twelve Newbery Medal winning books for children depicted its protagonist and sought out commonalities between the texts that espouse both positive and negative gender roles. By using the multi-disciplinary theoretical framework of sociology and education, this study was grounded in the feminist works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the gender theory of Candace West and Don Zimmerman, as well as Paulo Freire's writings on systems of education.

Future work on this topic should continue to modernize the results so that they remain applicable to each generation of young readers. In addition, most of the volumes used in this sample feature a "reading group guide" following the actual book, which could yield interesting results regarding what themes and messages are being emphasized for use within the classroom. On another note, future studies must expand their samples to encompass non-award winning books that are being read as much as – or more than – the Newbery Medal winners in classrooms and in homes. For children to truly be liberated from the harmful effects of media-perpetuated gender stereotypes, awareness of the issue must be drastically increased so that parents and teachers alike can work productively to raise children in a society that could potentially achieve gender equality in the near future.

APPENDIX A

Sampled Newbery Medal Books by Year Won

1998: Hesse, Karen, *Out of the Dust*

1999: Sachar, Louis, *Holes*

2000: Curtis, Christopher Paul, *Bud, Not Buddy*

2001: Peck, Richard, *A Year Down Yonder*

2002: Park, Linda Sue, *A Single Shard*

2003: Avi, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*

2004: DiCamillo, Kate, *The Tale of Despereaux*

2005: Kadohata, Cynthia, *Kira-Kira*

2006: Perkins, Lynne Rae, *Criss Cross*

2007: Patron, Susan, *The Higher Power of Lucky*

2008: Schlitz, Laura Amy, *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village*

2009: Gaiman, Neil, *The Graveyard Book*

APPENDIX B

Breakdown of gender of characters by book							
Year	Title	Protagonist	Protagonist: gender	Female	Female: well- developed	Male	Male: well- developed
2009	The Graveyard Book	Nobody Owens	male	19	7	40	10
2008	Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!	N/A	N/A	21	11	29	12
2007	The Higher Power of Lucky	Lucky Trimble	female	10	2	5	3
2006	Criss Cross	Debbie	female	14	5	16	7
2005	Kira-Kira	Katie Takeshima	female	13	7	14	7
2004	The Tale of Despereaux	Despereaux Tilling	male	9	6	16	11
2003	Crispin: The Cross of Lead	Crispin	male	4	2	17	5
2002	A Single Shard	Tree-Ear	male	1	1	12	5
2001	A Year Down Yonder	Mary Alice Dowdel	female	24	9	20	6
2000	Bud, Not Buddy	Bud Caldwell	male	13	4	20	11
1999	Holes	Stanley Yelnats	male	14	3	29	11
1998	Out of the Dust	Billie Jo Kelby	female	23	7	44	8
	TOTALS		6 male, 5 female	165	64	262	96

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