

Małgorzata Siupik

Information Technology Schools Complex in Slupsk

My favourite characters. Images of girls and boys in children's literature. A pedagogical gender study.

Contact with books, although increasingly rare today, is a permanent element of education. It normally results from school demands (obligatory reading), and sometimes covers literature read voluntarily. Regardless of the motivation, reading is an element of education and socialisation, including gender socialisation. The choice of the issue under analysis is justified by many studies suggesting that "the school system may be doing more to validate gender stereotypes than challenge them" (Neimanis 2006: 74). Basing myself on analyses unambiguously indicating the stereotypicality of school curricula and textbooks, I shall pay attention to educational impacts that are not directly related to the school system, but which are an element of the socialisation process.

This paper aims at the presentation of girl and boy characters from primary school pupils' favourite books. The protagonists will be analysed primarily in the context of gender stereotypes. In this article, I shall focus on children's spontaneous reading (taking into account books not included in the school book canon).

Exploration of this research area is consistent with the recommendations as a part of the application of *gender mainstream* principles in education. In chapter nine of the report *Polityka równości płci. Polska 2007. Raport* [Gender Equality Policy. Poland 2007. A Report] (Balińska *et al.* 2007), Magdalena Środa and Ewa Rutkowska specify nine concrete, detailed recommendations directed to authors of curricula and textbooks, ministry officials and publishers. I believe that the recommendations should also apply to education outside schools. Of particular importance for my area of explorations are two of the recommendations, which justify the purposefulness of studies into the gender analysis of children's books: the analysis' sensitivity to gender/sexuality, and other premises of identity.

My research procedure involved two parts: part one was aimed at becoming acquainted with children's reading choices, and part two consisted in the analysis of images of the children's favourite characters. In view of its goal, part one was carried out by means of a diagnostic survey. Part two complements the work with a qualitative content analysis. The combination of two distinct methodological strategies in a single research project is possible as long as both methods are used in separate stages of the research (Krüger 2007).

The study was performed in March 2012 and covered male and female pupils from grade V of one of the primary schools in Słupsk. A total of 85 pupils participated. 81 survey questionnaires were analysed. Four questionnaires were rejected since gender was not indicated among the respondent's particulars. The questionnaire survey was filled in by 47 boys and 34 girls.

Before commencing the study, I adopted some preliminary assumptions – the research shall focus on children's favourite characters, and I shall perform the analysis in the context of gender stereotypes, trying to answer the following questions: are the favourite characters from books stereotypical boys and stereotypical girls? What do the pupils learn about being boys and girls when they read their favourite books?

Answering the first question, I took into account two basic elements of gender stereotypes, i.e. the traits and actions undertaken by the books' protagonists. The table below, presenting a list of stereotypical male and female traits, is not a "rigid" scheme used for the analysis, but only guidelines for the text analysis. The list of traits was developed on the basis of the available literature.

Table 1. Stereotypical female and male traits (Brannon 2002, Pankowska 2005)

Stereotypical male traits	Stereotypical female traits
Rationality	Intuitiveness
Courage	Timidity
Aggressiveness	Sensitivity
Insensitivity	Tenderness
Ambition	Inclination to self-sacrifice
Imperiousness	Delicacy
Emotional coldness	Empathy
Valour	Submissiveness
Activity	Passivity
Self-reliance	Dependence on others
Independence	Non-logicality
Logicity	Weakness
Strength	Helplessness
Resourcefulness	Modesty
Self-assuredness	Quietness
Readiness to take risk	Focus on the needs and feelings of others
Rivalry	Grace
Creativity	Naivety
Composure	Undecidedness
Resoluteness	Emotionality
Ability to divide emotions from reason	Focus on external appearance
Carelessness as to their appearance	

Source: author's own analysis.

I shall present the results of my quantitative research in a descriptive form.

The reading activity of pupils

30 boys (64%) and 24 girls (71%) answered "yes" to the question "Do you like reading"? Reading books as a form of spending their free time was mentioned by 11 female (32%) and 10 male (21%) pupils. Both boys and girls indicated their mums as persons who read most at their homes. Mum was also indicated by 27 girls (79% female respondents) and 37 boys (79% male respondents) as the person who read books to them when they were younger.

13 girls and the same number of boys read more than twenty books last year. Six girls (18%) and 12 boys (27%) read books every day. Both boys and girls read books mainly due to school demands and for entertainment. The children learn whether a given book is worth reading mainly from their parents.

Which books were selected as their favourite ones by girls and which ones by boys?

82% of the girls and 66% of the boys declared that they had a favourite book. The table below illustrates the respondents' reading choices.

Table 2. Female and male pupils' favourite books

No.	Female pupils' favourite books	Male pupils' favourite books
1.	A.M. Stefańska, <i>Zuzka na spadochronie</i> [Sue on a Parachute]	A. Stelmaszyk, <i>Kroniki Archeo i Skarb Atlantów</i> [The Archeo Chronicles and the Treasure of the Atlantes]
2.	R. Kosik, <i>Felix, Net i Nika</i> [Felix, Net and Nika]	R. Kosik, <i>Felix, Net i Nika</i> [Felix, Net and Nika]
3.	J. Dale, <i>Puppy Patrol – The Sea Dog</i>	P. Bacalario, <i>Ring of Fire</i>
4.	E. Nowak, <i>Pajęczek na rowerze</i> [Little Spider on a Bicycle]	F. Simon, the Horrid Henry series (3 choices)
5.	<i>Wszystko o zwierzętach</i> [Everything About Animals] issued in 2009 as a part of the series <i>Książki z Delfinkiem Dudu</i> [Books with Dudu the Dolphin] published by Graaf	D. Terry, <i>Horrible Histories: The Rotten Romans</i>
6.	A.C. Doyle, the <i>Sherlock Holmes</i> series	H.J. Chmielewski, <i>Tytus, Romek i Atomek</i> [Tytus, Romek and Atomek]
7.	J. Wilson, <i>Bad Girls</i>	G. Daneshvari, <i>School of Fear</i>
8.	K. Gier, <i>The Ruby Red Trilogy: Ruby Red, Sapphire Blue and Emerald Green</i>	M. Paver, <i>Chronicles of Ancient Darkness</i>
9.	K. Duey, <i>Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron</i>	T. Canavan, <i>The Black Magician Trilogy</i>
10.	C. Jefferies, <i>Fame School</i>	M.P. Osborne, <i>The Magic Tree House</i>
11.	H. Block, T. Di Terlizzi, <i>The Spiderwick Chronicles</i>	J. Kinney, <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> (2 choices)
12.	M. Cabot, <i>The Princess Diaries</i>	C. Paolini, the Inheritance Cycle
13.	M. Budzyńska, <i>Ala Makota</i>	M.R. Levin, <i>Rescuing Sprite</i>

14.	A. Maleszka, <i>Magiczne drzewo – czerwone krzesło</i> [The Magic Tree – The Red Chair]	A. Maleszka, <i>Magiczne drzewo – czerwone krzesło</i> [The Magic Tree – The Red Chair]
15.	B. Patten, <i>The Story Giant</i>	P. Baccalario, <i>Ulysses Moore, The Door to Time</i>
16.	J.K. Rowling, <i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	J.K. Rowling, the <i>Harry Potter</i> series (4 choices)
17.	G.C. Levine, <i>Ella Enchanted</i>	<i>Star Wars</i> books based on the films (2 choices)
18.	–	<i>Czas honoru</i> [Days of Honour] – a book based on a TV series produced by the TVP channel

The following school readings were omitted: *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *In Desert and Wilderness*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Six Bullerby Children*, *O Psie, który jeździł koleją* [The Dog That Travelled by Train], *The Little Nicholas* series, and *The Hobbit*. Source: author's own analysis

All the books mentioned by the female pupils were selected just once. In the case of boys, four books were chosen as favourite ones by more than one person. The favourite books of both boys and girls include the *Harry Potter* series, *Magiczne drzewo – czerwone krzesło* [The Magic Tree – The Red Chair] and *Felix, Net i Nika* [Felix, Net and Nika]. Table 2 shows that – apart from a few items – the choices of the boys and girls are not the same. The literary interests of male and female pupils appear to be largely determined by gender.

Which book characters were selected by girls and which ones by boys as favourite ones?

38% of female pupils and 26% of male pupils declared that they had a favourite protagonist. The table below illustrates the reading choices of the pupils participating in the study.

Table 3. Girls' and boy's favourite protagonists

No.	Girls' favourite protagonists	Boys' favourite protagonists
1.	Sherlock Holmes	Harry Potter
2.	Ella (<i>Ella Enchanted</i>)	Albus Dumbledore (<i>Harry Potter</i> series)
3.	Gwendolyn (<i>The Ruby Red Trilogy: Ruby Red, Sapphire Blue and Emerald Green</i>)	Torak (<i>Chronicles of Ancient Darkness</i>)
4.	Marmaduke Stamp (<i>Fame school</i>)	Eragon (the <i>Inheritance Cycle</i>)
5.	Chloe Tompkins (<i>Fame school</i>)	Anakin Skywalker (<i>Star Wars</i>)
6.	Princess of Genovia – Mia Thermopolis (<i>The Princess Diaries</i>)	Bartek (<i>Kroniki Archeo</i> [Archeo Chronicles] and <i>Skarb Atlantów</i> [The Treasure of Atlantes])
7.	Ala Makota (<i>Ala Makota</i>)	Sprite (<i>Rescuing Sprite</i>)
8.	Hermione Granger (the <i>Harry Potter</i> series)	–
9.	The wild horse (<i>Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron</i>)	–

School readings were omitted. Source: author's own analysis.

In my analysis, I omitted Anakin, since he is originally a film character, and Bartek in view of the unavailability of the book in the Słupsk libraries.

My research shows that the choice of favourite character is directly related to the pupil's favourite book. The characters selected by girls are predominantly female (apart from Sherlock Holmes, Marmaduke Stamp and the animal – although it has a gender as well). Boys chose male protagonists (although an animal character of a concrete gender was also indicated).

The gender of the favourite book characters is related to the readers' gender. Girls chose representatives of the female gender, while boys selected male characters. Such choices are related to their identification with the selected protagonist. It is a continuation of the process which begins at the beginning of education – in kindergarten.

It turns out that for small children, gender is the key to the assessment of the nearest environment (other people). A simple principle is in operation: boys believe that other boys (and men) are better and the opposite sex is the worse one. Girls perceive the world in the same way. In kindergarten children, gender affects not only the classification of people, but also for example the remembering of stories (boys prefer fairy tales with male protagonists, and the other way round) (Burnetko, Mateja 2011: 10).

I shall perform a qualitative analysis of my respondents' favourite protagonists on the basis of the data from Table 3, using the guidelines contained in Table 2. Having described the particular characters, I shall indicate whether they are marked by gender stereotypes. I shall complement their description with quotations from the books. Two characters: Sherlock Holmes and Albus Dumbledore, are adults, which makes them an exception in terms of the age of the protagonists. All the other characters under analysis are children.

Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes is rational, conservative, reserved, emotionally cool, and is marked by logical, exact thinking, precision and composure. He can be classified as not only a thoroughly stereotypical character, but a chauvinist to boot, who, however, under the influence of a certain woman changed his discriminating attitude to women to an egalitarian one.

And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit. He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honourable title of the woman (Doyle 1892: 28).

Ella

The next protagonist is called Ella. Soon after Ella's birth, a fairy lay a curse on her, making the girl obedient. To maintain her own separate personality, Ella tries to rebel as much as the magic spell allows her. "Instead of making me docile, Lucinda's

Curse made a rebel of me. Or perhaps I was that way naturally". (Levine 2006: 5). Ella was clumsy, and it was only at school that she was shown how a lady should behave. She was a fast learner, had a linguistic talent, imagination, and a sense of humour, and was impulsive, assertive, and independent. At the end of the novel, owing to her strong will and independent thinking, she managed to break the curse.

Now it was over. Ended forever. I was made anew. Ella. Just Ella. Not Ella, the slave. Not a scullery maid. Not Lela. Not Eleanor. Ella. Myself unto myself. One. Me. I tore off the rag that covered my hair. Then I curtsied to Char. "When you asked for my hand a few minutes ago, I was still too young to marry." I looked up at him and saw a smile start. "I am older now, so much older that not only can I marry, but I can beg you to marry me." He knelt and took his hand. He didn't let me kneel before him, He pulled me up and kissed me again. I took that to signify his consent. (Levine 2006).

Interestingly, it was finally she who proposed to Char, thus acting contrary to the settled and socially-sanctioned (both in the real and the literary world) sexual contract. Ella is a character we cannot call a stereotypical girl.

Gwendolyn Shepherd

Gwendolyn Shepherd is the next character that the girls indicated in their surveys. The protagonist of *The Ruby Red Trilogy* is not a very distinct personality – instead, she is unsure of herself and is focused on her looks – and as a stereotypical teenage girl, she has poor self-esteem. Although she lives in the shadow of her cousin, it turns out that in fact she is "the better one", as indicated by, for instance, Gideon's interest. This is caused by the gene enabling the girl to travel in time. Gwendolyn's uniqueness is caused by an accident rather than by anything she did. The protagonist sees herself as a girl primarily through the eyes of boys. Her image and value are defined by the male perspective.

I didn't mean to, but as I was on my way out I turned back once, quickly, to see if my triumph over Dr. White had impressed Gideon. Obviously not, because he was looking at my legs. Probably comparing them with Charlotte's.

Hers were longer and thinner, dammit! And she certainly didn't have scratches all over her calves from clambering about last night among a lot of old junk and a stuffed crocodile. (Gier 2011: 149).

This perspective is often present in women's lives. "During adolescence as in childhood, females continue to esteem themselves insofar as they are esteemed by those with whom they have emotional relationships. For many women this never changes during their entire lifetime" (Bardwick, Douvan 1982: 172).

There are many references to gender stereotypes in the book – for example, the figure of Count de Saint Germain – a declared chauvinist. Gwendolyn is amused by the Count's attitude and considers his chauvinistic beliefs a weakness of character. The Count describes his attitude to women in the following way:

I'd say the female blood is considerably more sluggish than ours. Just as the female mind is inferior to the masculine intellect. Would you not agree with me, girl?"

Male chauvinist pig, I was thinking as I kept my eyes cast down, stupid, pompous, boring old chatterbox. Oh, no! Was I crazy? I wasn't supposed to be thinking of anything! But obviously the count's mind-reading skill wasn't all it was cracked up to be, because he just chuckled again in a self-satisfied way. "Not particularly talkative, is she?" he remarked.

"She's only shy," said Gideon. "Timid."

Intimidated would have been more like it.

"There are no shy women," announced the count. "The modest way they cast their eyes down merely hides their naivety" (Gier 2011: 220).

Marmaduke Stamp

The character selected from the *Fame school* series is Marmaduke Stamp – a passionate dancer, and a class clown. He is an immature extravert and an optimist, but an injury leaves his personality transformed. He is distinctive, especially owing to his appearance. "Marmalade's long curls, snub nose, and freckled face were as noticeable as his bubbly nature and noisy laugh. Everything about him was larger than life, especially when he'd just gotten a little bit closer to realizing his ambition" (Jefferies 2008).

Chloe Tompkins

From the same series, girls also chose Chloe Tompkins as their favourite protagonist. Chloe comes from a not very well-off family. She is ambitious, hardworking, consistent, and determined. She has her own passion – pop music, to which she devotes herself entirely.

"But this is what I want to do for a *job*," she insisted. "Of course I'll work hard at something I really want!" [...] "I won't grow out of it," said Chloe. She was getting desperate. Her voice was wobbling, and she was near to tears. "It's my Big Chance. You're always telling me to be ambitious and aim high because you wasted *your* chance at college" (Jefferies 2005: 33–34).

The favourite *Fame School* characters cannot be classified as stereotypical boys and girls.

Mia Thermopolis

The Princess of Genovia – Mia Thermopolis (*The Princess Diaries*) – is an interesting character. Her parents are not together, they have never been married. The girl lives with her mum, who is an artist/painter and romances with Mia's algebra teacher. Her father turns out to be the prince of Genovia (a little known European country bordering with France), and Mia is his heiress, i.e. a princess. The book has the form of a diary, and together with its contents brings about associations with *Bridget Jones' Diary*. It is basically a teenage version of this type of literature. The novel contains many references to the bodies and sexuality of girls. This topic is treated in a superficial, stereotypical, sometimes even vulgar way. Most of the problems of the protagonist oscillate around the size of her breasts.

My breasts have grown exactly none since last summer. Mom was totally wrong. I did not have a growth spurt when I turned fourteen, like she did. I will probably never have a growth spurt, at least not on my chest. I only have growth spurts UP, not OUT. I am now the tallest girl in my class. (Cabot 2000).

No boy will ever ask me out. Ever. EVERYONE has a date to the Cultural Diversity Dance [...] Why was I born under such an unlucky star? Why did I have to be cursed with such freakishness? Why? WHY??? I would give anything if, instead of being a five-foot-nine flat-chested princess, I could be a five-foot-six normal person with breasts. ANYTHING. (Cabot 2000).

[Conversation with the school principal – M.S.] Is everything all right? Is everything all right? Hmm, hold on a minute, let me see... my mom is going out with my Algebra teacher, a subject I'm flunking, by the way; my best friend hates me; I'm fourteen years old and I've never been asked out; I don't have any breasts; and oh, I just found out I'm the princess of Genovia. (Cabot 2000).

Every so often, a "Things to Do" list appears in the diary – it contains ten items such as: "6. Stop thinking so much about Josh Richter. [...] 10. Measure chest" (Cabot 2000).

In the context of gender stereotypes and their consequences (including violence caused by prejudices), the following quotes can be considered particularly dangerous:

How embarrassing! Supposing Josh Richter starts sexually harassing me someday (I wish) and I don't notice? God, I'm so stupid sometimes. (Cabot 2000).

Just my luck, the only guy who's ever felt me up (not that there's anything to feel) was BLIND. (Cabot 2000).

One of the younger girls, Nicole, is sort of my friend, but then one night she told me this story about how she was Frenching a boy and I didn't know what Frenching was. I was only eleven at the time, which is no excuse, because so was she. I just thought Frenching was some weird British thing, like toad-in-the-hole, or air raids, or something. (Cabot 2000).

Then Michael asked me if I would put out for Josh Richter, and I had to think about it for a minute. Losing your virginity is a really big step, and you have to do it with the right person or else you could be screwed up for the rest of your life, like the women in Dr. Moscovitz's Over Forty and Still Single group, which meets every other Tuesday. So after I'd thought about it, I said I would put out for Josh Richter, but only if: 1. We'd been dating for at least a year. 2. He pledged his undying love to me. 3. He took me to see *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway and didn't make fun of it. (Cabot 2000).

The book is an example (many similar examples can be quoted here) of the maintenance of the vision of a woman as a sexual object. Interestingly, Mia considers herself a feminist.

And it is sort of hard when all these beautiful, fashionable people are telling you how good you'd look in this and how much that would bring out your cheekbones, to re-

member you're a feminist and an environmentalist, and don't believe in using make-up or chemicals that might be harmful to the Earth. I mean, I didn't want to hurt their feelings, or cause a scene, or anything like that (Cabot 2000).

Ala Makota

Ala, the protagonist of the novel *Ala Makota. Notatnik sfrustrowanej nastolatki* [Ala Makota. Notes of a Frustrated Teenager] is thirteen, and attends a primary school at the time preceding the reform of the system of education – i.e. before the introduction of lower secondary schools. The girl has family-related problems. Her parents are divorcing – they both have other partners or romances. The form of the book is similar to *The Princess Diaries* discussed above. Also, the Polish Ala's problems are similar to the problems of her USA peer – they are related to outward appearance.

I shall become a model. Before I become one, I need to get rid of the pimple above my left eyebrow. I wiped it with spirit. It became red. I sprinkled it with mum's powder. It became brown. Thus, I cannot become a model yet (Budzyńska 2000: 40).

Pete! You are getting bold! I trustingly looked him in his contact lenses and he replied: you are not that far from that, either... Your breasts have not yet grown up decently and they have already sagged... After such a slander, obviously, my jaw dropped all the way down to the sandy lane. My heart was seized by indignation and quiet despair. As soon as I managed to pull myself together, I jogged straight home. I locked myself in the bathroom and I checked my breasts thoroughly in front of the mirror

... Pete is a boor. My breasts are so small that there is no way for them to sag, damn it, there is no chance for something which does not exist to sag (Budzyńska 2000: 67). It was for the very first time that someone said that I was pretty... I consider myself interesting... intelligent... well-read... generally speaking rather outstanding... but – pretty? As simple as that??? Until now no one has ever talked about me so frankly... And now – Ms Asia (Budzyńska 2000: 35).

It is worth having a look at descriptions concerning Ala's relations with boys – the following is a fragment about the boys Ala met during her holidays in Mallorca:

[...] together with Puszka, we have taken lots and lots of photos with our new boy-friends. Against the background of the swimming pool and under palms, at the table, and under an umbrella, in front of the hotel and by Elwira's shop – everywhere, literally everywhere. After all, the entire class – if not the entire school indeed – will burst out of jealousy ... And this is all about it (Budzyńska 2000: 13).

In part two, Ala attends demonstrations of farmers and miners to support them and express her protest. Although in contrast to *The Princess Diaries*, the problems are described in a less vulgar, but more humorous way, they remain strongly rooted in a stereotypical vision of girlhood.

Hermione Granger

Hermione Granger is one of the main characters in the Harry Potter series.¹ The Hogwarts pupil has long, brown, strongly curly hair. She is Harry's best friend. Her parents are Muggles – dentists by profession. Hermione is one of the most remarkable and important female characters in the entire series of the books. She often displays extraordinary knowledge and abilities. Hermione is an excellent example of a pro-school attitude – she is dutiful, always prepared for her classes, industrious, well-read, consistent with all the rules and regulations, principled, sometimes fetching in as far as being petty and overzealous, which makes her predictable.

One of her friends (Ron) sneers at her diligence and dutifulness as follows:

Well, I'm taking more new subjects than you, aren't I?" said Hermione. "Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, Study of Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies –"

"What are you doing Muggle Studies for?" said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. "You're Muggle-born! Your mum and dad are Muggles! You already know all about Muggles!" "But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. (Rowling 1999).

In part three, Hermione changes her behaviour – she more often follows her emotions in what she does. The decisions she takes are no longer justified by rules and regulations, but her own independent evaluation of the situation. She becomes more self-reliant, courageous, spontaneous and valiant.

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first – SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul – you evil –"

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

"Get off, Ron!"

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

"C'mon," Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

"Hermione!" Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

"Harry, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!" Hermione said shrilly.

"You just better had, because I can't stand it if Slytherin wins!" (Rowling 1999).

¹ My analysis takes into account the first three parts of the series – mainly in view of the age of its potential readers. Theoretically speaking, this is the age group of the children who participated in my survey. However, I am conscious of the fact that primary school pupils also read the other parts of the cycle, although in my opinion they are definitely not addressed to this particular age group.

The girls selected Hermione as their favourite character, while the boys chose the main protagonist of the book – Harry Potter, the most popular children's literature character in recent years. The novel is loved by children and adults alike, and is invariably criticized by the Church, which criticizes it for the alleged promotion of black magic (used by the book's protagonists) and occultism among children. There have been many papers and analyses on this hugely popular series – some of them written using critical or feminist discourse. Feminists' opinions about Rowling's books are different, with two interpretations prevailing: one accusing the books of sexism, and the other stressing their progressiveness. The attitude depends on the perspective adopted for the analysis: either radical or liberal feminism (Smith 2010).

Harry Potter

The title protagonist of the series of books written by Rowling is a wizard. He is marked by courage, smartness and valour. "Third – to Mr Harry Potter ...' said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet. '... for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points.'" (Rowling 1997). He shows talent and brightness – and he is a very fast learner. He is also a very sensitive and emotional boy. He is very devoted to his friends. Harry often values love and friendship more than the need of revenge.

Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realise that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. It is in your very skin. (Rowling 1997).

In the article *Harry Potter, Radical Feminism and the Power of Love*, the author quotes an interesting scene (from the last part of the series, which I did not analyse, but it is significant and it is worth mentioning it), when Harry called on Voldemort to feel remorse, which can heal him. This "astonishing act of compassion [...] shocks Voldemort "beyond any revelation or taunt." "It's your one last chance,' said Harry, 'it's all you've got left.... I've seen what you'll be otherwise... be a man... try... try for some remorse.'" (Rowling 2007, quoted after: Smith 2010).

The author points out that according to the boy, Voldemort's actions had nothing to do with manhood, since "Harry's understanding of manhood is one that is fully human, incorporating traditionally feminine traits as well as traditionally masculine ones" (Smith 2010: 107). Harry is a complex character, who possesses traits considered to be typically male, but also traits believed to be female. He can be referred to as an androgynous character.

Albus Dumbledore

Albus Dumbledore – the headmaster of Hogwarts, believed to be the most powerful wizard of his time, is yet another character from the series. Albus has

a fantastic sense of humour. He was a great wizard, while having an unusual distance to himself:

Albus Dumbledore had got to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there. 'Welcome!' he said. 'Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!
'Thank you!'
He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.
'Is he – a bit mad?' he asked Percy uncertainly.
'Mad?' said Percy airily. 'He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes.' (Rowling 1997).

What is also meaningful is the fact that Dumbledore is gay. There is no information about the psychosexual orientation of Hogwarts' headmaster in the books. The author revealed the fact only during a meeting with her readers.² Dumbledore is also a role model for Harry, who shows the boy that one can be both a courageous and compassionate or caring man. "In the Potter books, the right sort of boy, indeed, the right sort of man, is not only strong and brave, but kind and loving as well" (Smith 2010).

Torak

Another character selected by boy pupils is the main protagonist of a series of novels *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*³, Torak – a twelve-year-old boy, who after the death of his father has to cope in the Forest on his own. He is brave, independent and extraordinary, since he understands the tongues of animals, especially wolves. On the cover of *Wolf Brother* we can read as follows:

Wolf Brother is an enthralling story of friendship, survival and betrayal. It carries you back thousands of years to the ancient darkness of the Forest: to a world steeped in natural magic and elemental terror: a world of wolves and aurochs, tree spirits and Hidden People; a world in which trusting a friend means risking your life.

We should pay particular attention to the relationship between the father and the son. There is a very strong, deep bond between them. "Torak had never questioned that before. It was how he'd always lived: alone with Fa, away from the

² The author of the series on the adventures of a teenage wizard announced during her meeting with fans of the books that one of the main protagonists, professor Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts, was gay: "Rowling confirmed what some fans had always suspected – that she "always thought Dumbledore was gay. [...] Rowling said Dumbledore fell in love with the charming wizard Gellert Grindelwald but when Grindelwald turned out to be more interested in the dark arts than good, Dumbledore was "terribly let down" and went on to destroy his rival. That love, she said, was Dumbledore's "great tragedy". "Falling in love can blind us to an extent," she said. The audience reportedly fell silent after the admission – then erupted into applause. (Reuters 2007).

³ I shall perform character analysis on the basis of the first novel: *Wolf Brother*.

clans. Now, though, he longed for people. He wanted to shout; to yell for help." (Paver 2004). Being very attached to his father, Torak found his death very hard to bear. He was also afraid of loneliness.

All his life he'd lived in the Forest with Fa, pitching camp for a night or two, then moving on. He knew the rules. Never skimp on your shelter. Never use more effort than you need when gathering food. Never leave it too late to pitch camp. His first day on his own, and he'd broken every one. It was frightening. Like forgetting how to walk. (Paver 2004).

However, owing to his brightness and resourcefulness, the boy managed to cope with many difficult situations.

It was twelve days since the bear had killed Fa. In that time Torak had fought hunger and conquered fever, found Wolf, and made his first big kill. He'd also made plenty of mistakes. But he was still alive. He pictured his father on the journey to the Land of the Dead – the land where arrows are plentiful, and the hunt never fails. At least, thought Torak, he has his weapons with him, and my knife for company. And all that dried meat. That blunted the edge of his grief a little. Torak knew that the loss of his father would never leave him – that he'd carry it in his chest all his life, like a stone. This morning the stone didn't feel quite so heavy. He'd survived so far, and his father would be proud. (Paver 2004).

Eragon

The last favourite character of the boys is Eragon – a teenage boy with a developed sphere of morality. He persistently sticks to his beliefs, but is at the same time clever and has a lot of enthusiasm for learning. In just a few weeks, Brom teaches him to read, write, and skilfully wield the sword. After his transformation under the Menoa tree, Eragon became a mighty Rider. Owing to acquiring elf's power, he could cast spells exceeding his human abilities. He also had a practical gift allowing him to assess how much energy a given charm will use. He was the best fencer among the Varden and dwarves, as well as most elves. He was a great archer owing to years of his hunting in the forest.

Both Torak and Eragon are stereotypical boys: brave and independent. They have interesting, dangerous adventures. In these novels, there are basically no girl or woman characters, and if there are any, their role is insignificant. We may mention such examples as Renn in *Torak*, who is a great archer, or the dragon Saphira in *Eragon*, but they are only a part of the background for the activity of the main protagonists.

In this text, I have analysed images of primary school pupils'⁴ favourite characters in the context of gender stereotypes. The results of the quantitative research show some small differences between the reading activity of boys and girls. The girls

4 We may wonder whether the characters mentioned by the children are really their favourite ones or just ones they remembered from the recently read books. However, this does not affect the qualitative analysis of their contents and does not lessen their socialization impact.

much more often selected their favourite male and female characters than the boys. We can notice a considerable difference as far as the gender of the favourite characters is concerned. The girl pupils selected girl protagonists much more often than boy characters. Importantly, the boys did not mention a single girl protagonist. This can be understood in the categories of ridicule, which means that a girl may have a favourite boy protagonist, but a boy does not see it as befitting to have a favourite girl protagonist. It is an element of an androcentric perception of reality, seeing the world through the gender (in this case sex) point of view, where the female/girlish is of lesser value. It also proves that boy protagonists in children's books are definitely more attractive to the readers of both sexes than girl protagonists.

The results of my analysis can yield the following conclusions:

1. Both the male and female characters are usually stereotypical. There are not enough distinct protagonists that could be a counterbalance to the ones embodying traditionally understood girlhood and boyhood.
2. The books read by girls much more often discuss corporeality. The girls have bodies, while the boys seem to be bodiless. The female characters are more focused on their appearance – they want to look good and want others to like them. Boys do not face similar problems. The books normalise the most traditional and conservative version of girlhood. The omnipresent “girls’ bodies” are accompanied by their presentation as sexual objects. I find such objectification in children’s literature unacceptable. Along with such notions as habitus, cultural capital, and symbolic violence, Pierre Bourdieu explains male domination in social reality. The author indicates the binarity and complementarity of women’s and men’s traits, describing the social translation of the anatomical construction of sexual organs (vagina as the opposite, reversal of the phallus – i.e. an empty thing, causing negative consequences, pernicious and dangerous) and the sexual act as a relation of domination described by the position of the pair: above/under, active/passive. Bourdieu also writes about “a body socially differentiated from the opposite gender [...], i.e. [...] a male, and therefore non-female, habitus or [...] a female, and therefore not male habitus.” (Bourdieu 2002: 23–24). Bourdieu describes how social constructions are “inscribed” in the body, how the social undergoes biologization, showing relations between nature and culture that are difficult to untangle.
3. The majority of the boy’s favourite protagonists reproduce stereotypes concerning masculinity, which are as dangerous as the stereotypes related to girls. The boys are in a way “doomed” to contact with masculinity models such as macho figures both in literature and in the real world. The boy protagonists can most often be categorised in the traditional masculinity paradigm and the heroic-national discourse. I shall understand masculinity here in the traditional approach as “domination and specialisation in concrete areas. It is based on the dualism of gender roles, asymmetry of masculine and feminine traits. It requires from the man to subordinate other men, women, and children. This is tantamount to the compulsion of stifling feelings and emotions” (Arcimowicz 2003: 28). Representations of masculinity in the traditional paradigm go hand in hand with the stereotypical perception of masculinity.

4. It is worth turning attention to the fact that the boys chose "magical" protagonists as their favourite ones (all four protagonists under analysis – Harry Potter, Eragon, Torak, Albus Dumbledore – are "magical") more often than the girls, who instead selected girl protagonists closer to daily life (three out of eight protagonists under analysis could be described as "non-real" ones: Hermione Granger, Ella, and Gwendolyn Shepard). What can, therefore, a potential reader coming into contact with characters from the "real" and "magical" worlds learn about being a boy or a girl? Selecting "magical" characters, boys have a chance to identify themselves with the masculine characters inscribed into the traditional discourse of masculinity. Such an understanding of masculinity is tantamount to the stereotype of a man. This is perhaps related to social changes in the area of social roles in modern societies, where such a type of masculinity is no longer the dominating one. The need of maintaining one's *status quo* in the area of the gender-based binary division of traits and duties is transferred to the fictitious world. Children's literature reflects the traditional division of gender roles and guards the sociocultural order, contributing to the reproduction of gender stereotypes, while the "reality" undergoes transformations in this area. The boys looking for distinct models of masculinity in literature become familiar with the traditional paradigm and "learn" masculinity in its patriarchal version.

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Summary

My Favourite Characters – Images of Girls and Boys in Children's Literature. A Pedagogical Gender Study

The purpose of the text is to present the characters of girls and boys in the favourite books indicated by elementary school students. These book's characters are analysed primarily in terms of gender stereotypes. The contact of the child with a book is an indispensable part of school education (required reading) while going beyond the framework of formal education (reading of choice). The text also points to the importance of reading in the educational process, particularly for gender education in the context of the formation of social gender roles.

Keywords

gender stereotypes, gender education, children's reading

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska

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