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Female Protagonists & Female Hero's Journey

I grew up reading novels handed down from my older sister and so my literature infused world was heavily influenced by her own. One of the authors that my sister was completely enraptured with is Lurlene McDaniel, and she soon passed on this tradition to me. For those that have not read her novels Lurlene McDaniel writes in the perspective of female characters who deal with traumatic situations, from dealing with a terminal illness to losing a younger sister to a coma. I was pulled into their realistic world and serious situations and it made me wonder how I would cope in a similar situation. Though these female characters suffered both physically and emotionally, by the end of the novel they found a way to see the positive, or at least move forward in a life completely altered from a serious situation. There is a strength found in these female characters that inspired me to understand how even death there can still be growth, life, understanding, or positivity. But I could only read her novels for so long until I needed a new kind of strength to hold onto. There was a large gap where there were hardly any female leads that struck my interest. Most female character novels were in the romance genre and though I can enjoy a good love story, I wanted something powerful, something that portrayed an independent woman separate from the standard love story. I did not find that until I read *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, where there was finally a female character defending her own beliefs and protecting her family. Up until then I was trying to find similarities and

connections of my life to a male protagonist, and while I did find comfort and similarities in some of the male characters, it never quite accomplished the real need for an independent female character. My struggles as a female in a patriarchal society were never accurately depicted in novels with male protagonists. The truth is males and females in their young adult life go through different experiences, ranging from different hormonal changes, to different social and cultural experiences.

Not only do males and females have these different experiences, but history plays a part on the social and cultural development as well. For the majority of history women have been surrounded in a patriarchal society. Women's rights is still a relatively new concept in my opinion, based on the fact that it is still trying to be rectified and developed in our present day. There has been a resurgence of a powerful, independent female lead in novels, mostly dominating the dystopian genre. However, there have been strides in developing stronger female characters in the fantasy genre as well. It is in these types of novels that there is a higher emphasis on independent, strong females, which has made great strides in recent decades but upon closer analysis the way in which the female characters are portrayed is not always in a step towards progress. These female characters are still connected in one way or another to a male character, and though at first glance they may look independent, in retrospect their dependence is subtly implied. In reality, there is still a need for an independent, powerful female protagonist.

In ancient literature most tell stories of heroes making their journey through obstacles and achieving some kind of resolution in the end. From early on, I was taught Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, where it details the basic step by step journey of what a hero encounters from beginning to end. However, Campbell's system neglects that of the female hero's journey.

Especially since there has been more and more female characters for young adult literature now, it is important for young adults to know what the differences are and why it is important. Once they can understand that there is a difference between a male and female hero then it opens the doors for students to analyze their literature in a myriad of ways. It generally opens the door to a more inclusive understanding of the hero's journey for both genders.

It is important for young adults to understand how female characters are portrayed in the context of the novel, the marketing strategies used by publishers to advertise female protagonists, and the differences between the female hero's journey versus a male hero's journey. There are still stereotypes and standards associated with female characters, which in turn translates to that of females in general. If the cover of a novel depicts a white, blonde hair, blue eyed girl then it sets the standard of what beauty is to young girls. This kind of problem is used in a wide variety of media, but even in stories meant to empower girls can end up backtracking any forward movement of thinking. It is important for young girls to understand the importance of equality and independence. Young girls need to feel a sense of strength, a place to turn to for comfort and for a way to understand the broader scope of the world. Through novels young girls are able to identify with characters and then translate what they learn from these fictional worlds into their own life. I want students, especially young girls, to know that the fictional world has made great strides in changing the female role and perspective, but there still needs to be change. But I also hope that there are female characters who do show weakness, and who do fail, to teach young girls that it is okay to feel vulnerable, but to rely on their strength to move on. My hope is that the next generation of young girls will rectify the subtle portrayals of women and truly create an independent, strong, powerful, but also vulnerable female character for females to look up to.

Annotated Bibliography

Buescher, Virginia. "The Female Hero's Journey." *The Female Hero's Journey*, 2006, vabuescher.tripod.com/.

This source has two diagrams depicting the hero's journey and the heroine's journey. The diagrams detail specific parts in each hero or heroine's journey and certain steps that are taken as a story goes on. There is a brief explanation of specific differences between a heroine's journey and a hero's journey. The source is useful when comparing the two journeys and allowing the audience to visually see the differences. Visual representations are easier to remember, and it makes it more accessible for an audience to recall. The specific explanation of the differences is also helpful when evaluating how female characters journey through their stories. The specific differences of how female coming-of-age stories shifts and female characters come to different trials, temptations, and even different revelations or endings compared to male characters.

Clare, Cassandra. *City of Bones*. New York, NY, M.K. McElderry Books, 2007. Print.

The City of Bones is about fifteen year old Clary Fray. On her birthday she and her best friend head go to the Pandemonium Club, and witnesses a murder by three teenagers covered in strange tattoos and wielding bizarre weapons. However, Clary has one more conundrum, she seems to be the only one who can see the teenagers and witnesses the murder. This sparks a curiosity in Clary that she soon tries to uncover. She learns about the secret world of the Shadowhunters, where she encounters Jace, a Shadowhunter who decides to show her the world she was meant to understand. When her mother disappears in strange circumstances, Clary entrusts the help of Jace to find her. Soon Clary embarks on a strange journey of self discovery, trying to distinguish the lies from the truth.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York, NY, Scholastic Press, 2008. Print.

The Hunger Games is about sixteen year old Katniss Everdeen, who lives with her mother and younger sister, in the nation of Panem in North America. Panem is made up of the elite Capitol citizens, and twelve outlying districts. The twelve districts were formed to represent their defeat from the Capitol, and are forced to send one boy and one girl from each district to fight to the death in a televised event known as The Hunger Games. The story details the struggles that Katniss must face, and ultimately the battle between fighting for her own life or the protection of those she loves. The importance of this novel for the YA audience is to allow readers to experience a somewhat realistic scenario, where young boys and girls are thrown into an impossible situation and must learn to cope. The main character is a female who is the protector and provider of her family. Not only that but she is highly skilled in the bow and arrow. Her portrayal as a strong female character who can has strong combat skills and takes on the non-traditional

role of a provider, allows female readers to find strength and comfort in taking the lead and straying from the normal female role.

Connors, Sean P. "Becoming Mockingjays: Encouraging Student Activism through the Study of YA Dystopia." *The ALAN Review*, Edited by Wendy Glenn, vol. 44, no. 1, 2016, pp. 25–26.

For the purpose of my topic only focusing on one specific section in an article of The ALAN Review. The article mostly discusses The Hunger Games and various dystopian novels and the themes or ideas that students gain from them as well as troubling insights on how dystopian novels depict gender or the emphasis on heterosexual relationships. The part that I am focusing on is the problematic representations of girls in young adult dystopias. In this section it discusses how even dystopian novels that emphasize strong female leads, do not necessarily depict them as their own independent seeker of change or rebellion. Even summaries on the back covers of novels have a normalized standard that the leading lady must have a male figure to either love or let lead her, despite how powerful she is depicted. Though the cover of dystopian novels may depict female characters as strong and powerful, they are still conformed to idealized standards of beauty. Even though female characters have become stronger and portrayed as more independent, there are still standards and stereotypes associated with female leads. I had originally thought that there was more of an influx of powerful female leads in literature, which is true, but there is still unfair standards put on these female characters, though it is more subtle. Now publishers are using subtle ways to market these novels to the mass media, compromising the true meaning of feminism and strong female characters that is needed for young adults today.

Gassman, Jennifer Youngblut, "A textual analysis of the role of women in historical fiction for young people" (2006). *Graduate Research Papers*. Paper 3.

<http://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/3>

This source mainly focuses on various works of literature that analyze female characters in historical fiction novels. For the purpose of my topic, my focus was more so on the author's feminist literary perspective and how reading through the eyes of a female character, or even a female author, is different than reading through the eyes of a male character or author. The source also considers how a male author's perspective on a female character is different. A male author's perspective may take on a misogynistic point of view or it may not fully encompass the female roles. The source also considers how women are portrayed in literature for young girls. The source discusses how female characters are portrayed in children's novels and some young adult novels. It mostly focuses on the roles that women represent in these pieces of work. This source is helpful when considering how female characters are portrayed in various pieces of work, ranging

from children's books to young adults. It is also helpful when considering the roles that women most commonly represent in novels. When considering the role of women in literature, it is important to consider how as children readers perceive women and the roles that are implied, and how that either changes or remains the same in novels intended for older generations. It addresses how our perceptions of female roles are shaped by what we read even from a young age. Additionally, given that this is published under graduate work, the source has extensive research on the topic from various sources, proving the credibility of what is published.

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. New York, NY, Penguin Books, 2012. Print.

This novel is about Hazel Grace, a terminally ill teen who is leading a mundane life. Until one day, when attending a group therapy session with other cancer patients, she meets the flirty and beguiling Augustus Waters. The novel details the difficult and humorous love story of two terminally ill teens navigating their special journey of love. This novel is a more realistic perspective of a teen, devoid of magical abilities. Rather this novel focuses on what how a female character deals with a terminal illness and the want for normal teen experiences. It is a realistic female character that allows readers to consider the ups and downs of life and love, and ultimately focusing on the ability to live in the moment. The thoughts and emotions of the character allow readers to find commonality, and the developing relationship between Hazel and Augustus is relatable to any young reader.

Konnikova, Maria. "Do Readers Judge Female Characters More Harshly Than Male

Characters?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 7 May 2013, www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/05/do-readers-judge-female-characters-more-harshly-than-male-characters/275599/.

This source discusses whether or not readers judge female characters within a novel in a harsher light compared to male characters. The source considers whether or not gender plays a role in a reader's mind and if the gender of a character reveals certain reactions or expectations perceived by the reader. The source discusses how depending on how a character is described places one expectation on the reader, but when coupled with a certain gender, the reaction and likability of a character will most likely change. In most works of literature, male characters who are described as powerful and rich are viewed in a more positive light. However, if a female character is described in the same way, the reader views the character more negatively, thinking that she is power-hungry, bossy, or too independent. The source also discusses if gender does and should play a role into the perception of a character. Rather, the likability of the character's personality should hold more value. Essentially, do readers want to be friends with that character or not, regardless of gender? This article holds credibility since it is published under a well known journal. This article is helpful in considering how female characters are perceived

in society, and then how that translates into literature. Furthermore, the source tries to consider how readers can evaluate a character based on whether or not they would consider hanging out with them in real life. By seeing a character's value in their personality, actions, and thoughts within literature, it removes gender expectation and allows the reader to evaluate the true core of a character. Overall, the source is helpful when considering how gender shapes a character, and how the absence of it is an idea to hopefully evolve as more works of literature are published.

Kunzel, Bonnie, and Susan Fichtelberg. *Tamora Pierce*. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2007.

This source discusses Tamora Pierce's career as a fantasy author. Tamora Pierce has a large teen and adult fan base, and the novel discusses her life and her published works. The source is broken up into three different sections: her personal life, several analyses of her novels, and literary devices used in her novels and along with an interview of Tamora Pierce. The source is useful when considering how one female author writes about strong female protagonists. This source is more specific, focusing on one author and how she portrays female characters in her novels. Essentially, a female authors perspective on what important aspects of female roles should be implemented in a novel. This source was helpful when focusing on Pierce's works and how her inspirations as a young girl helped shape her novels and the need for strong female characters.

Lurlene McDaniel. "Lurlene McDaniel." *Lurlene McDaniel*, www.lurlenemcdaniel.com.

This source is blog about the author Lurlene McDaniel. She is an accomplished author who has written over 50 novels. Her stories entail female characters who go through the motions of traumatic experiences and learn to change and grow into a better person. From characters dealing with a terminal illness like cancer, to coping with a little sister in a coma, these deeply traumatic experiences shape the main character in the novel and learn not only how to deal with the experience but learn to grieve and find comfort through various means. I chose this author as a source because my sister and I grew up reading her novels. I was able to learn how to cope with grievous situations through these characters and many times novels do not address such serious topics in detail. Not to say that boys can not experience the same emotions in grievous situations, but in instances where a female character loses a mother or a sister, the impact may leave the female role lost and trying to find their own definition of what it means to be a woman.

Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna: The First Adventure*. New York, Atheneum, 1983. Print.

In a world where females are forbidden to become knights, Alanna of Trebond wants nothing more than to join the ranks of knighthood in the palace. She convinces her twin brother Thom to switch places, cuts her hair, and takes on the identity of Alan of Trebond. The story details Alanna's training as a page, where she deals with bullies,

rigorous coursework, and ultimately trying to make sure no one finds out about her deep secret. However, Alanna soon realizes that becoming a knight is not as easy as she thought it would be. She battles with trying to keep her identity a secret, building friendships, and accepting her unwanted magical abilities. But sooner rather than later Alanna's destiny catches up with her and she struggles to accept the long road ahead. From the voice of a hot tempered and blunt female voice, Alanna takes the readers on a humorous, adventure filled journey to discovering the trials and difficulties of being a girl in a patriarchal environment. This was the book I used in my book talk and it is the novel that prompted me to look more into other female protagonists in the YA genre. Tamora Pierce writes a powerful and independently strong female character navigating the difficult world of men and knighthood. The importance of this novel is to help young readers find a source of comfort and familiarity with a more tomboy-like female character. It also encourages girls to pursue their goals regardless of society's expectations of female roles.

Priester, B.J. "The Heroine's Journey: How Campbell's Model Doesn't Fit." *FANgirl Blog*, FANgirl, 30 Apr. 2012, fangirlblog.com/2012/04/the-heroines-journey-how-campbells-model-doesnt-fit/. This source discusses how Joseph Campbell's traditional hero's journey arc does not necessarily fit when applied to a female character. First of all, Campbell focuses more so on historical pieces of fiction, and the portrayal of women in ancient texts are vastly different from the portrayal of women in fiction now. Campbell's hero's journey is designed for male characters, and thus not all aspects of the arc can be applied to female characters. In order to make the hero's journey more inclusive, it should consider differences that a female character will experience in her journey. Some examples are: the female characters should support other characters and a heroine's journey should be forward thinking, meaning it should follow a more feminist approach. This source was helpful when evaluating the differences between male heroes and female heroes. Most people are familiar with Joseph Campbell's version of the hero's journey, so when using this as a source for a presentation it has already known to most of the audience. The familiarity with Campbell's version will make it easier for the audience to decipher the differences, while still considering the similarities.

Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*. New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Print.

Lyra Belacqua, a young girl who has been given shelter by the scholars at Jordan College at Oxford University, and her "daemon," Pantalaimon, hide in an off-limits wardrobe in the Headmaster's rooms. Lyra and Pantalaimon learn that Lord Asriel, Lyra's uncle, is about to be poisoned by the Headmaster for mysterious reasons. One night they overhear

Lord Asriel telling the scholars at Jordan about a strange substance he is researching called “Dust.” Lord Asriel is able to convince the scholars to fund his further explorations of Dust, which require him to travel to the northernmost reaches of the globe. Mysterious kidnappers whom Lyra and her friends call “Gobblers” take Lyra’s best friend, an Oxford boy named Roger Parslow. Lyra sets out to look for Roger, but encounters various obstacles, people, and discoveries in the journey to finding her close friend. Lyra makes some startling discoveries about the origin of dust, and the secret experiments of children and their daemons, and learns the world around her is not so innocent after all. The importance of this novel is really to portray a young girl coming of age in a fantasy world. She comes across various obstacles and must learn to overcome them in a world she does not fully understand. Her independence and curiosity is what drives Lyra to make new discoveries and to go beyond the world she thought she knew. In many novels the “damsel in distress” is a female, however Pullman makes Roger the character in distress, and Lyra the hero. Not only that, but Lyra is thought to be an orphan in the beginning of the novel, and she navigates her world entirely on her own, finding parental figures in the people she meets along the way. The novel centers around Lyra as the female hero journeying through her world, making new discoveries about the evil of human nature, the perceptions of different characters and drawing her own conclusions, and discovering who she is and from where she came from.

(“His Dark Materials Plot Overview.” *SparkNotes*, SparkNotes, www.sparknotes.com/lit/hisdarkmaterials/summary.html.)

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