GENDER IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: *HARRY POTTER AND THE HUNGER GAMES*

by

SARAH COLLEEN RIDDELL

B.A., The University of Victoria, 2010
B.Ed., The University of Victoria, 2012

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Language and Literacy Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2016

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of gender in contemporary adolescent literature through the examination of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, with particular focus on protagonists Katniss Everdeen and Hermione Granger. It examines the ways in which adolescents relate to these novels through the lens of gender dynamics and shows how these novels subscribe to traditional gender roles even while presumably attempting to subvert them. Finally, it reviews young adults’ reading motivations and attitudes toward gender, and contemplates the pedagogical implications these findings may have for English Language Arts teachers.
Preface

This Master’s thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, S. Riddell.
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Acknowledgements

I offer my gratitude to faculty, staff and students at UBC who have inspired me to continue work in this field, to my colleagues and students at Stratford Hall that ground my work, and particular thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Teresa Dobson.

Special thanks to my parents, who fostered my education and taught me to be a lifelong learner, as well as to my partner for his endless support.
Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my mother, the strongest female protagonist in my life.

To my father, who taught me that little girls can do anything.

To Oscar, for keeping my head out of those ivory towers.
1 Introduction

1.1 Interest Area and Rationale

My focus in writing this thesis is adolescent literature and literary practices. I’m particularly interested in the ways in which young people engage with written text, and how this, in combination with the rising popularity of female protagonists in the young adult “adventure” story, may affect young people’s social construction of gender. The studies and discussion in this thesis focus particularly on North American society, with an emphasis on Western Canadian secondary school experiences.

In this thesis I will explore the role of gender in contemporary adolescent literature through the examination of female characters in Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games and in JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series, with particular focus on the series’ female protagonists, Katniss Everdeen and Hermione Granger. Furthermore, I will address the ways in which adolescents relate to these novels through the lens of gender dynamics. I will show how these series subscribe to traditional gender roles, even when attempting to subvert them. Finally, I will turn my attention to young readers’ motivations, attitudes toward gender, and the pedagogical implications these findings may have for English Language Arts teachers.

1.2. The School Literary Canon

With regard to the English Language Arts classroom curriculum in Western Canada, Mackey, Vermeer, Storie, DeBlois (2012) state that “the role of selected texts is undoubtedly important, not only as part of the educational process, but also as a means of cultivating students’ appreciation of reading and literature” (p. 26). The researcher team has shown that the collection of texts taught in Alberta remained relatively fixed over a ten-year period, and that students often don’t have the opportunity to select their own literature to read. In the decade between 1996 and
2006, Mackey and her research team compiled reading lists among Grade 10 English classrooms in Alberta. The research included both regular and advanced placement classes and a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, of the 1,830 students in the classrooms studied, 26 languages other than English were regularly spoken. Mackey and her colleagues reported that we asked whether students were allowed to read materials of their own choosing. 46 answers were affirmative and 13 were negative. Of the 46 teachers who gave ‘yes’ answers, 9 allowed completely free choice while 29 said they did not and the rest did not specify. The limitations were highly varied, from the cryptic ‘depends’ to various assessments of appropriateness. (p. 36)

Mackey compared top 10 lists of novels studied in these English classrooms in 1996 and 2006. Interestingly, the lists did not change significantly. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* remained the most widely read novel, with *Deathwatch*, *The Chrysalids*, and *Lord of the Flies* rounding out the top four. Interestingly, the only novel written post-1990 included on the 2006 list was Sachar’s *Holes*. These novels are all written originally in English, mostly feature male protagonists, and do not question issues of gender binaries. Mackey’s research provides a sampling of what secondary students in Western Canada are reading in the English Language Arts classroom.

1.3 Reading Motivations of Young Adults

For many young people, regardless of gender identification, reading can be an integral part of growing up. Secondary school students explore literature in the classroom, and many texts that students read contain painful and complicated issues. Adolescents who read recreationally report that reading can function as both an escape from everyday life and a chance to work through tough issues that they may otherwise not feel comfortable outwardly exploring
In “What Teachers Can Learn About Reading Motivation Through Conversations with Children” (2013), Edmunds demonstrates that students’ reading motivation plays a key role in learning, and that this “frequently makes the difference between learning that is temporary and superficial and learning that is permanent and internalized” (p. 414). Through conversations with 837 students of varying ages, Edmunds identifies and categorizes several patterns in her research study. Personal development through literature is identified in cases where “frequent mention of personal interests indicated that children’s reading motivation was influenced by their own interests” (p. 416). Edmunds recommends that teachers and parents “provide books on many different topics that match the interests of the children” (p. 417). This, in many ways, puts the onus on adults to expose youth to various forms of literature to encourage an exploration of self. Edmunds points to the opportunity for students to read teacher-created “special” book collections, such as a particular author’s work or commonly themed works.

The importance of individual choice is a common theme during Edmunds’ (2013) discussions with the children:

when sharing the narrative text they were reading, 84% of the children discussed books they had selected themselves, while only 16% discussed books that were assigned by teachers. It appears the students were motivated to read when they were given the opportunity to decide. (p. 418)

Edmunds recommends that in order to increase children’s desire to read, students should be allowed to self-select literature whenever possible. It is recommended that “teachers not only give children the opportunity to choose the books they would like to read, but also allot time during the school day to read them” (Edmunds, 2013, p. 418). This study clearly establishes that
the classroom is an integral space for young people to access and engage with literature. When discussing narrative and expository text,

the children overwhelmingly reported that they found out about their books from the school library. [Their] responses indicated that exposure to the school library (as well as public libraries) positively affected the children’s motivation to read because it introduced them to a variety of books. (p. 419)

Additionally, though individual choice is important to young adults, they “frequently identified their teacher as the person that introduced books to them” (p. 419). The students felt that their teachers were a source of information about a variety of literature, and knew the students individually well enough to direct them to texts that would interest them.

1.4 Gender and Diversity in YA Literature

Mackey and her colleagues have shown how fixed the school literary canon remains. YA literature, on the other hand, is sometimes viewed as better reflecting the diversity of student experiences. Bean (2001) observes, “Contemporary young adult literature, intended for readers between the ages of 12 and 20, offers a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas” (p. 640). Gender is undoubtedly an integral aspect of one’s identity; Bean recognizes that adolescent literature adopts “more recent postmodern conceptions of identity which recognize its complex and multifaceted character,” including a less polar spectrum of gender (p. 641).

Adolescence is a critical time period for the construction of gender, and one of the ways in which adolescents explore this construct is through literature, both that which is read for pleasure and that which may be assigned reading in the secondary school classroom. Young Adult literature as a literary canon explores immediate, relevant societal issues through the experiences of its characters, and, as Bean observes, “adolescent readers view characters in
young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens” (Bean, 2001, p. 638). Therefore, this area of literature lends itself well to the exploration of gender construction in that it is particularly and significantly relevant to the intended audience (young readers between the ages of 12 and 20), and certain aspects of gender are already problematic due to the content of the literature itself. Katherine Proukou (2005) calls Young Adult literature “much more” than a rite of passage:

It is about life, its histories and potentialities, transformations and choices; it is about conflicts between the claim of the individual and the claims of culture (Freud); it is about life’s fantastic flux of being. It is about new beginnings and other directions; of young heroes who wind up threads and carry wisdom. (p. 63)

At a time in which young people are developing critical thinking skills, it is imperative to utilize exploration mediums such as literature to facilitate this process.

And yet, in terms of gender diversity, Blackburn (2005) also argues that most contemporary adolescent literature largely subscribes to heteronormative notions of gender, and notes that literary scholars largely ignore any literary interpretation beyond heteronormative gender identity when examining Young Adult literature. Furthermore, Blackburn believes that the experiences of young adults who identify as LGBTQ students “illustrate the significance of understanding gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender” (p. 398).

The purpose of this study is to trouble the notion of a dichotomous gender construct within contemporary adolescent literature, with particular reference to the construct of gender roles and gender stereotypes in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and JK Rowling’s *Harry
The Potter series. Both these bodies of work are regarded as innovative in that they feature a strong female protagonist. Yet, if gender is viewed as a continuum or spectrum, are the novels truly innovative, or are they perpetuating stereotypes even as they strive to break them by upholding a traditional gender dichotomy? How does the construct of gender presented in the novels affect students’ level of engagement with the text, and how can we fit this into a broader context in examining secondary literature and literary practices?

Coats (2012) suggests that male and female youth respond to literature differently: “One reason for this stark divide between female and male reading perspectives may be that the literature itself is infused with gender stereotypes” (pp. 142-143). She notes that when reading texts that subscribe to heteronormative gender roles, boys’ and girls’ reading logs show very different connection with male and female characters: boys are “practical and judgmental” and girls are “nurturing and patient” (Coats, 2012, p. 142). Because of this, Coats advocates for “teaching of YA texts that complicate the social construction of gender in ways that raise questions rather than assume answers about identity and empowerment” (p. 143). In Un/Popular Fictions, Moss (1989) argues

there is something deeply problematic about reading girls in school as always endangered, as the special object of our concern, as being unable on their own to engage successfully in society. Positioning girls as "lack" is not particularly helpful to girls and can in fact perpetuate the very disempowered status we are concerned about. (p. 8)

If Young Adult literature is an essential tool for exploring the human condition, with particular emphasis on gaining a fluid perspective and full understanding of its complications and complexities, it is imperative to critically examine popular contemporary Young Adult literature in order to understand its influence on its target audience.
In the contemporary moment, young people are being called upon to challenge injustice and navigate through difficult social issues, many of which trouble traditional gender roles. Coats (2012) observes, “Neither boys nor girls can effectively engage with social justice when they rely on stereotypes about gender and feminism” (p. 141). The process of reading literature that may trouble traditional gender dichotomies helps young people engage in discussion of social justice issues related to gender.
2 Gender Theory

In this chapter, I will review theory related to the question of gender as a social construct. Before doing so, I will define terms used in this thesis.

2.1 Defining Sex and Gender

To contextualize the notions of gender troubled in this thesis, it is important to clarify how the terms “gender” and sex have been used. An early concept of gender was conceptualized in 1972 by Oakley:

for many people, the terms “gender” and “sex” are used interchangeably, and thus incorrectly. This idea has become so common, particularly in Western societies, that it is rarely questioned. We are born, assigned a sex, and sent out into the world. For many people, this is cause for little, if any dissonance. Yet biological sex and gender are different; gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one’s physical anatomy. (p. 16)

Within this framework, biological sex refers to the chromosomal makeup of an individual, and can include physical characteristics such as external genitalia, the presence of gonads, sex hormones, and reproductive organs. At birth, sex is assigned based on these factors. Oakley further explains that

sex is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’, however, is a matter of culture: it refers to social classification. (p. 16)

Oakley believes that psychological differences between assigned sexes are due to social conditioning, and that “there is no research which allows us to infer any biological determinism whatsoever” (p. 16).
The concept of gender was introduced to indicate the established differences between men and women, whether individual or cultural. Delphy (1993) explains:

we now see gender as the content with sex as the container. The content may vary, and some consider it must vary, but the container is considered to be invariable because it is part of nature, and nature does not change. (p. 3)

That is to say, gender is independent of sex. The idea of gender as content is intriguing; it indicates that it can shift and change.

2.2 Gender Identity

An individual’s gender identity can be the same, different or a variation of both their biological sex and their gender expression. “Understanding Gender” (Butler 1999) makes this distinction clear:

one’s innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different than the sex assigned at birth. Individuals are conscious of this between the ages of 18 months and 3 years. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex. Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically change their sex to more fully match their gender identity. (p. 6)

According to the American Psychological Association, gender expression is how others present their gender identity to the world (“Gender”, 2015). This is largely variant depending on cultural context. The World Health Organization defines gender as

socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society
and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places. When individuals or groups do not “fit” established gender norms they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion – all of which adversely affect health. It is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories. (WHO, 2016)

2.3 Does Sex Give Rise To Gender?

According to gender theory, gender and sex should be completely independent of one another. However, as Delphy points out, “sex comes first, chronologically” and “the very fact of suggesting or admitting the precedence of sex, even implicitly, leads to one being located, objectively, in a theory where sex causes or explains gender” (pp. 3-4). Essentially, according to Delphy, one should be able to exist without the other, yet an individual needs to have a body (and thus, an assigned ‘sex’) to have a gender; an individual with a different gender identification than biological sex may therefore end up fighting against what they are assigned at birth.

2.4 The Gender Spectrum

Current thinking portrays gender as a spectrum. In “Understanding Gender” (Butler 1999), the spectrum is described as furthering the idea of sex and gender as independent ideas. Beyond anatomy, there are multiple domains defining gender. In turn, these domains can be independently characterized across a range of possibilities. Instead of the static, binary model produced through a solely physical understanding of gender, a far richer tapestry of biology, gender expression, and gender identity intersect in a multidimensional array of possibilities. (p. 2)
The gender spectrum remains problematic, however, because, as Monro (2005) notes, in Western society many still assess gender based on binaries in the construct of the spectrum, with “male” on one end and “female” on the other (p. 6). In this way, the gender spectrum still subscribes to traditional notions of gender, reinforcing a dichotomous understanding of what it means to assign a gendered identity.

2.5 Gender Privilege

In North American society, when an individual is considered to be “typically gendered” or “cisgendered” (that is, their birth-assigned sex matches their gender identification), they benefit from what Butler’s “Understanding Gender” (1999) refers to as gender privilege: for individuals whose biological sex, gender expression, and gender identity neatly align, often referred to as “cisgender” there is a level of congruence as they encounter the world around them. Like many forms of social privilege, this is frequently an unexamined aspect of their lives. (p. 2)

Additionally, gender privilege facilitates the idea of gender as a factor in conception of power.

The concept of gender privilege is integral to this thesis, and will be examined in the context of Harry Potter and The Hunger Games in later chapters.

2.6 Gender Theory

In her analysis of gender as a construct, Butler asserts that “gender is used to support defining institutions, such as compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. 20). Heterosexuality as a “defining institution” refers to the notion that heterosexuality is defined as the most common sexual orientation, and any other form of sexuality would be seen as outside the norm. Additionally, heterosexuality would require all social interaction to be examined through the lens of heteronormativity. Butler further explains that “biological sex is biologically determined,
sexuality is altered in accordance to preference, and gender is a behavioural mode of being” (p. 19).

Poststructural feminism argues that traditional concepts of gender binaries are problematic. The theory posits, instead, the notion of a spectrum: an intersectionality of sex, race, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and gender identity (Williams 1990). Walby (2004) defines the process of “gender mainstreaming” as a “form of theory; a process of revision of key concepts to grasp more adequately a world that is gendered, rather than the establishment of a separatist gender theory” (p. 321). This theory moves away from the binary “male” and “female” construct and towards a much more complex representation of gender as a fluid and multifaceted construct. Globally, there have long been examples of societies that recognize and integrate gender roles beyond traditional binaries common in many western cultures. The Samoan people, for example, accepted a third normative gender: the fa’afafine, understood as biologically male individuals who subscribe to traditionally “female” domestic roles (Bartlett 660). Translated into English, fa’afafine means ‘in the manner of a woman’, yet not all fa’afafine individuals identify as women; they move away from gender binaries entirely. Bartlett writes

Western concepts of gender and sexual orientation do not translate easily, if at all, into a Samoan context. In Independent Samoa, biological males who manifest gender-atypical behavior are referred to as fa’afafine. Based on our own field observations, we have found that fa’afafine are a heterogeneous group in many ways. Most self-identify as fa’afafine, not as men. Some self-identify as women even though they recognize that they differ physically and socially from biological women. In appearance and mannerisms, although most would be considered feminine, they range from remarkably
feminine to unremarkably masculine. Some engage in feminine modes of gender presentation on a daily basis whereas some do so only intermittently. (p. 660)

Deutsch’s “Undoing Gender” (2007) refers to a “landmark” article by West and Zimmerman that explores how the social construct of gender must be continually broken down in order for gender theory to be fully understood. West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that an individual’s gender is not static and inherent, but rather, something an individual chooses to do, as an action. According to Deutsch, “Undoing Gender” changed the focus of the study of gender in four important ways:

1. It de-emphasized socialization as the basis for gendered difference between men and women; it exposed the weaknesses of deterministic structural accounts of gender; it alerted us to the taken-for-granted expressions of difference that appear natural but are socially constructed and reinforced; and it implied that if gender is constructed, it can be deconstructed. (p. 108)

Deutsch (2007) notes that although these understandings are recognized in theory, there is a long way to go in terms of “undoing” dominant conceptions of gender in practice. She states, “to do gender is to act with the possibility that one will be judged according to normative standards applied to one’s sex category—to be accountable to that sex category” (p. 109). Furthermore, Deutsch points to West and Zimmerman’s notion that the “omnipresence of gender as a created system of difference will always bolster a system of inequality” (p. 109), noting that “West and colleagues appear to preclude the possibility that gender could be eliminated or that some forms of gender might be compatible with equality between men and women” (Deutsch, 2007, p. 109). Deutsch does not leap to the imagining of a non-gendered society, though this may help one obtain a complete understanding of the limitations of gender. To do this, Deutsch points out
that “researchers need to focus more on the variations in gender inequality that exist across societies, over time, and even within society” (p. 113). Gender is a variable concept, as is gender inequality and social construction of gender both across and within societies. Deutsch insightfully points out that the platform for change must include a strong foundational understanding of this variance and the subtle nuances within it. Deutsch also argues that the elimination of binary-gendered categories is related to the social construction of power: “Men have more say, and they get more money, more attention, more interesting work, more status and more leisure...masculine pursuits are given greater value” (p. 117). She inquires whether gendered differences exist without the support of these power differences.

Deutsch’s (1999) “Undoing Gender” also challenges early queer theory, which, though focused on the “other”, still puts heterosexuality and the male/female binary in the centre of the theory’s exploration. In order to fully deconstruct gender roles, she suggests there needs to be no “norm” in determining gender.

2.7 Implications of Exploring Gender Using Literature

If I could change one thing, it would be that all people were required to understand that there are more than two categories of gender. That way other kids won’t have to suffer like I did (17-year-old trans-boy; quoted in Rands, 2009, p. 419).

To understand the implications of studying gender in literature, it is important to look into the experience of young people with alternate gender identities—how their gender identity affects their daily life, relationships, and internal wellbeing. Wyss (2004) conducted a qualitative study with seven gender non-conforming youth detailing their experiences in American high schools. Wyss’ research aims to “open an inquiry into the school-based lives of gender-variant teens, a group heretofore ignored by most academics and educators” (p. 709). This work uses
informants’ voices in conjunction with ‘doing gender’ theory to analyze experiences of physical and sexual violence among butch lesbian girls, transgendered teenagers, and genderqueer youth. The author also examines “the impact of this violence on their self-esteem, academic achievement, substance use and sexual lives” (p. 709). Wyss identifies adolescence as a time when individuals “confront social challenges,” and notes that because of increasing awareness of alternate gendered and sexual identities in the media, young people are identifying as LGBTQ at younger ages (p. 711). The social constructs of gender and sexuality are contentious within the high school environment. Wyss points to a range of literature to illustrate this:

While only 9% of heterosexual youth report enduring violence at school, gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers are not so fortunate. At least 50% of these young people lose friends upon coming out, and most face constant harassment from their peers, ranging from being called ‘faggot’ or ‘dyke’ to beatings, rape and, occasionally, murder. (Wyss, 2009, p. 712)

Wyss (2009) notes that school becomes a place of social isolation and vulnerability rather than a place of learning: “Many LGBTQ students spend their time in school not learning but quite literally trying to survive” (p. 713). When a young persons are most focused on simply surviving the school day, they are unlikely to engage with the coursework, whether it is open-ended and carefully chosen to facilitate critical thinking or not. Wyss’s research sheds light on the responsibility of the educator to create a “safe space” for students to learn. It is impossible to expect students to be flexible, thoughtful risk-takers in their learning if their basic needs (including a sense of safety among their peers) are not being met.

Rands (2009) discusses school as a “setting in which students come to understand gender” and notes, “one group that is largely left out of discussions of education consists of
transgender students, those who transgress societal gender norms” (p. 419). She notes that it is a difficult construct to define, which creates a strong need for increased awareness of teaching gender in schools: “Given these interacting concepts of gender identity, gender expression, gender attribution, gender expectations, and gender assignment, it is clear that gender is a complex concept” (p. 420).

Among LGBTQ youth, students who report the most difficulty at school are genderqueer individuals. Wyss determined that in this group relationships with peers are fraught: “not only with the usual adolescent tensions but also with the dynamics introduced when ‘alternative’ gender identities come face to face with the homophobia and transphobia that are rampant in almost all schools” (p. 713). Wyss points to Goffman’s (1959) “doing gender” theory, which suggests that most of the work in gender attribution is done not by those who display gender but by those who interpret it. In this paradigm, a person has to ‘prove’ whether they are a woman or a man only once: “after a new acquaintance makes an initial gender attribution, that person holds the other’s gender constant and feeds all interactions through the lens of that supposedly ‘natural’ femaleness or maleness” (p. 711).

The studies above identify gender as a contested construct and literature as a catalyst to open discussion surrounding gender identity. Gender binaries are based on archaic notions of the human landscape, and so it is important to raise questions about gender identity and how young people use the concept of gender to orient their worldviews.
3  Representations of Gender in The Hunger Games Trilogy

Thomson, Murachver, and Green (2001) write that “language is more than just a set of features. It is a process whereby people adapt their language to fit the situation” (p. 174). In the context of this thesis, with the exception of direct quotations from scholarly sources, I will use the gender-neutral term ‘hero’ to refer to Katniss as opposed to the gendered distinction between ‘hero’ and ‘herione’. For clarity and consistency with the original author’s choices, I will use the gendered pronouns she/her and he/him when referring to characters in the novel, researchers and participants of the studies I cite.

Why is gender still a contested topic in literature? Coats (2012) suggests:

one reason for the stark divide between female and male reading perspectives may be that the literature itself is infused with gender stereotypes, which is why we advocate for teaching YA texts. They complicate the social construction of gender in ways that raise questions rather than assume answers about identity and empowerment. (p. 143)

In the next two chapters, I will analyze two popular literary series that some (e.g., Skinner, 2009; Woolshyn, Taber and Lane, 2013; Berents, 2013) have argued trouble gender norms: Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy and JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series. In probing into these popular works, I will ask whether these novels actually do complicate the construction of gender or whether they re-inscribe conventional values.

Collins’ The Hunger Games (2008) is a YA novel series taught in many secondary English classrooms throughout Western Canada, most often as part of the Grade 10 English curriculum. One online resource entitled “Successful Teaching of the Hunger Games” features lesson plans from teachers in many parts of North America who have integrated this novel into the English Language Arts classroom (“Successful Teaching of the Hunger Games” 2007). Other
sources feature several unit plans on The Hunger Games that focus on social justice issues, English Language Arts curriculum, and physical and cultural geography (“The Hunger Games Units”, 2013). Additionally, Simmons (2012) alluded to a “class on fire” in using the trilogy in American English Language Arts classrooms to explore social justice issues.

When examining these novels, we see expression of gender identity through the female protagonists’ behaviour in perilous situations and the female protagonists’ relationships with significant male characters. We may also examine young adult readers’ reactions to and understandings of the gender constructs displayed by the characters by examining adolescent literary practices in order to gain crucial understandings of the ways in which young people engage with written text.

In Collins’ The Hunger Games, we are introduced to Everdeen, a slightly boorish young woman responsible in large part for her family’s survival after her father’s tragic death in a mining accident left her mother unable to function. In “Exploring the Function of Heroes and Heroines in Children's Literature from Around the World,” Singh (2003) defines heroic characters as “exemplars” of the character traits of “personal courage, caring for others, perseverance, resourcefulness, belief in oneself, and optimism” (p. 1). Throughout the novel, Katniss displays heroism and a deep will to survive in the face of life-threatening adversity, though she lacks or inconsistently displays many qualities traditionally associated with the literary hero. Though she is impatient, challenging and often not particularly likable, Katniss’ imperfections make her a hero with whom readers are able to relate.

Early in the novel, we see Katniss hunting and foraging illegally in order to keep her family alive. Living conditions in District 12 contribute largely to her willingness to break the law, but Katniss is also brave and skilled with a bow. Readers learn quickly that Katniss copes
with her difficult situation by displaying a sense of detachment from all emotion, including kindness, empathy, and fear. It is not that she never displays these qualities—she certainly does—but she is selectively caring and empathetic, and has a sort of dulled control over her fears. In “Scary New World,” Green (2014) notes that “the archetype of the girl survivalist is familiar—she’s tough and resourceful, but kind and sentimental. We are put on notice that Katniss is something different in Chapter 1” (p. 2). The article points to a moment early in the novel when Katniss discovers that a beautiful lynx is following her while she hunts. Though her situation and inner dialogue would suggest that she is lonely and appreciates the animal’s company, Katniss has no issue killing the lynx, as it is scaring off her game. Katniss has been forced to endure hardship after hardship from a very early age, with little parental support, particularly after her father’s passing. She kills the animal because she has no time for sympathetic notions or nurturing behaviour that may come at the expense of her family’s ability to eat a nutritious meal. At 16, she feels responsible for her mother and sister’s survival, and is fearful that her sister will end up alone in a care home or dead if she is unsuccessful in providing for her family. In “The Hunger Games: A Conversation,” Skinner (2009) argues that Katniss is a young woman who is continually figuring out how to outwit her oppressor and secure her family’s survival. Her vulnerability is evident and I fear and hope with her as she realizes that she cannot get along on just self-sufficiency but must learn if and how she can trust another. (p. 108)

This vulnerability muddies Katniss’s role as hero: she is not rock solid in the face of adversity; rather, her need to rely solely on herself, even when it is evident that this is impossible, reveals her to be somewhat weak in this way. Her behaviours and viewpoints are not characteristics of a strong, indomitable hero. However, they are deeply human and understandable on many
levels. Katniss is the imperfect hero. In some ways, the fact that she is imperfect enables young adult readers to identify with her and gives them a platform to explore the complexities of the human condition as outlined in earlier chapters. As young readers connect with Katniss’s internal struggles, they are more likely to explore those pieces of her character and possibly identify similar issues within themselves.

Katniss is inconsistent in her displays of compassion throughout the novel. She is not a symbol of strength or universal love, as she does not display unreserved love for even the unconditionally good characters in the novel. The exception to this is her unwavering devotion to her younger sister, Prim. When Prim’s name is drawn during the reaping ceremony, Katniss boldly assumes her place without a second thought for her own safety; it seems an innate and automatic reaction to protect her younger sister. Her compassion for and connection to Prim is so strong that she gives no regard to placing her own life in danger in an attempt to save her sister. Katniss lets readers know that in these dire situations, her actions are unusual: “Family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing” (p. 26). This further directs readers to examine Katniss’s behaviour, as we are told that it is a rarity. When Prim tells Katniss she must try to win, Katniss realizes that she must fight, though she feels this way not out of regard for the value of her own life, but only for her sister’s sake. She seeks survival, not for the thrill or satisfaction of “winning,” but to ensure that her sister and mother are taken care of. In the novel, Collins makes it clear to readers that Katniss feels this way due to the absence of a male figurehead in the family. Although we see Katniss in the conventionally “male” gender role of provider for the family, this is due solely to the accident that took her father’s life. Ergo, Katniss shirked traditional gender duties only because her father’s death left her no other choice. In this, Collins solidifies the concept of a “woman’s”
and “man’s” place within the traditional, nuclear family. Furthermore, Katniss’s mother is seen as a weak, vulnerable woman, unable to enter the workforce in District 12 to provide for her family in Katniss’s father’s absence. Katniss blames her mother’s emotions for this. She observes, “I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness…all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well…I took over as head of the family. There was no choice” (p. 27). This strengthens the notion of gender dichotomy:
Katniss’s mother is presented in stark contrast to her father. Although Katniss steps in to provide for her family, she notes that her efforts do not compare to what her father provided for the family, that she is very nearly unsuccessful, and that she does this out of sheer necessity for survival. Gale, who has known Katniss from childhood and has a complicated relationship with her, seems to do better in providing for his many younger brothers and sisters. Even when her mother re-engaged with the family to some extent, she took on a domestic role rather than entering the workforce. Katniss remarks that her mother “began to clean and cook and preserve some of the food I brought in for winter” (p. 52). Katniss continues to hunt for the family. Similarly, when Katniss is accepted as a tribute and knows she will enter the arena and likely die in the Hunger Games, she does not look to her mother for Prim’s survival, but to Gale. When she is given the opportunity to speak to her mother, she does so as if her mother is the child, chiding her and demanding that she not return to her former state of emotional catatonia. Conversely, when Katniss speaks to Gale, she is reassured: he promises to protect her family and provide them with food and, if necessary, shelter. Katniss doesn’t question his promises as she does her mother’s; she finds comfort in his words.

In the arena, Katniss displays sisterly compassion and love for Rue, a young tribute who reminds her of Prim. Interestingly, Taber and Woolshyn (2013) note that “Katniss's relationship
with Prim is paralleled to her bond with Rue in the Games, which she reciprocates only after Rue assists her in escaping from the Careers. Collins writes Katniss as a moral player, concerned with fairness even in the face of life-threatening adversity: “since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her” (p. 184). Woolshyn notes that Katniss protects Rue, mourning her eventual death by covering her in flowers “in defiance of the game-makers” (p. 154). Rue is characterized as young, fairly defenseless, innocent and childlike. Katniss notes that she reminds her of Prim at their initial meeting, and yet she still feels that she must justify her desire to warn Rue of the dangerous Careers. Perhaps this is because Katniss realizes that she and Rue will not both get out of the arena alive. Still, a heroine displays a blend of unshakable goodness and strength in the face of adversity. Though she is loving and kind, Katniss doesn’t quite live up to this in her interactions with Rue. As Katniss embodies varied and often internally conflicting characteristics, she is rarely one thing.

In The Hunger Games, the young protagonists are placed in extreme danger very quickly. Katniss volunteers at the reaping ceremony to participate in the Hunger Games, an arena of deadly weapons, bitter conditions, and trained killers. Woolshyn, Taber, and Lane’s (2013) study surrounding discourses of masculinity and femininity in The Hunger Games illustrates Katniss’s expression of traditionally masculine characteristics when faced with significant adversity in the arena. The purpose of this study was to explore how the main characters in Collins’ The Hunger Games were portrayed “using Connell’s (2005, 2012) gendered discourses of hegemonic masculinity, marginal masculinity, and emphasized femininity” (p. 150). Hegemonic masculinity is the theory that gender expectation in society mandates that males must portray the dominant role of provider, protector, and hunter, while females must take on a subordinate role of domestic duties and require protection from males.
Taber, Woloshyn and Lane (2013) conducted a study entitled “She’s more like a guy and he’s more like a teddy bear” in which four participants were provided background education in gendered discourse analysis and then were asked to read each novel in the trilogy independently in order to focus on patterns that emerge with each reading. The research participants, four girls aged 10-13, came together for several discussion sessions to compare analysis of the language used in each novel. The researchers found that

although there is much in the book that may promote critical analysis with respect to class and power, there is also much that provided mixed messages with respect to gendered stereotypes. Therefore, we argue that it is of crucial importance to facilitate critical discussions of the content of various popular culture artifacts in order to assist youth in engaging in critical literacy that will lead to a sociocultural critique. (p. 1022)

The findings of this study are especially relevant, as The Hunger Games trilogy seemingly does not follow this discourse pattern. Participants noted that Peeta represents marginalized masculinity because he exhibits several submissive characteristics and is placed in juxtaposition to Gale, who exhibits hegemonic masculinity. Katniss is the most complicated of the three, embodying both traditionally feminine characteristics (most notably, her naïveté), and masculine characteristics such as dominance over Peeta and aggression in the arena. Findings indicated that she is also sexualized more than Peeta or Gale’s characters. The participants also looked at discourses of important thematic symbols in the novels, such as peace and altruism, inadequacy, manipulation, unworthiness, and uninvited romance. The findings indicated that

while the girls perceived the characters of Katniss and Peeta in ways that defied traditional notions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, they also struggled to accept these unconventional traits and behaviors, demonstrating the strength of societal gender norms
with respect to not only their own agency, but also the ways they viewed the characters.

(p. 1030)

The implications of this study are numerous. First, the authors suggest that these findings indicate the gendered dichotomy of adolescent literature, which can be problematic for readers at an impressionable age. Additionally, they believe that this trend speaks to issues surrounding gender in Western society as a whole. They feel that this trilogy is especially problematic because, in the beginning, Katniss and Peeta seem to shirk traditional gender roles, but ultimately end up in a heteronormative family dynamic, suggesting that this is “the ultimate goal” no matter the circumstances. Further research could be conducted as to the implications of this for young readers, particularly those who don’t identify as fitting within traditional gender frameworks or who have family dynamics separate from the traditional, nuclear family.

Woloshyn, Taber and Lane (2013) wrote an additional article entitled “Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games: ‘Scarred’, ‘Bloody’ and ‘Stunning’”, in which they identified common elements pulled from each novel in the trilogy to explore “how characters in The Hunger Games trilogy are portrayed relative to Connell’s representations of emphasized femininity, hegemonic masculinity, and marginalized masculinities” (p. 152). They found that Katniss represents both female and male characteristics:

her female body marks her as a woman with elements of emphasized femininity while her actions encompass elements of hegemonic masculinity. These characteristics emerge at different junctures throughout the books, with the tendency towards a demonstration of more emphasized femininity as the narrative progresses. (p. 152)
The researchers found that Gale, seen through Katniss’s eyes, is representative of hegemonic masculinity. They note that “hegemonic masculine practices typically are privileged in that they present men as strong protectors and leaders who deserve to be in positions of authority over women and marginalized men” and that “Gale fits this position well, with Katniss describing him as a strong, capable, decisive, and independent young man who provides for his mother and siblings as well as others in the community. As an eligible bachelor, he has gained the attention of many young women” (pp. 151-152). Finally, the researchers identify Peeta’s character as an example of marginalized masculinity, particularly when juxtaposed with Gale’s ultra-masculine characterization. They write:

At the start of the series, Peeta is described as somewhat attractive by Katniss, but also as weak, unskilled, naïve and privileged as the baker’s son who has “always had enough” (The Hunger Games, p. 292). Katniss states, ‘It’s not that Peeta’s soft exactly, and he’s proved he’s not a coward. But there are things you don’t question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Gale questions everything’ (The Hunger Games, p. 296). This ‘gender politics’ places Gale as a better ally than Peeta, both inside and out of the Games. (p. 153)

The researchers also note that Peeta is often portrayed as

less than Gale in context of the Games, possessing few hunting or other survival skills. He is capable of camouflage which, although useful, has seemingly little relative value compared to hunting or fighting. Furthermore, his skill is feminized when Katniss attributes it to icing cakes. (p. 153)

Moreaux (2013) examines Katniss as a ‘modern heroine’—one who has been retold by Collins as a contemporary version of the Greek mythical hero. Moreaux draws parallels between
Katniss’s appearance (rather androgynous, unless she has been made up and styled by professionals) and that of the Greek goddess, Atalanta. Both are described as skilled huntresses, warriors and combative in nature. Moreaux does touch on Katniss as embodying traditionally feminine characteristics—she nurtures both Peeta in the arena and her younger sister, Prim, in everyday life—in addition to traditionally masculine characteristics of hunting, fighting, and providing. The article provides specific comparisons between Greek mythology and Katniss’s gender identity within *The Hunger Games*, but I think its inherent value is to provide a sense of how gender identity is expressed through Katniss using specific examples from the novel, such as her embodiment of both “the role of provider—typically masculine – and the role of nurturer—typically feminine” (p. 1). In the absence of any functional parent, Katniss fulfills the role of both father and mother for Prim. Moreaux is also careful to note that Katniss is not on a traditional ‘heroic quest’ found in Greek mythology. This research provides a strong foundation with which to conduct further inquiry into the novel and Katniss as she relates to other important characters.

After she is chosen to compete in the Hunger Games, Katniss is required to achieve a more feminine appearance that will endear her to the crowd watching. This begins with the removal of body hair. Katniss describes the experience as follows:

I grit my teeth as Venia, a woman with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows, yanks a strip of fabric from my leg, tearing the hair out beneath it. ‘Sorry…you’re just so hairy!’ My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. My skin feels sore, and intensely vulnerable. (p. 61)
When she is finished with the hair removal, “the three step back and admire their work. ‘Excellent! You look almost like a human being now’” (p. 62).

The deep vulnerability Katniss feels at being stripped of her body hair in an attempt to feminize her is reminiscent of the traditional gender binary seen in earlier dystopian literature, such as Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). By calling attention to her feelings, Collins challenges readers to sympathize with Katniss’s vulnerabilities and question whether gender is truly “equal” in this dystopian society. Having visible body hair is viewed as masculine, and Katniss’s distaste for the forced removal of her body hair calls this viewpoint into question. Katniss’s stylist, Cinna, though portrayed as a kind man, “walks all around my naked body, not touching me, but taking in every inch of it with his eyes” (Collins 64). Katniss clearly dislikes this intense scrutiny of her body. She does not outwardly resist, but rather, shares her inner distaste with the readers while she “grits her teeth” and allows the stylists to violate her in the name of femininity. Even more disturbing is that the removal of body hair makes Katniss appear more childlike and vulnerable. Venia suggests that the beautification makes her look almost human, as if having visible body hair made Katniss less than a woman. Katniss, on the other hand, clearly identifies that this process makes her feel less herself and thus, less human.

This is further discussed during the makeup process Katniss is subjected to, which completely changes her appearance. Katniss tells us that the stylists

erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out. Huge dark eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink...the creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. (p. 120)
Katniss as she knows herself is gone; body hair is removed and her facial features are altered beyond her own recognition. She feels as if she has been made subhuman: a creature from another world. This feeling shows readers that Katniss’s idea of her identity is significantly affected by the forced shift in her outward appearance. We do not hear of a similar experience from Peeta, suggesting that Katniss’s identification as female meant that she needed more aesthetic changes to make her worthy of the Captiol’s acceptance.

Haymitch, who refers to Peeta by his name, refers to Katniss as “Sweetheart.” The neglect of Haymitch to refer to Katniss by her proper name within the framework of the Hunger Games may be indicative of his patronizing belief that she will not survive long enough to be worthy of being addressed as an individual. Katniss responds to this by explaining, “somehow Haymitch calling me Sweetheart ticks me off enough that I’m at least able to speak” (p. 106). In this regard, Katniss draws strength from being patronized, and thus demonstrates she is indeed a forceful character, independent of her mistreatment. She states this explicitly when Peeta adopts Haymitch’s nickname for her as well: “Peeta smiles at me, sad and mocking. ‘Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart.’ It’s like a slap in the face; his use of Haymitch’s patronizing endearment” (p. 142). Interestingly, Katniss is referred to by the dehumanizing nickname “sweetheart” only once more in the novel—when she stumbles upon a weakened Peeta, he asks her, “here to finish me off, sweetheart?” (p. 252). In yet another feat of strength, Katniss immediately risks her own life to save Peeta’s.

Because of her traditionally “masculine” character traits, Katniss is continually seen as in need of Peeta’s finesse to come across as a likeable female tribute to her audience. Haymitch instructs her to adopt a falsely cheerfully persona; he asks her to delight him with her charm.
When that doesn’t work, he defines humility as “acting like you can’t believe a little girl from District Twelve has done this well” (p. 118). Katniss remarks,

> At once, it’s clear I cannot gush. We try me playing cocky, but I just don’t have the arrogance. I’m not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or mysterious. By the end of the session, I am no one at all. A nasty edge crept into [Haymitch’s] voice. ‘I give up, sweetheart. Just answer the questions’. (p. 118)

Katniss’s remark that “I am no one at all” at this stage in the novel’s development is poignant. She has just experienced an undoubtedly traumatic event at the Reaping, yet she takes her younger sister’s position as Tribute without a significant amount of explanation of this trauma to readers. It is her experiences during the initial phases of the grooming, physical alteration, and coaching by Haymitch in order to prepare to face the viewers of the Hunger Games that Katniss’s signals to readers become truly horrifying. During the interview with Ceasar, Katniss remarks on the “provocative” and sexualized nature of the other female tributes (one is wearing a “see-through gold gown” [p. 125]). Katniss notes of the appearance of the Tribute from District 1 (which is identified as a strong district that often wins the Hunger Games), “you could tell her mentor didn’t have any trouble coming up with an angle for her. With that flowing blonde hair, emerald green eyes, her body tall and lush…she’s sexy all the way” (p. 125).

> When it is her turn to take the stage, Katniss says, “I sit like a lady, the way Effie showed me. Cinna makes the tiniest circular motion with his finger. He’s saying, twirl for me” (pp. 125-128). Conversely, she sees a large male tribute behave in a way she would find more natural and remarks, “if only I was his size, I could get away with sullen and hostile and it would be just fine” (p. 126)! Through these observations and interactions, Katniss shows readers that being
identified as a male tribute would allow her to “get away with” reacting to her situation in a more authentic way. It is in Katniss’s nature to feel “sullen” and “hostile” towards the Capitol (and rightfully so, given the circumstances they have put her in), yet because she is a female tribute, she must behave a specific way, sitting like a lady and employing a personality veneer as a strategy to make herself more likeable to her audience. While it could be argued that Collins’ authorial decision to call attention to this in Katniss’s situation may be in itself a commentary on the challenges of present-day gender dichotomies, Katniss herself doesn’t trouble this notion in an outwardly critical fashion. Rather, she attempts to follow instructions and finds herself increasingly internally conflicted as she does so.

When Katniss meets Gale for the first time, he accuses her of stealing a squirrel that she hunted, implying that a female is unlikely to hunt successfully (p. 111). Although Collins certainly does challenge traditional gender dichotomy through Katniss’s expression of extreme dislike for the ways in which she is treated, her frustration is most often only expressed as an internal monologue. Additionally, although Katniss shirks the “traditional” gender dichotomy by displaying “male” associated characteristics, Collins still subscribes to a gender binary by consistently referencing Katniss’s need to achieve a more feminine appearance in order to be seen as attractive, and by comparing her to other female characters who are “sexy” and traditionally attractive to the members of society responsible for aiding the tributes during the Games.

Skinner and McCord’s (2013) conversation about gender in The Hunger Games provides insight into Katniss’s relationships with Gale and Peeta through a gender lens. They note that
makes a leap that few books do, allowing for Katniss, a young woman, to be the hero for all readers, regardless of gender identity…Katniss is, to a large degree, free of characterization based solely on her gender…she’s allowed complex emotion, physical agility and strength, self-doubt, and vulnerability, all while, most importantly, being a woman in a main-character role. Her gender is never the focus. (p. 111)

I disagree with this notion; Katniss’s gender is often the focus, as seen in the examples of her aesthetic overhaul at the hands of the stylists, as well as how she is treated by Haymitch, Effie, and, occasionally, Gale and Peeta. Skinner and McCord feel that Katniss’s relationships with the male characters in the novel, Gale and Peeta, are complicated and potentially problematic, but ultimately necessary as character foils for Katniss. They acknowledge that Katniss’s bond with both Peeta and Gale is important to her role as a strong female, but they feel that her character falls into conventional female gender roles in her alliance with Gale. In her relationships with Gale and Peeta, Katniss “slowly discovers that she must rely on Peeta…and cannot rely on pure self-reliance and grit” (pp. 112). Her alliance with Gale serves to feed her family in the absence of her father, and her alliance with Peeta allows her to survive in the arena. Skinner and McCord identify Katniss’s relationship with Peeta as the more significant of the two in that it assists in her personal growth as well as her survival. Skinner (2013) writes that Katniss is ultimately able to form an attachment to Peeta beyond the need to subsist, and, while never overly sexualized, is able to discover “a new sense of love with Peeta” (p. 112). Through this love, Katniss “discovers new aspects of herself and possibilities for her life” (p. 112). The article also speaks to Katniss’s willingness to take the time needed to explore her feelings for Peeta. The authors suggest that Peeta’s initial declarations of love for Katniss do not sway her: she is confident enough in herself
as an individual, and “approaches love like she approaches everything else: with a practical survivalist attitude” (pp. 111-112).

Katniss’s behaviour in the arena troubles gender dichotomies to some degree, as she, again, embodies both archetypically masculine and feminine character traits in order to stay alive. She displays remarkable nurturing instincts when she cares for Rue, possibly in part because Rue parallels Katniss’s little sister. She tells readers, “Rue has decided to trust me wholeheartedly...nor do I have any misgivings about her” (p. 208). Despite describing herself as “sullen and hostile” earlier in the novel, Katniss develops immediate rapport with Rue, whom she protects with maternal instinct. She snuggles with Rue as they sleep, pokes her jokingly in the belly, and “comes to know Rue, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who forages in the meadows in a district where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours” (p. 211). Through the characterization of Rue and Katniss’s willingness to protect her, Collins shows readers the undeniable strength of playing the role of nurturer. Both Katniss and Rue display remarkable bravery in their home life, where they are responsible for the wellbeing of younger siblings, and both prove themselves formidable in the arena. When Rue is struck with a spear in front of Katniss, she shows strength of character even in her death as she tries to comfort a devastated Katniss. In turn, Katniss risks her life to wrap Rue in “blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white...I decorate her body in flowers...they’ll have to show it. Everyone will see her then and know I did it. Rue could really be asleep in the meadow after all” (p. 237). Katniss completes this act of tenderness with dual purpose: she wants to show love for the little girl who reminds her of Prim, and she wants to make a statement for all of the viewers of the Hunger Games.
In Collins’ third instalment of the series, *Mockingjay*, Katniss’ persona as warrior is challenged when she is tormented by her relationships with Peeta and Gale. She ends up in a heteronormative marriage with Peeta and has two children, one girl and one boy. Collins writes:

They play in the Meadow. The dancing girl with the dark hair and blue eyes. The boy with blond curls and gray eyes, struggling to keep up with her on his chubby toddler legs.

It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly. When I first felt her stirring inside of me, I was consumed with a terror that felt as old as life itself. Only the joy of holding her in my arms could tame it. Carrying him was a little easier, but not much. (p. 389)

If Collins seeks to trouble traditional gender norms through Katniss, it is somewhat troubling that Katniss ends up subscribing to traditional gender norms in a heterosexual marriage, bears two children because Peeta wishes to have them, and that each of these children themselves appear to subscribe to traditional notions of gender (a girl and a boy, the girl dancing). This is particularly troubling because Katniss states clearly throughout the trilogy that she does not wish to have children. Woloshyn, Taber and Lane (2013) suggest that “while the trilogy could be read as taking a feminist stance with a strong female protagonist, it nonetheless also constrains Katniss in heteronormative ways” (p. 150).
4 Representations of Gender in the *Harry Potter* Series

The second collection of novels to which I wish to turn my attention is J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Within this series, I wish to focus in particular on the portrayal of Hermione.

4.1 Hermione and Feminist Theory

Hermione is part of a trio dedicated to fighting Voldemort, an evil wizard who murdered Harry’s parents and threatens the world. Berents (2013) states that “one important aim of feminist theory is to uncover the locations where girls and women act beyond or outside their traditional roles, and to bring attention to the margins of our society where women’s work and activities are often located” (p.142). She points to Hermione’s role as an active member of “The Trio” (Harry, Ron and Hermione) as evidence of this. Berents’ research alerts us to “feminist critiques of girls in conflict and situations of violence and how they are frequently portrayed and marginalized” (p. 142), with particular emphasis on Hermione as “a (girl) soldier; her assumed victim-status because of her gender, and the ties to family and created community that bind Hermione as a fighter in the Second Wizarding War” (pp. 142-143). I agree with Berents that Hermione “provides a vehicle to discuss real-world marginalization and silencing,” though I do not agree that Hermione’s characterization “furthers the aims of both JK Rowling and feminist endeavours more broadly in recognizing injustice and inequality in our own world” (p. 144), unless Hermione’s characterization is viewed through a critical lens by a reader who wishes to explore these concepts (pp. 144).

Berents comments on literary representations of war:
war is often seen and characterized as a male sphere, with men and boys as the main protagonists. Women and girls, if they appear at all, are victims or loyal supporters, and are portrayed in supportive roles: they maintain the home, they nurse the injured. Men make war and women make peace. (p. 145)

Rowling gives Hermione a large part in the Second Wizarding War, though she is credited with a more minor role than she actually plays. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Hermione saves the lives of Ron and Harry several times. She effectively Apparates the trio away from the Burrow when they receive a warning that Voldemort’s Death Eaters are coming during Bill and Fleur’s wedding, and Rowling makes it clear that their getaway is due to Hermione’s actions.

‘Ron! Ron!’ Hermione called, half sobbing as she and Harry were buffeted by terrified guests: Harry seized her hand to make sure they weren’t separated as a streak flight whizzed over their heads. And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione’s free hand and Ron felt her turn on the spot. (p. 134)

It is also revealed that when she realized the trio would likely need to make an unexpected escape, Hermione packed a bag full of survival necessities and cleverly charmed it to hold all of its contents.

“Why didn’t I make sure I had the Invisibility Cloak with me?” said Harry, inwardly cursing his own stupidity. ‘All last year I kept it with me and’

‘It’s OK, I’ve got the Cloak, I’ve got clothes for both of you,’ said Hermione.

(pp. 135-136)
Hermione saves Ron and Harry’s life again when the trio are at the Lovegood home, and thinks to hide Ron under the Invisibility Cloak while allowing the Death Eaters to see her and Harry in order to avoid punishment on Xenophilius for allowing them to escape. Rowling writes that “She had blasted a hole in the sitting-room floor. They fell like boulders, Harry still holding on to her hand for dear life” (p. 342-343). In both situations, Hermione is viewed by Harry and Ron as the key to surviving the ordeal. Similarly, when they are captured by Snatchers, Hermione demonstrates sheer talent by Hexing Harry’s face in order to hide his identity (p. 362). In each of these instances, Hermione saves their lives, and yet doesn’t receive credit for doing so. Berents points out that “Hermione demonstrates not only quick and independent thinking, but also chooses to protect others as well as herself. Her purpose and clear sightedness are the realization of a process of self-determination that occurs throughout the book” (p. 149). Rowling, whether intentionally or not, fails to self-actualize Hermione through her own eyes and through the eyes of others. Rowling also subscribes to traditional notions of gender when Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange selects Hermione of the trio to be tortured for information under the Cruciatus Curse while Harry and Ron sit together in the dungeon (p. 375). Berents notes

it is doubtful that Bellatrix’s choice is random. Rather it is more likely she chooses Hermione because of inherent assumptions about gendered weakness, and also because in selecting Hermione and removing her from the Trio she is also hurting Harry and Ron.

(p. 150)

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Hermione becomes Viktor Krum’s “sleeping beauty” and is imprisoned under water and guarded by merpeople; this is due to her relationship with Krum as she is an “item” that he will “sorely miss” (p. 463). In this moment, Hermione becomes defenseless and vulnerable. Furthermore, through Krum’s relationship with Hermione and his
treatment of her, Rowling places Hermione in the role of damsel in distress, which is in direct conflict with the characterization that previously had been established for Hermione. More disturbing is that Hermione has no perceivable control over her imprisonment. Hermione is teased relentlessly by her peers after this incident: “people had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood” (p. 510). Hermione’s relationship with Krum also angers Ron, for no discernible reason, foreshadowing that he may have romantic feelings for her.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling examines gender roles through an interaction between Hermione, Ron and Harry regarding Harry’s romantic interest, Cho Chang. In this passage, Harry is recalling an intimate moment with Cho, who is upset due to the recent passing of Cedric Diggory.

‘Did you kiss?’ asked Hermione briskly.

Harry looked from Ron’s expression of mingled curiosity and hilarity to Hermione’s slight frown, and nodded.

“HA!” Ron made a triumphant gesture with his fist and went into a raucous peal of laughter. Hermione gave Ron a look of deep disgust and turned to her letter.

‘Ron,’ said Hermione in a dignified voice, dipping the point of her quill into her ink pot, ‘you are the most insensitive wart I have ever had the misfortune to meet,’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Ron indignantly. ‘What sort of person cries while someone’s kissing them?’
Hermione looked at the pair of them with an almost pitying expression on her face.

‘Don’t you understand how Cho’s feeling at the moment?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Ron and Harry together. (pp. 458-459)

In this passage, Rowling clearly divides Hermione’s emotional capacity for empathizing with Cho Chang from Ron and Harry’s, and she makes it clear that this is a moment of gender division. When Harry expresses further confusion—“one person can’t feel all of that at once, they’d explode”—Ron sympathizes with him “don’t blame you, mate” (p. 459).

4.2 Gender Identity in Rowling’s Harry Potter Series

Donaldson and Heilman (2009) look at feminist theories of children’s literature, which “begins with female representation in literature” (p.141). They note that

the Harry Potter books are dominated by male characters. Among the students named in the first four books, there are 29 girls and 35 boys. By the end of the series, there are 115 females to 201 males mentioned. Further, the more important characters are predominantly male. The main characters are two boys, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, and a girl, Hermione Granger. The characters that are frightening, evil, or suspected of evil, are overwhelmingly male in the first four books and primarily male in the later books. In The Order of the Phoenix, however, a startling number of new female characters are introduced and others are newly developed. The expansion is so extreme that it reads as a willful attempt at gender inclusion. (pp. 141-142)

Additionally, Rowling’s novels do not outwardly include any characters outside heternormative gender binaries at all (notwithstanding the debate about Dumbledore’s sexuality, which is external to the novels themselves, and which I’ll discuss shortly). When the characters in Harry
Potter attend school dances, the pairings of dates are always male-female. All romantic relationships depicted, including the marriages at the end of the series, are heteronormative.

4.3 Dumbledore’s Homosexuality

During her US book tour after the conclusion of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, however, JK Rowling revealed that she had always thought of Dumbledore as homosexual. When asked if Dumbledore found "true love" in an audience question period, she observed she had always thought of Dumbledore as gay:

‘Dumbledore is gay’ she said, adding he was smitten with rival Gellert Grindelwald, who he beat in a battle between good and bad wizards long ago.

The audience gasped, then applauded. ‘I would have told you earlier if I knew it would make you so happy’ she said. ‘Falling in love can blind us to an extent’ she added, saying Dumbledore was ‘horribly, terribly let down’ and his love for Grindelwald was his ‘great tragedy.’ (“JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay”, 2007)

Gay rights campaigner Tatchell welcomed the news about Dumbledore and said:

It's good that children's literature includes the reality of gay, since we exist in every society, but I am disappointed that she did not make Dumbledore's sexuality explicit in the Harry Potter book. Making it obvious would have sent a much more powerful message of understanding and acceptance. (“JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay”, 2007)

The New York Times’ Rothstein (2007) discussed this revelation, and disagrees with Tatchell that Rowling’s post-novel identification of Dumbledore’s homosexuality is positive, or at least, benign:
Of course, it would not be inconsistent for Dumbledore to be gay, but the books’ accounts certainly don’t make it necessary. The question is distracting, which is why it never really emerges in the books themselves. Ms. Rowling may think of Dumbledore as gay, but there is no reason anyone else should. (pp. 3-4)

This is what is most troubling about Rowling’s post-publication outing of Dumbledore. In the contents of the novels themselves, Dumbledore is never identified as a sexual being whatsoever. If Dumbledore is indeed a gay character, why not write him as such?

Furthermore, Rothstein notes that

In her outing of Dumbledore, Ms. Rowling seemed to be confirming the smarmy kiss-and-tell insinuations of her gossip-mongering character Rita Skeeter, whose lurid biography of the apparently saintly headmaster is described in “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows”. Skeeter drops teasing hints about Dumbledore’s ‘murky past’, about his not being “exactly broad-minded”, and suggests that in his mentoring of Harry there is an ‘unnatural interest’, something ‘unhealthy, even sinister.’ (pp. 4-5)

Why, then, would Rowling create Rita Skeeter? Skeeter’s reactions to Dumbledore are nothing short of hateful, yet perhaps in this juxtaposition of characters Rowling’s intentions can be uncovered. Rothstein (2007) states

There is really a puckish impulse at work in Ms. Rowling’s declaration, a provocation evident in the books themselves. Perhaps speaking of Dumbledore as gay was just a matter of creating another diverse rebel against orthodoxy. Ms. Rowling refuses to be content with simply rejecting the old order and championing a morally vague multiculturalism. The pure-bloods here are blinded by their pride, but Harry and his friends see something more profound. (pp. 5-6)
Dumbledore’s homosexuality is never openly shared in any of the seven novels in the series. Furthermore, according to Rowling as cited above, the one homosexual character in the series experiences his “great tragedy” through a romantic gay relationship. Though it may not have been Rowling’s intent, the omission of Dumbledore’s homosexuality could suggest to readers that it is not worthy of characterization. Numerous heterosexual romantic relationships between adult characters are seen throughout the novels (Molly and Arthur Weasley, Hagrid and Madame Maxime, James and Lily Potter, Remus Lupin and Tonks). It seems curious that the single homosexual relationship would be glossed over in the prose and, when exposed post-publication, noted to have been tragic in its ending. Meredith (2008) argues that the post-publication outing of Dumbledore at least

makes those unfamiliar with homosexuality confront it in the context in which it ought to be dealt with. While Hogwarts hardly typifies everyday normalcy, the inclusion of homosexuality in popular, mainstream literature is a way of making many confront what is already in front of them. (p. 139)

I would argue, instead, that readers do not in fact have to confront homosexuality in the Harry Potter series, as it is never explicitly brought to the readers’ attention. Goodhue (2008) sums up the situation:

Regardless of her intentions, by making this late declaration, Rowling has created space for readers to imbue adult characters with fluidity in their sexual identities. The pronouncement of Dumbledore’s homosexuality has left the series’ audience struggling with what this postscript means for the Harry Potter canon. (p.143)

Because Dumbledore’s homosexuality is not overtly addressed in the series, Rowling leaves readers of the series in a space of ambiguity.
4.4 Harry Potter vs. Hermione Granger

Fry (2001) believes that in the Harry Potter series Rowling juxtaposes the most prominent female character, Hermione Granger, with the male protagonist, Harry Potter, in order to challenge traditional notions of gender. She writes,

JK Rowling uses and subverts gender roles in the Harry Potter books, with particular emphasis on the characterization of Hermione Granger and Harry Potter, and mentions that Rowling herself has observed that ‘Hermione is the most brilliant of the three Harry, Ron and Hermione and they need her. Harry needs her badly. (p. 157)

In this subversion of gender roles, readers are shown that the masculine hero cannot conquer the evil forces at work without the skill, knowledge, and strength of his female counterpart. Fry (2001) observes,

Rowling’s characterisation of Harry and Hermione is in opposition to the usual characterisation of heroes; hero stories typically inscribe the dualism of male/female asserting that what it means to be human, to be the norm, is to be male, and defining the female as “other” – different, deviant, and dangerous. (p. 161)

Hermione’s character challenges this notion throughout the series—though she is arguably different from Ron and Harry, she is often the glue that holds the trio together to work against the evil forces challenging the wizarding world. Fry highlights that in many situations throughout the first four novels, it is ultimately Hermione that saves the lives of herself, Harry and Ron. For example, Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone’s ultimate challenge is a series of spells and magical riddles, the last of which Harry and Hermione face without an injured Ron.
Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing. ‘Brilliant,’ said Hermione. “This isn’t magic – it’s logic – a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven’t got an ounce of logic, they’d be stuck in here forever.’

‘But so will we, won’t we?’

‘Of course not,’ said Hermione. ‘Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire and one will get us back through the purple.’

‘But how do we know which to drink?’

‘Give me a minute.’ (p. 11)

In this passage Hermione takes the lead, using logic to solve a complicated riddle. Fry (2001) notes, “If Harry had been alone at this point, the reader is left in no doubt that he would have been stuck in the chamber indefinitely; the logic of the riddle is beyond Harry’s understanding” (p. 159). Furthermore, Hermione makes this difficult decision without hesitation, which shows trust and confidence in her own logic. Interestingly, Harry receives much of the credit for locating the Philosopher’s Stone, as he is the only one to move forward after Hermione solves the riddle, and confronts Voldemort in the form of Professor Quirrell to locate the Philosopher’s Stone by himself. In this way, though Rowling identifies Hermione as a force to be reckoned with, she is not given the status of a true hero; Harry, though fearful, ultimately sends her back to tend Ron’s injuries while he faces Voldemort alone. This happens several times throughout the series; though Hermione is shown to be brave, resourceful, and intelligent, Ron and Harry often
send her back to “safety” while they continue forward to face Voldemort. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione uses her Time Turner to rescue Sirius and Buckbeak from execution. Harry, fearful and reckless, wants to interfere in Sirius’ fate too early, and it is Hermione who, as Fry (2001) notes, “keeps a cool head in spite of her own emotional involvement; she cares about Sirius’ fate just as much as Harry, but she is able to separate her emotions from her logic” (p. 160). Not one to embody a damsel in distress, Hermione goes so far as to physically hold Harry back from his own error, and in doing so saves him from potentially fatal consequences. Hermione’s character is regarded by Fry (2001) as “both more sensitive and much smarter than Harry and in this she demonstrates Rowling’s use of role-reversal” (p. 163).

Fry (2001) does note that Rowling’s narrative style falls prey to certain subscribed gender norms in that,

with regard to the portrayal of the lives of women [in literature], Rowling has done little as yet to reverse the conventional gender roles of hero myths; she tells readers almost nothing of the lives of any of the female characters, except where they impinge on Harry’s life…women appear only as they are involved in the hero’s adventures, effectively suggesting that women are largely insignificant. (p. 161)

To some extent, Hermione does indeed function primarily in relation to Harry’s battle against Lord Voldemort, but it’s not clear that this is due to her gender. All other characters, whether male or female, support or antagonize Harry as he prepares for “the Final Battle”, where Voldemort will either overtake the Wizarding world or be defeated for good. Additionally, Hermione repeatedly shows herself to be closer to Harry than Ron is. This occurs for the first time in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* when Ron and Harry argue over Harry’s decision to
participate in the Triwizard Tournament, and again, more poignantly, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Ron leaves Harry and Hermione in frustration as they hunt Voldemort’s Horcruxes. Hermione, though clearly romantically involved with Ron at this point, chooses to stay with Harry to find the Horcruxes rather than accompany her love interest to comfort, safety, and a warm bed. Tucker (2002) views Rowling as “employing stereotyped gender roles, with the boys enjoying the action, and the one prominent female character ‘forever urging caution’” (p. 164). While Hermione does urge caution and display more overt anxiety than the prominent male characters in the series, she does so when it is logical to be cautious. Conversely, Harry and Ron are often shown to be reckless or less thoughtful than their female counterpart. Fry (2001) adds that Tucker

overlooks the fact that it is Hermione who steals the essential ingredients they lack in order to make the Polyjuice Potion [*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*], which is hardly a cautious act, and that it is Hermione’s idea to make the Potion in the first place...he also overlooks the fact that in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, it is Hermione who fetches Harry’s Invisibility Cloak after he is forced to leave it in a secret passage. (p. 164)

These acts of bravery in conjunction with her logical, thought-out cautious nature point to Hermione as a strong character who keeps a clear mind in the face of staggering adversity and danger. This does not make her an overly emotional, anxious worrier, but rather a character that utilizes intelligence and innate sense of her surroundings to strategically fight the forces of Lord Voldemort while keeping herself, Harry, and Ron alive. According to Bell (2012),

common sense would direct the majority of readers to say that the central hero of the tale, Harry, is the obvious choice for leader and vanquisher of evil (the true antithesis of
Voldemort). However, the true anti-Voldemort is Hermione Granger, the scholar and most notably, the organizer. Organization is the single most effective and arguably the only effective tactic to use against an established institutionalized power system.

Hermione’s place is as Voldemort’s true opposite, not Harry Potter. (p. 199)

If this is true, though, why doesn’t Rowling write it as such? Hermione and Ron are both secondary and supplementary to Harry’s battle with Voldemort; after all, Harry is the “Chosen One”.

Dresang (2002) makes a similar statement: she believes that Hermione in the Harry Potter series is intentionally named for the Greek god Hermes, god of science, trade, and eloquence. She notes that Hermione embodies “feminist” literature in that she is “empowered regardless of gender” (pp. 218-219). The term ‘hermaphrodite’ comes from the Latin term *hermaphrodites* or from Greek *hermaphroditos*; it refers to a person expressing attributes of both sexes. Hermaphroditos name is a compound of the names of his parents: Hermes and Aprhodite. He was loved by the nymph Salmacis; she prayed for complete union with him and they were united bodily, thereby combining male and female characteristics. Hermaphroditos is also the god of male and female sexuality.

Hermione, along with Harry and Ron, faces incredibly dangerous circumstances, but as Dresang (2002) notes, she relies successfully on her acquired knowledge of magic to keep the trio safe. While she largely views the *Harry Potter* series as forwarding positive characterizations of femininity, Dresang points to an issue of discourse, namely that

Hermione’s role is constructed by her actions within the confines of the story and by the language Rowling uses to describe her behavior…readers must overcome the language
Rowling imposes on Hermione when she is not describing her in the ‘intellectual problem solver’ role to see Hermione as empowered in her role as a ‘strong, independent woman’.

(p. 222)

She also identifies a weakness in Hermione’s characterization in a “stereotypic part of Hermione’s role constructed by Rowling related to the hysterical and fearful, whining behavior that Hermione exhibits” (p. 222). Dresang (2002) believes that, again, this is an issue of discourse. Despite her characterization as a strong, independent and intelligent female who generally solves problems for the trio, Hermione is frequently characterized with verbs such as “shrieked,” “wailed,” and “whimpered,” which is in contrast to the language used for male characters, such as Ron and Harry. Mikulan (2009) rejects this notion, and points out that more important to Hermione’s characterization of strong female protagonist is that, unlike Katniss, she is not made strong by her adaptation into adventurous roles traditionally reserved for men. Hermione, on the other hand, relies on her intelligence, compassion, and levelheadedness to prevail in dangerous situations. While Hermione has her share of adventure with Ron and Harry, Mikulan notes that “Hermione’s power is not realized through typically male roles; also, she does not attain androgynous characteristics conforming to the theories of radical feminists” (p. 291). Furthermore, she addresses Dresang’s claim that Hermione is often shown to cry, unlike the male characters in the novel. Mikulan doesn’t see this as weakness; rather, she says it points to Hermione’s ability to stay mentally strong while expressing emotion:

This is determined by scientists to be healthier and better for the psychological and physical development of the person, so that the call for the androgynisation of female characters is unnecessary as long as the members of both sexes are accepted as they are. (p. 292)
To her credit, Hermione shirks traditional gender roles in her willingness to exhibit behaviours independent of what her male classmates and academic superiors think. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione is given a Time-Turner in order to take several classes at one time. At the end of the novel, she returns it to Professor McGonagall, realizing that the course load is too much for her. As Dresang (2002) notes, “this is an example of Hermione learning to reconcile her love of learning with the limitations of life” (p. 220). Hermione realizes that she needs to become more self-aware. This reflective nature is not shown in Harry as much, and hardly at all in Ron, who still struggles with self-regulation in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when he becomes frustrated with the process of hunting Horcruxes and leaves the trio. Hermione, on the other hand, shows her resourcefulness once again in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when, after the Ministry unexpectedly falls and the three are forced to leave, it is Hermione who, though panicked, performs an *Apparate* spell, which instantly takes Ron and Harry away from danger. Hermione takes charge of the situation, telling Harry

‘It’s OK, I’ve got the Cloak, I’ve got clothes for both of you,’ said Hermione. ‘Just try and act naturally’.

She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

‘When you say you’ve got the Cloak, and clothes…’ said Harry, frowning at Hermione.

‘Undetectable Extension Charm,’ said Hermione. ‘Tricky…I managed to fit everything we need in here.’ (p. 136)

Harry and Ron are astonished at Hermione’s foresight:

‘When did you do all this?’ Harry asked.
‘I told you at The Burrow, I’ve had the essentials packed for days, in case we needed to make a quick getaway. I packed your rucksack this morning, Harry, after you changed…I just had a feeling…’

‘You’re amazing, you are,’ said Ron.” (p. 136)

Hermione has no problem asserting herself in this situation, and once again proves to be level-headed and capable of foresight. Rowling puts Hermione in situations where her gender might make her vulnerable, and shows that Hermione is largely unaffected by them. After Rowling reveals that Hermione has successfully rescued Ron and Harry from the Death Eaters and had the foresight to pre-pack dozens of items that they will need to locate the Horcruxes (pieces of Voldemort’s soul needed to successfully vanquish him), Hermione is immediately subjected to a gendered assault.

‘Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?’ Ron asked Hermione.

“I’ve no idea, it just popped into my head, but I’m sure we’re safer out in the Muggle world, it’s not where they’ll expect us to be.’

‘True,’ said Ron, looking around, ‘but don’t you feel a bit – exposed?’

‘Where else is there?’ asked Hermione, cringing as the men on the other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her.

‘All right, darling?’ the drunkest of the men on the other side of the pavement was yelling. ‘Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come and have a pint!’ (pp. 136-137)

Although the Trio are very clearly in danger from the Death Eaters, even when Hermione Apparates them to the relative safety of the non-magical Muggle world, she still must endure
vulnerability and danger due to her gender. Her reaction demonstrates that Hermione views herself as an equal, and she controls the situation when Ron and Harry begin to act on her behalf.

4.5 Hermione’s Relationship with Family

Hermione breaks some norms of traditional gender roles within the context of adolescent literature, yet also subscribes to traditional gender roles throughout the novels. Trites (2011) asserts, “Female protagonists are more likely to define maturity in terms of inner growth and familial relations than they are in terms of achieving independence from their parents” (p. 472). This is not the case for Hermione; she willingly performs a memory-wiping Obliviate charm on her parents in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows to protect them should the Death Eaters locate and torture them for information as to her whereabouts. She says to Harry as they prepare to depart,

I’ve modified my parents’ memories so that they’re convinced they’re really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins. That’s to make it difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me—or you. Assuming I survive the hunt for the Horcruxes, I’ll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. Wendell and Monica Wilkins don’t know they’ve got a daughter, you see.’ Hermione’s eyes were swimming with tears again. (p. 85)

In this passage, we see Hermione has used a more logic approach to thinking about the search for the Horcruxes than either Ron or Harry and, without prompting, performed the difficult magic necessary to protect all from Voldemort.
Additionally, from the story’s inception in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Hermione willingly leaves her family to attend Hogwarts and is seen spending many Christmas and summer holidays with Ron’s family and Harry. She is more independent from her family than Ron, who is described as a “mummy’s boy,” and who is consistently fed and clothed by Molly Weasley. JK Rowling (2014) describes Hermione as “the intense, clever, in some ways not terribly self-aware, girl, rarely the heroine and I really wanted her to be the heroine” (p. 4). While Hermione proves herself to be a worthy heroine, Rowling doesn’t often give her the necessary tools to become one. Though she’s remarkably resourceful and intelligent and most often identifies and transposes barriers in the Trio’s battle against Voldemort, Hermione is rarely given the opportunity to reap the glory of her wit. Even when she’s given credit by Ron and Harry, she’s not given praise to the standard that the boys are. As previously mentioned, in the end of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Hermione saves Ron and Harry from the Devil’s Snare and solves the difficult riddle left by Voldemort:

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

‘Got it,’ she said. ‘The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire – towards the Stone.’ (p. 307)

Though she’s the one who solved the riddle, Hermione allows Harry to drink the small bottle of potion and move toward the Philosopher’s Stone while she returns to Hogwarts to revive Ron and send an owl for Dumbledore’s help. This is no lesser feat, yet, as Ron points out to Harry afterward, “the whole school is talking about you” (p. 324). Additionally, when Dumbledore awards House Points to the three for their bravery, Hermione and Ron receive 50 each while Harry receives 60.
4.6 Hermione and Ron’s Romantic Relationship

Dresang (2002) identifies Hermione’s relationship with Ron and Harry as complicated. She notes that, on a positive note, Harry and Ron continually regard Hermione’s knowledge as remarkably valuable to them. Both male protagonists state explicitly in the series that Hermione is the cleverest student in their year. For much of the series, the three friends have a platonic relationship with one another, and “care for one another in an independent manner” (pp. 231). Dresang notes that the friendship dynamic between the three is also interdependent, and if anything, the male characters seem to rely more on Hermione than she does on them. While Dresang identifies many positives for young readers in this relationship between characters, she problematizes several key aspects of their friendship. First, Hermione is largely without friends beyond Ron and Harry. She notes that Hermione has no significant female friendship and is not shown to be at ease with female teachers. Furthermore, her family is mentioned only in passing, which is in stark contrast to descriptions of identification of Ron and Harry’s familial relationships.

While foreshadowed in earlier texts, the budding romantic relationship between Hermione and Ron comes to light primarily in Rowling’s final novel. When Ron becomes upset at the Trio’s lack of progress in locating Horcruxes and their dismal living conditions in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, his romantic feelings for Hermione cloud his treatment of her:

‘Ron!’ said Hermione, forcing her way between them. Ron made a sudden movement. Harry reacted, but before either wand was clear of its owner’s pocket, Hermione had raised her own. ‘Protego!’ she cried, and an invisible shield expanded between her and Harry on the one side and Ron on the other; all of them were forced backwards a few steps by the strength of the spell and Harry and Ron glared from either side of the barrier
as though they were seeing each other clearly for the first time. Harry felt a corrosive hatred towards Ron: something had broken between them. Ron turned to Hermione.

‘What are you doing?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you staying, or what?’

‘I…’ she looked anguished. ‘Yes – yes, I’m staying. Ron, we said we’d go with Harry, we said we’d help’

‘I get it. You choose him.’” (pp. 253-254)

Hermione is distressed when Ron leaves, and torments herself over his perception that she has chosen to support Harry instead of him. Rowling writes that Hermione “curled up into a chair and started to cry” and that in the morning “her face looked puffy and red, as if she had not slept” (pp. 254-255). In the days following Ron’s decision to leave the Trio, Hermione is seen sobbing and isolated from Harry, who, in not knowing how to comfort her, chooses to do nothing. Additionally, when Ron returns, he never truly apologizes to Hermione.

Harry had not expected Hermione’s anger to abate overnight, and was therefore unsurprised when she communicated mainly by dirty looks and pointed silences next morning. Ron responded by maintaining an unnaturally somber demeanor in her presence as an outward sign of continuing remorse. (p. 314)

The significance of Ron’s departure and the emotional toll it takes on Hermione would seem to dictate a more pointed response from Harry and especially Ron, but neither step up to address her suffering. Harry minimizes her understandable anger, referring to her as “sulky” and
“baleful” (p. 319). Ron remembers an earlier scenario when Hermione, angry at seeing him with Lavender Brown, “set birds on me” (p. 318). Neither of the boys seem to take Hermione’s anger seriously, and seem to attribute her anger to the fact that she is female, which further separates Hermione from them and in doing so re-inscribes the notion that gender hinders understanding of one another.

### 4.7 Harry and Ginny

Cherland (2009) notes that in the later *Harry Potter* novels, Harry is engaged in a significant internal struggle between his love for Ginny Weasley and his “responsibility” to save the world from Lord Voldemort.

The fear that Ginny will die in the war with Voldemort and the desire to secure her safety trouble Harry and sometimes work to create his hesitancy to act. At the same time, Harry experiences a conflicting desire for revenge at the deaths of his parents…these conflicting desires make him human, but Rowling presents these desires as problems, as weaknesses that must be overcome…Harry must not be distracted by desire. He must let reason rule. (p. 277)

Cherland (2009) suggests that Rowling has created a complicated character in Ron’s younger sister, Ginny. In some ways, Ginny subverts traditional gender roles—she’s identified as independent, fiery, and unabashed about her romantic life. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Ginny aggressively kisses Harry in her bedroom. Rowling writes,

> and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed him before, and Harry was kissing her back, and it was blissful oblivion…Ginny, the feel of her, one hand at her back and one in her long, sweet-smelling hair. (p. 99)
Ginny has many romantic partners and is not shamed for it, although Ron feels a “duty” to protect his sister. Cherland notes, “we see young people creating social and psychological realities…in Harry’s world, war has already begun, and he has positioned himself as the ‘moral leader’” (p. 277). She asserts,

Ginny’s initiation of the kiss offers Harry the subject position of “lover”, of one who values love above any other reality. Ron’s arrival [he interrupts the kiss] brings with it the subject position of ‘rational man’ who must value duty and the good of all above his own pleasure and happiness. Harry is offered two different subjects positions and then takes up the subject position of dutiful, rational man. He speaks to Ron – and not to Ginny. ‘It won’t happen again,’ said Harry harshly. (Cherland, 2009, p. 278)

While Ginny’s aggression in going after Harry romantically may be a break from conventional gendered ideas of romance, where the woman must wait for the man’s advances, Rowling falters in this when Harry answers directly to Ron, and not to Ginny herself, when he decides he must not pursue a relationship with her.

4.8 Gender Equality in Harry Potter and The Hunger Games

Trites (2009) points to the boarding school setting of the Harry Potter series as integral in setting up a social construct of gender that young readers engage with, as it provides them a place to interact outside of the home and often without direct supervision of parents. The boarding school allows for this relative autonomy of the protagonists, where they can learn and grow in independence. She also determines that the setting allows for exploration of power dynamics, among the protagonists themselves and with the authority figures and adults they must challenge along the way. She also examines Hermione and Ron’s attraction towards one another as a major plot point midway through the series. Trites sees the romantic aspect of the story as a
key feature of adolescent literature as a whole. She feels that the exploration of romantic relationships serves to get young readers’ attention, and that the introduction of this midway through the series points to Western “cultural tendency to define sexuality as the purview of maturation” (pp. 475).

4.9 Gender Constructs within Harry Potter

Heilman and Donaldson (2009) take a more general approach to examining gender identity and construct specifically within the *Harry Potter* series. They see inherent value in these novels for young people in that the gender constructs presented open opportunity for increased dialogue around the subject matter. They note that though both feminist and poststructuralist theories tell us that texts can be read from multiple, contradictory, and even transgressive positions, it is still important for criticism to reveal dominant and hegemonic conventions. Though any one gender stereotype would not be significant, repeated and varied examples are very significant. These gender ideologies are especially powerful because the books are pleasurable and popular. (p. 140)

Heilman and Donaldson note that throughout the series, the number of significant and diverse female characters increases rapidly, yet they feel that Hermione’s identity is not as self-assured as it should be for a positive female role model. Similar to Dresang, they point out her propensity for emotional outbursts. The authors also point to specific instances where Hermione behaves in a self-deprecating fashion—telling Harry she’s not as brave or strong as him, and she hides in embarrassment when a potion gone awry alters her appearance. They feel that young female readers will look at Hermione as a weaker character than Harry and Ron because of these characteristics.
Similarly, Cherland (2009) points to the discourse surrounding Hermione’s character as subscribing to traditional gender norms. She suggests that “Rowling uses a discourse of rationality to mark male characters as reasonable and a discourse of irrationality to mark female characters as foolish” (p. 275). Although the language used to describe dialogue seems to fit within Cherland’s suggestion (in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry “yells” while Hermione “shrieks”), Hermione does exhibit logical behaviour in solving puzzles for the trio (p. 208). It is important to note, however, that her actions and behaviours are not always regarded as logical by other characters, which may be an indication that she is not taken seriously by her counterparts. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione’s concern for the well-being of the house elves is regarded as silly by Ron and Harry, and often met with eye rolls and remarks about the complicated nature of girls. Of course, the notion that rationality and logical behavior are in themselves linked to “maleness” has been troubled by many scholars. Evidently is not a given that “rationality” is an inherently male trait just as it is not a given that “caring” is an inherently female trait. Further, some would argue that available norms of rationality are accorded an inflated importance, or would find fault with the norms and ideals themselves (e.g., Jones, 2004).

Other prominent female characters in the *Harry Potter* series provide further insight into Rowling’s subversion of traditional gender constructs. Ron’s younger sister, Ginny Weasley, is the youngest of five children and the only girl in her family. Rather than portraying a young, immature little girl in need of protection by her older brothers, Rowling created in Ginny a brave, independent young girl. Ginny is athletic, playing on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. When they attempt to interfere in her dating life, Ginny tells her brothers in no uncertain terms that she will be in charge of her decisions in romantic relationships. Ginny and Hermione share many
qualities, as they’re both brave, autonomous, and intelligent. They both, however, subscribe to traditional notions of gender and engage in solely heterosexual relationships.

Ginny’s mother, Molly Weasley, though loving and nurturing to her family, is fiercely protective and not afraid to duel physically to save her family. She famously cries, “Not my daughter, you bitch!” when duelling Bellatrix Lestrange in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (p. 589).

‘What will happen to your children when I kill you?’ taunted Bellatrix, as mad as her master, capering as Molly’s curses danced around her. ‘When Mummy’s gone the same way as Freddie?’

‘You will never touch our children again!’ screamed Mrs. Weasley. Molly’s curse soared beneath Bellatrix’s outstretched arm and hit her squarely in the chest, directly over her heart. Bellatrix’s gloating smile froze, her eyes seemed to bulge: for the tiniest space of time she knew what had happened, and then she toppled, and the watching crowd roared, and Voldemort screamed. (p. 590)

In this passage, we see two female characters fight to the death, without regard for their own physical safety. Throughout the series, Molly Weasley is seen as a mothering, gentle character prone to extreme worry over her husband and children. It is not until Bellatrix Lestrange cruelly taunts her with the death of her child, Fred, that Molly displays physical aggression, which is not unusual in terms of gender roles. Given the gravity of the war Molly is fighting, and her membership in the Order of the Phoenix, Molly could have easily displayed aggression earlier in the novels.
4.10 Veela: Sexualized Female Characters

In books four, six and seven, Hermione and Ginny are situated next to the more beautiful, part-Veela Fleur De’lacouer. Veelas are always female, yet they’re not completely human, and they have a powerful and manipulative pull when they are in the presence of male characters. In Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Harry encounters Veela for the first time.

Veela were women…the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen…except that they weren’t—they couldn’t be—human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind…but then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human—in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all. (p. 103)

They’re seen as not quite evil, but certainly capable of using their powers for their own purposes. Arthur Weasley tells Harry and Ron in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* “that, boys, is why you never go for looks alone!” and Ginny finds Fleur’s effects on the men in her family to be tiresome and irritating (p. 194). Their power comes primarily from their aesthetic beauty—they are described in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as shining, with long, flowing blonde hair. Heilman and Donaldson (2009) believe this overt comparison sends the message to young females to “get a makeover. You are not okay. It is disturbing that the females that are most physically beautiful—the Veelas—are not even human. They are portrayed as male fantasy sex objects able to seduce, beguile, and confuse males” (pp. 152).

Harry and Ron’s reactions to both the Veela and the part-Veela Fleur De’lacouer invert the gender discourse seen in the rest of the novels, and, interestingly, irritate Hermione and
Ginny consistently. At Fleur and Bill’s wedding in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Rowling again calls attention to Fleur’s part-Veela charm, writing that

[Fleur’s] radiance usually dimmed everyone else by comparison, but today it beautified everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dressed, looked even prettier than usual, and once Fleur had reached him, Bill did not look as though he had ever met Fenrir Greyback. (p. 121)

Green (2009) writes

the Veela emerge as the exoticized/eroticized Other in the series valued for nothing more than their physical appearance. Although the Veela can and do intermarry with humans, wizards and witches tend to treat them as highly sexualized objects. Male wizards turn nearly idiotic in their presence, literally enchanted by their overwhelming physical charms, while witches grumble about their beauty. Fleur Delacour, a competitor from Beauxbatons in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, is only half-Veela, yet her effect on men is immediately spellbinding. Ron, after ogling her, states, “They don’t make them like that at Hogwarts!” ([*Goblet* 253]). Instead of presenting Fleur as a competent competitor, Rowling instead relies on gender stereotyping by focusing not just on Ron’s reaction, but the similar reaction of other young men who see her arrival. (“New Perspectives on Children’s Literature”, 2015, par. 8)

Rowling has not explicitly commented on what purpose the Veela serve in the *Harry Potter* series, and as several literary scholars have identified, it is potentially problematic that they seem to exist in the novels primarily to charm and confuse men. Incidentally, Veela are used as mascots for a professional Quidditch team, where they dance to charm the fans, referees,
and members of the opposite team. Do they act as mere character foils, to highlight the strength and reliance on intelligence and bravery that Ginny and Hermione display? Or are they a nod to the traditional folk and fairy tale literary narrative, where female characters only retain the power that they can exert to manipulate the more powerful, movable male characters? Furthermore, what do the Veela show about gender as a social construct? We identify that they undoubtedly fit into the female category of the gender binary, yet they are only semi-human. They marry and have children with male wizards, creating ultra-attractive yet human half-Veela, such as Fleur. Half or full male Veela are never identified in the *Harry Potter* series, so it is not known whether they exist. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Rowling reveals that Veela hair has magical properties, which can be used as a wand core, though they create “temperamental” wands (p. 308). In contrast to the mesmerizing Veela, Harry and Ron make misogynistic comments about a female classmate’s appearance when searching for dances to the Yule Ball.

‘We should get a move on, you know…ask someone. We don’t want to end up with a pair of trolls.’

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

‘A pair of…what, excuse me?’

‘Well – you know,’ said Ron, shrugging. ‘I’d rather go alone than with – with Eloise Midgen, say.’

‘Her acne’s loads better lately—and she’s really nice!’
‘Her nose is off-center,’ said Ron.

‘So basically, you’re going to take the best-looking girl who will have you, even if she’s completely horrible?’

‘Er—yeah, that sounds about right,’ said Ron. (pp. 394-395)

Not all scholars accept that the *Harry Potter* series troubles traditional gender dichotomies. Tucker (1999) argues that a large part of the initial allure and ultimate success of the *Harry Potter* novels is a return to simplistic storytelling that does not delve into the “tough stuff” featured in most contemporary works of Young Adult literature. In “The Rise and Rise of Harry Potter” he notes that,

[Rowling’s novels] have a distinctly backward-looking quality. Could it be that modern children relish the chance to return to some of the popular themes and attitudes that used to be found in their fiction…when the simplicities of the stories read…were generally less realistic and more concerned with pleasing fantasies? As it is, contemporary social issues do not exist in the Potter books. (p. 221)

This is not entirely true when contemplating issues like prejudice: in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, Harry defiantly tells Professor Slughorn that “one of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she’s the best in our year” (p. 70). Tucker suggests Rowling may gain young adult readers by indulging more fantastical interests. However, Tucker remarks that “Rowling improves upon the traditional model, as…within the school boys and girls now mix together as equals. They share common rooms, although not dormitories” (p. 225). Tucker also acknowledges that, “gender roles are stereotyped, with boys out for action and the one salient girl character (Hermione) ever urging caution” (p. 229). It is important to note that this literature
came out in 1999, just after the third novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, was published. As the novels progress, the characters mature, and Hermione begins to give up caution where necessary to enact lasting change in her society. Even early in the series, in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione physically fights a troll to save her classmates. She’s not afraid to do whatever is necessary to protect the trio.

### 4.11 Endings

The *Harry Potter* series fails to trouble traditional notions of gender when the endings for the characters are examined. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, readers are given a brief synopsis of what happened to the main characters 19 years after Lord Voldemort is last defeated. Although both Hermione and Ginny were shown to be strong, independent female characters, they end up in heteronormative marriages with Ron and Harry. It is established that both male characters drove their families to the Hogwarts Express, with Ron asking Harry “park all right, then?” (p. 604). Furthermore, the younger generation of Potter/Weasley children identify another heteronormative relationship: James, Harry’s son, appears and tells his father, “Teddy’s back there, and guess what he’s doing? Snogging Victoire! He’s *snogging* her!” (p. 605). Lily, James’ sister, responds enthusiastically “Oh, it would be lovely if they got married!” (p. 605). This scene re-enscribes traditional gender roles, as both Hermione and Ginny end up married to men with children of their own; and even when the fate of more minor characters are examined, we see no romantic relationships beyond heterosexual male and female characters in a marriage situation.

### 4.12 Conclusions

Ultimately, construction of gender within adolescent literature is a complicated topic. *Harry Potter*, along with *The Hunger Games* series, as we saw in the preceding chapter,
feature innovative female protagonists fully immersed in the stereotypically male “adventure story.” The question becomes whether this innovation in the construct of gender roles within contemporary adolescent literature perpetuates gender binaries. While Hermione, Ginny, Katniss, and even Prim are strong, intelligent, and insightful female characters, they are identified immediately and undeniably as depicting stereotypically “female” traits. Ron and Harry both make several comments throughout the novels about not understanding “girls” and we see weaker female characters that allow their emotions to guide them, such as Lavender Brown and Cho Chang, both of whom let heartbreak over the loss of a romantic partner (incidentally, male partners) destroy their emotional wellbeing. This is not the case for Harry, who initially loses Ginny and, while he expresses that he still cares for her, is not deeply affected by their break-up. In addition, while these strong female protagonists do deviate from traditional gender stereotypes in many ways, one must question whether even as they break “female” stereotypes, they strengthen the concept of a gender binary by embodying “male” stereotypes. This is shown further when we examine the ways in which other characters interact with and respond to these strong female protagonists.

Berndt (2013) also points to the “male gaze” as a challenge in determining gender outlook in the Harry Potter series.

Readers experience the story through Harry’s eyes, and share his subjective reflection of the events of the plot. The internal focalization on Harry’s perception restricts the field of vision of the reader. With respect to his two best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, Harry’s conclusions are not so much unreliable as limited to what he knows and can understand against the background of his own experiences. His observations are very much informed by his respective age and his feelings towards his friends. These two
factors – Harry’s restricted view and his personal attitude towards Ron and Hermione – determine the presentation of Hermione in the series. Like the rest of the characters, she is only ever depicted from Harry’s point of view and assessment. (p. 161)

How do we unsettle these unsettling binaries that persist? In her commentary “Harry’s Girls: Harry Potter and the Discourse of Gender,” Cherland (2009) offers insight into the ways in which post structural feminist theory may be applied to the teaching and learning of critical literacies to offer “ways of thinking, reading, and writing that unsettle our common sense notions of how the world works and that can lead us to challenge our ideas of what is ‘normal’” (p. 273). Cherland writes that “binaries such as male/female, rational/irrational/mind/body and good/evil” are part of Humanism, a body of thought that originated during the eighteenth century, which “encourages dualistic thinking” and is “harmful to women and other groups of people because it makes invisible the structures that subjugate them” (p. 274). She notes that “the Harry Potter novels, like other cultural artifacts, make certain discourses available to us as we construct ourselves and our beliefs about who we are and about who other people are” (p. 276). If students use these artifacts to question and consider rather than to simply accept, they become a tool for fostering critical literacy. As literary and literacy educators, we need to challenge such binaries, work to find literature that does so, and explore critical examinations of existing literature within our classrooms. This analysis shows that The Hunger Games and Harry Potter, far from offering alternate perspectives, actually re-inscribe values we might wish readers to question, and so it is important to develop critical literacy skills in the context of reading such texts.
5 Where do we go from here? Implications for Education

In reviewing empirical research with young adult readers of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the *Harry Potter* series, as well as with readers of young adult literature more generally, I have found that there is a tendency to accept heteronormative gender roles among young people despite the abundance of literature suggesting this should be challenged. Research shows that despite growing acceptance for LGBTQ individuals, there are still strides to be made toward understanding the complexity of gender identity, and the school setting is a platform that may be utilized effectively to facilitate this. Empirical research that explores the experience of young people that fit both within and outside of heteronormative gender roles with literature and in school sheds light on this issue. In the following sections I will explore teachers’ and students’ perspectives on motivation and gender in classroom learning, instructional approaches to teaching gender inclusivity and critical literacy skills in the classroom, how literature fits in as a ‘tool’ for fostering critical literacy in young adults, and challenges teachers may face in developing a classroom environment in which readers may explore these issues deeply.

5.1 Teachers’ Perspectives on Motivation and Gender in Classroom Learning

Johnston (1993) discusses the role of the ‘person’ in curriculum development, and presents her ideas “in contrast with common perceptions that curriculum development is a technical or impersonal process” (p. 473). She uses the case study of a social studies teacher, Helen, who worked in Year 2 at the secondary level, with whom Johnston met on a weekly basis over a period of three months. She transcribed their conversations and, interestingly, found that Helen had a “deeply held view about why she was a teacher and what role she fulfilled”:

> teaching is almost an archetypical way of being in the world. Across time, across places, even back to prehistoric time, there have always been folks who took the accumulated
wisdom and stories and skills to share with other members of the clan or the tribe and with younger members of the culture. They make changes – they help people see things differently. I think of teachers in my own life who help me see some things differently. It wasn’t destined that I grow up the way I was raised. They introduced me to other ways of being. (p. 476)

Helen’s perspective indicates that she may see the teacher in a role of facilitator, that the teacher has the ability to help young people question ways of knowing. In order to do this successfully, the teacher must know the students’ varied perspectives, biases and backgrounds. The research found that “Helen demonstrated that she had an intimate knowledge of the students’ needs and backgrounds as she weighed the consequences of each of her ideas and its likely impact on the class”, and also that “much of her knowledge of her students was tacit” (p. 478). Helen noted that I’m not sure what to do with artificiality in the curriculum. I want it to rise out of the children’s interests and needs, ideally. How do I create an environment so those experiences occur authentically and naturally? I’ll be searching for authentic ways rather than artificial exercises. Even though I know I create the environment so certain things happen, I want what happens to be authentic participation in the environment.

Authenticity is very, very important. (p. 479)

Creating classroom experiences that are authentic and promote discussion among students and also coincide with administration, government and parent expectations can be a balancing act for teachers. Johnston indicates that Helen “had to devise ways in which the children themselves would seek understanding of other places and other peoples beyond their immediate context.” (p. 479). In their conversation, Helen discussed what this might look like in practice:
the word ‘participation’ captures a lot because it has a wholeness to it. You participate bodily and emotionally and as a social being and as a solitary being and as a thinking being. I want them to be emotionally involved in the activity and physically involved too and socially involved. It’s very interesting – I feel the experience more than I can talk about it. (p. 480)

In determining what constitutes appropriate pedagogy related to gender roles in contemporary English Language Arts classrooms, we must first identify the purpose of working with literature in the classroom; the classroom teacher is a critical part of this examination. Gambrell (1996) notes that “motivation plays a critical role in learning”, and when she polled young readers as to what they’d like to see in their English Language Arts classrooms, the response was simple: “Let us read more” (pp. 14-15). Literature allows young people to explore the human condition within a “safe” environment, privately and with fewer social consequences than personal exploration in their daily lives. Hebert (2000) identifies the process of “teenagers seeing something of themselves in a novel, identifying with a character from a story, reflecting on that identification and undergoing some emotional growth as a result of that reading experience” as developmental bibliotherapy, which is the process of engaging with written text in order to inform and understand personal pain or complexities (Hebert, 2000, pp. 173-174). The researchers recognize that both special needs and neurotypical students can benefit from the more informal, “developmental” bibliotherapy in the classroom, as opposed to structured, psychology-driven clinical bibliotherapy, which is usually conducted under the supervision of a mental health professional. This study also recognizes that the positive effect of the process of engaging in developmental bibliotherapy in the English Language Arts classroom
will also depend on the ways in which the teacher approaches the examination of the literature. Hebert (2000) writes,

> Adolescents are usually able to deal with common emotional concerns. However, emotional upheavals...are sometimes overwhelming and using appropriate literature may serve as a catalyst in getting young people through their hurt, to find some answers. In addition to the reader’s initial response, the therapeutic effect also depends on the group discussion facilitated by the teacher who provides follow-up techniques such as reflective writing, role-playing, creative problem solving, music and art activities, or self-selected options for students to pursue individually. (pp. 172-173)

Agee (2000) researched and developed case studies of five American English teachers’ beliefs and practices in their English Language Arts classrooms, examining “how experienced high school English teachers defined and gauged effective literature instruction as well as how their perspectives affected their students’ experiences with literature” (p. 304). To explore this, Agee focused on three integral questions:

> How did these teachers define effective literature instruction? What kinds of evidence did they look for to gauge their effectiveness? How did their perceptions of effective literature instruction inform their decisions about texts and ways of reading them with students in different grade- and ability-level classes? (p. 304)

Agee found that some teachers mostly focused on literature as a means of developing reading comprehension and writing skills, whereas others reported more emphasis on aiding students to develop personal and intertextual connections with literature. Poignantly, Agee argued, “how high school teachers approach literature sends messages to students not only about what kinds of literature are valued but also who is valued” (2000, p. 306).
5.2 Young People’s Perspectives on Gender

The beauty of the study of literature is that it can be deeply personal and transformative. Nylund, (2007), in *Reading Harry Potter: Popular Culture, Queer Theory and the Fashioning of Youth Identity*, examines an adolescent in a public high school who read the *Harry Potter* series during his early secondary school years and allowed the researcher access to his experience engaging with the novel through interviews and candid discussions. The student used the experiences of Harry Potter to mirror his own experiences coming out as a gay adolescent to his parents, teachers and classmates. He determined that Harry’s journey was much like his own, and was able to use these parallels to find strength in determining his own identity and in becoming comfortable enough to share it with others. While Rowling may not have intended Harry’s characterization to reflect present-day issues surrounding LGBTQ youth, her stories of Harry helped this student immensely. This study suggests it is essential for educators to allow students as much freedom of interpretation as possible when studying literature in the classroom. Educators can guide students to certain conclusions, point out the use of literary elements, and give examples of scholarly approaches to literature; however, what seems likely to have the most poignant and positive impact on young adults’ relationship with literature is to provide a foundation from which they can comfortably explore reader responses and make connections to the broader world without fear of social or academic repercussions. Nylund refers to the *Harry Potter* novels as a “powerful therapeutic tool.” The participant in his study, as an “active and creative producer of meaning,” used queer theory to “uncover some of the hidden ‘queer’ readings and messages in the *Harry Potter* books, [which] helped him find support for his own sexual identity” (p. 13). Nylund points to a theory of cultural studies, which suggests that “...media/popular cultural texts are polysemic – that is, open to multiple interpretations” (p.
14). Through this lens, appropriate pedagogy in the English Language Arts classroom must account for varied interpretation of text, and the classroom should be a place in which these many ideas may be thoroughly examined by the students and teachers.

Boldt (2004) conducted a study with her own students in the late elementary years that inquired as to the place of the concept of gender within the classroom. She describes witnessing an exchange where one student said to another, in an insulting manner, “you’re such a girl” (p. 7). When Boldt asked the student what he meant, he told her that it was

an insult the boys often used against one another, ‘like calling someone ugly or stupid.’ I looked at the girls. They showed no visible response. I was as perturbed with their silence as I was with the boy’s comments and I asked the girls why they didn’t defend themselves. In a voice calmer than my own, a girl responded that they were used to the boys acting like they were better than the girls and that sometimes the girls just ignored it. (p. 7)

This reported behaviour enhances gender differences and removes a stable foundation for young people to openly and critically discuss issues around gender and sexuality. Boldt (2004) observed that, despite a negative environment, “gender in the classroom wasn’t hard to find”, and that this exchange between her young male students played out

my worst fears—that the boys actively and aggressively defined the category of "girl in a degrading manner and that the girls passively accepted this characterization. It was also common to see the boys demanding narrowly defined, highly stereotyped masculine behavior from themselves and one another, sometimes through the use of taunts like "girl" or "gay" in order to maintain careful boundaries of what it meant to be a "true boy". (pp. 8-9)
If we apply the findings of Nylund’s study to this snapshot of classroom behaviour, literature can be a powerful springboard to open up discussion about heteronormative ways of knowing in the classroom.

Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane’s (2013) study, introduced earlier, speaks to both issues of character relationships towards one another and young readers’ perceptions and understandings of the gender construct within *The Hunger Games*. This article provides a detailed account of four preadolescent girls’ perceptions of and responses to violence and gender in Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. The researchers set up a book club that explored issues of gender and sociocultural issues within and extraneous to the novel. The participants were four girls between the ages of 9 and 13. Each was provided with both print and audio copies of the text, and was instructed to use either or both. The guided discussions took place in four two-hour sessions over eight weeks. The researchers directed all discussion group activities. Carefully worded critical prompts relating to gender discourse, violence, and sociocultural issues were used to facilitate thoughtful responses among participants. The researchers intentionally brought up these issues through written prompts, role-playing activities, and oral response activities. Exploration of gender, violence, power imbalance, and sociocultural imbalance in *The Hunger Games* was also expanded beyond the novel. Parallels were drawn to popular culture using supplementary materials (for example, a *Dove* commercial and an accompanying *Dove* film were used to discuss issues of gender). This ensured that all four were given the same criteria for expressing their thoughts and opinions, and also gave the participants, who had not studied literary criticism, more context in which to relate their perceptions of the characters and themes in the novel study. This also worked to expand participants’ critical examination of gender issues beyond the academic realm. The researchers, though very present and involved
throughout the experiment, were mindful to create nonjudgmental, non-regulated discussion that encouraged critical exploration. This mitigated potential issues surrounding too much researcher influence. The researchers were careful to foster an environment in which the participants did not feel as if they were being assessed or needed to provide a “right” answer: they were encouraged to fully explore and put out all of their feelings and thoughts.

Furthermore, the researchers discussed the study’s implications for educators who may address issues of gender presentation, violence, and sociocultural biases when teaching a novel study. Language in the article was presented in a way that is accessible to both academic scholars in the field and educators in secondary schools. This makes the article valuable as a source of research surrounding issues of gender among young adults. The study is interesting in that the work is completed with participants designated as “struggling readers.” This may change the dynamic of student engagement with text; however, this isn’t fully discussed in the article. As well, more exploration could be conducted to compare “struggling” readers’ thoughts surrounding gender and violence in *The Hunger Games* as opposed to students without this designation.

A more broadly examined study of young adult literary practices is useful in examining adolescent behaviour as it relates to the particularities of *The Hunger Games* and the *Harry Potter* series. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) looked at a broad range of adolescent behaviour and writing in the domain of online weblogs, and focused specifically on their perception of identity in relation to gender and sexuality. Participants were 184 randomly selected adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19. Female blogs made up 121 and male blogs made up 63 of the sample, so it was not even in terms of self-identified gender variance. Researchers hypothesized that female participants would be more forthcoming with emotive language, gendered language,
and sexually explicit language than male participants. However, they felt that, in keeping with traditional gender roles, the female use of language would be more passive, cooperative, and accommodating than male language. They also hypothesized that males would display more aggressive language and willingly provide more personal and detailed information than the female participants. The language analysis focused on the front page of each blog, and was conducted independently by two researchers. The procedure involved obtaining quantitative data using the discourse analysis program DICTION 5.0, which was used to create scores for language content, diction, and tone. Researchers concluded that male participants used more aggressive, dominant discourse in the blog postings, but that females did not use more passive, cooperative, or emotive language. There was no resolute determination as to which gender more openly discussed issues pertaining to sexuality. This study is important when exploring adolescent construct of gender, as it is not correct to assume that today’s young people fit into traditional gender roles or use traditionally gendered language. To properly analyze their interpretation of these issues, researchers must have a grasp on youth perspectives.

Toomey, Diaz, Ryan, Card and Russell (2010) may shed some insight into gender nonconforming youth perspectives. These researchers examined associations among retrospective reports of adolescent gender nonconformity and school victimization due to perceived or actual lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) status, along with current reports of life satisfaction and depression in 245 LGBT young adults ranging in age from 21 to 25 years. (p. 1580)

Toomey et al. note that

The unique social stigma experienced by gender-nonconforming LGBT young people in adolescence has lasting negative effects into young adulthood and that these lasting negative
effects are the product of victimization based on gender nonconformity, not of their gender nonconformity. Further, it is victimization due to gender nonconformity that should explain the association between gender nonconformity and negative effects in young adulthood. (p. 1581)

In the school environment, which is “one of the primary settings where social interactions occur during adolescence,” Toomey et al. discuss the “heightened awareness and sense of an imaginary audience” that accompanies adolescence, and because of this, “shame often controls or holds in place strictly gendered roles” (pp. 1583-1584). They also state that during adolescence, “gender differences observed between girls and boys can be partially explained by the intense socialization of stereotypical gender roles prior to and during that developmental period” (p. 1583). All of these factors combined make school “one of the most dangerous social contexts for gender-nonconforming and LGBT youth” (p. 1584). The study asked participants to report past school victimization due to actual or perceived LGBT status, and participants were able to answer on a 10-item retrospective scale. The researchers found that boys with actual or perceived LGBT status experienced greater amounts of victimization at school than actual or perceived girls with LGBT status, and that “victimization due to LGBT status was significantly associated with negative psychosocial adjustment” (p. 1585).

5.3 Instructional Approaches for Gender Inclusivity

When teachers use literature to acknowledge and confront, they don’t just build a literacy foundation for their students, they create a safe zone for all students in their classrooms

(quoted by Wood, Kissel and Miller, 2016, p. 53).

Based on their study of young adults in the school setting with actual or perceived LGBT status, Toomey et al. (2010) made recommendations for educators to increase safety in schools:
providing education about gender expression and LGBT issues to students, administrators, staff, and teachers is a key strategy for increasing safety in schools. Schools should provide the opportunity for a support or social group for gender-nonconforming and LGBT students, to provide an institutional venue for social support, student involvement and student voice. (p. 1586)

Diekman and Murnen (2004) conducted a study about the concept of gender equality in children’s literature identified by experts as “nonsexist.” They ask, “do nonsexist books show equality in female-stereotypic domains as often as in male-stereotypic domains” (p. 377)? First, a detailed comparison was conducted in which participants were asked to read books deemed as “nonsexist” as well as books highly criticized for sexism by researchers and experts in the field of children’s literature. This list was compiled by the authors, who conducted a detailed literature review. Ten books were randomly selected from each category to ensure a nonbiased choice of subject matter for the participants to engage with. Participants were 20 self-identifying men and 20 self-identifying women enrolled in an introductory psychology course at an undisclosed university. They were not aware of the classification of the books prior to their reading. To measure the view of sexism in these books, participants were asked to rate the extent to which the book portrayed previously identified elements of gender inequality through completing a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about participants’ view of the book’s gender segregation, notion of the traditional feminine ideal, and equal or unequal representation of male and female characters in the book. This data was analyzed quantitatively. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions about levels of engagement with the book, personal enjoyment of the book, and whether participants felt that the book was sexist or non-
sexist. This data was analyzed qualitatively. Tables detailing the numerical values assigned to each response are included in the study.

Interestingly, in the open-ended responses, findings indicated that levels of enjoyment and satisfaction with the novels did not vary between sexist and non-sexist books. They did indicate, however, that participants felt that even books deemed as non-sexist portrayed a very narrow vision of gender dynamics, in which the female characters typically exemplified traditionally male characteristics, but male characters displayed very few traditionally feminine characteristics. This is consistent with the character of Katniss and Peeta in *The Hunger Games* and of Hermione, Ron, and Harry in the *Harry Potter* series. This study is an important source of information for educators responsible for choosing novel studies or books for their classrooms. Further research could be conducted to more clearly isolate factors that constitute gender identity in children’s literature.

Contemporary adolescent literature explores complicated issues that influence young people as they develop into autonomous adults. For example, Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, Dashner’s *The Maze Runner*, and Roth’s *Divergent* series encourage students to critically examine their worldviews by presenting dark, dystopian environments that are eerily fathomable. Drug use and abuse is overtly shown in the very popular Hopkins novels, the anonymous *Go Ask Alice*, and even Green’s *Looking For Alaska*. Similarly, Green does not shy away from the examination of mental health issues, dealing with suicidal ideation and sexual molestation in *Looking For Alaska*. Asher’s widely regarded *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Chomsky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also deal with these issues. Much popular adolescent literature deals with “risque” or challenging topics that have been, and potentially could still be, considered inappropriate or taboo for young adults. Educators have to identify
their position within this, and carefully choose curriculum that allows young people to wrestle with some of these issues while juggling a range of expectations from the school, parents, and students. This is an undeniably challenging task. To facilitate this, educators must be very familiar with works of young adult literature and the issues that they present.

Behrman (2006) writes about pedagogical techniques that may support the development of ‘critical literacy’, which “espouses that education can foster social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations” (p. 490). He mentions practices may include identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts. (p. 491)

First, Behrman broadly identifies what pedagogy that develops critical literacy should look like. He writes,

A critical literacy agenda should encourage teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed. (p. 491)

Behrman notes that critical literacy pedagogy places the responsibility for the development of curriculum and strategies on the classroom teacher. He identifies the use of six categories of classroom practice in order to develop critical literacy:

1) reading supplementary texts, 2) reading multiple texts, 3) reading from a resistant perspective, 4) producing counter-texts, 5) conducting student-choice research projects, and 6) taking social action. (p. 492)
Supplementary texts such as “works of fiction, film or popular culture,” in addition to “traditional classroom texts,” can be used to mitigate a text that may “present a problem from an ethnocentric or gender-based viewpoint” in the same way that simply exposing students to multiple texts might (p. 492). Similarly,

students can be encouraged to ‘peel’ different layers of meaning from a text and to explore how the same reader might approach a text from different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion. Reading from a resistant perspective requires a conscious awareness of the influences upon text interpretation. (p. 493)

Behrman identifies ‘countertexts’ as “a student-created text that presents a topic from a nonmainstream perspective”, and discusses how the production of countertexts may “serve to validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students and other underrepresented groups” (p. 494). This practice serves to open students up to varied perspectives, and may give marginalized subgroups a legitimate voice, within both immediate and global communities (p. 494). He also discusses student-choice projects, in which there is opportunity to take some type of social action “aimed at making a real difference in their or others’ lives” (p. 495). He writes that “the rationale for social action is that critical literacy instruction should not be limited to the promotion of personalized or internalized reconceptualizations of language, power and text (p. 495).

Appropriate pedagogy implores teachers and students to critically examine and challenge existing stereotypes within contemporary literature. It’s not enough for students to recognize the presence or absence of gender ideology within literature, they must go deeper into the issue to ask themselves what the implications of these gender norms are. How does this affect the
novel’s plot? How are these issues represented in the experiences of the characters, and what do the characters learn in response to dealing with these issues? Centrally, *why does this matter?* If a purpose of school is to inspire young adults to love learning and critically examine the world around them in order to enact positive change, we must take the study of literature beyond the page itself. Students can and should use literature presented in the English Language Arts classroom as a jumping point for asking tough questions, making individual determinations and exploring the human condition. The teacher, as the adult in the classroom and the educational facilitator, is responsible for setting the foundation for this conversation to occur. As Diekman and Murnen (2004) put it simply: “books teach children about gender roles. They change children’s ideas about the world” (p. 419).

As much as possible, students should be able to choose their own works of literature to study, at least some of the time. This can be challenging when an educator must meet state- or province-mandated prescribed learning outcomes; however, the autonomy of choosing one’s own reading material can make the difference between student engagement and aversion to the literature presented. Additionally, when the educator is choosing literature, it is important to choose works that speak to one’s particular group of students as much as possible. Again, as all young people are different; this can be a challenge, but when given interpretive freedom, most well-chosen works of literature can be moulded to fit individual learning needs.

Coats and Trites (2012) conducted a study with four American teachers in secondary English classrooms in the US and determined that

YA novels provide a way for teachers to purposefully lead students to analyze feminism in terms of critical thinking, including asking students to think about issues of language, community, identity and empowerment -- because neither girls nor boys can effectively
engage with social justice when they rely on stereotypes about gender and feminism. (pp. 141-42)

The study included an examination of *The Hunger Games*, which was determined to be a piece of young adult literature that represents gender as a “multivariate social construct” (p. 141). Young adult literature, they conclude, encourages students to develop a sense of critical thinking that is “personal, analytical and complex” (p. 143).

Hebert (2000) conducted a study that “examines how developmental bibliotherapy featuring young adult literature serves as an effective strategy to address emotional issues in the lives of gifted teenagers” (p. 167). As mentioned earlier, developmental bibliotherapy involves the use of literature as a platform to examine aspects of one’s own life and to relate these to larger questions of the human experience. His study begins with the story of the “summer-refreshed high school English teacher...excited about exploring the worlds of Hemingway, Steinbeck, and other literary giants with intelligent, energetic young adults during the upcoming year” (p. 168). These works, however, may not be ideal tools for developmental bibliotherapy. Quickly, the teacher realizes that for their proximal development, her students require more from their literature than learning about symbolism and metaphor in the classics. Put simply by Hebert, “as adult literature reflects society and culture, so does young adult literature reflect adolescent society and issues facing teenagers” (p. 168). According to Bushman (1997), although secondary English literature teachers have recognized the positive impact of young adult literature in their regular classrooms, “this genre has not been given the same importance in honours level English classes” (p. 45). This is an obvious but important distinction: often, adolescent students in high-level English classrooms study *adult* literature, that is, literature intended to explore society and culture at an adult level, which often features adult protagonists,
though not always. These labels in themselves are problematic: literature labeled ‘adult’ often addresses issues relevant to youth, and ‘young adult’ literature is widely read and enjoyed by adults. However, if we subscribe to these labels in order to categorize literature, it makes sense that young people would benefit from studying literature that identifies and explores issues pertinent to their current realities. This can be a range of literature; labels are not effective in determining what will speak to the varied interests of readers. Bean (2003) writes

> Because they deal with issues that are relevant to teens, including racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice, young adult novels provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life. (p. 638)

It is important, as teachers are not trained clinicians,

to clarify the appropriate use of bibliotherapy with students in school; a distinction is made between clinical bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy. Clinical bibliotherapy involves psychotherapeutic methods used by skilled practitioners with individuals experiencing serious emotional problems. Developmental bibliotherapy is helping students in their normal health and development. One of the advantages of this approach is that teachers can identify the concerns of their students and address the issues before they become problems, helping students to move through predictable stages of adolescence with knowledge of what to expect and examples of how other teenagers have dealt with the same concerns. (p. 173)

Hebert noted that the beginning of the therapeutic experience for young adults is when they identify themselves with one or more characters in a novel. Teenage readers may feel relief that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem. The reader learns
vicariously how to solve some of the problems upon reflecting how the characters in the book solved their problem. (p. 173)

As an educator, it is not enough to facilitate students’ individual learning through choosing appropriate mediums in young adult literature. The difficulty in the educator’s role is to not only welcome alternate viewpoints as young learners progress through various texts, but to take this a step further: the teacher must possess the analytical ability and astute understanding of both the student and the literature being studied to ask the right questions, which will allow the teacher to assess the students’ understanding. If we want students to develop personal, analytical, and complex critical thinking skills, educators must be prepared to identify evidence of critical thinking that may not be apparent when first working through curriculum instruction. The example of Nylund’s use of the Harry Potter series as a test case of exploration of adolescent sexuality is a perfect example: Rowling has never discussed Harry Potter as queer literature, but her authorial intent is not the primary focus. Rather, the young adult’s identification with Harry’s plight within the text serves as a platform for critical thinking; therefore, the person responsible for assessing learning must be adaptive to various interpretations of the literature that is studied in contemporary English Language Arts classrooms.

Earlier, I spoke of Boldt’s (2004) findings that gender variations very much exist in today’s contemporary English Language Arts classroom. After her study with the young adults in her classroom, she ultimately turned her focus inward to reflection on her own teaching practice:

I felt challenged to review my thoughts and assessments of my students. Reading through the narrative progress reports I had written each quarter for the children and their parents, I realized that I did indeed speak of girls and boys differently. I praised boys in
my class more highly than girls. I spoke of boys as having potential even when there was little performance evidence to point to that. I admired girls' successes less. I saved my highest praise for girls' personalities rather than their accomplishments. I questioned the depth of understanding of even successful female students. Seeing these patterns in my assessments, I began to realize that I was taking those things that were traditionally part of the "masculine realm" as the norm, the most desired, and that equality primarily meant girls learning to be more like boys and then being able to compete equally in ‘the male world.’ (pp. 8-9)

This brave admission on the part of Boldt (2004), a self-identified feminist, instigates a need for critical thinking and reflection on the part of educators when it comes to gender in the contemporary classroom. Boldt also connects conceptualization of gender with that of power; the two are inextricably linked. She “explores the potential of theorizing both power and gender in the classroom not as possessions or objective descriptions but as performative accomplishments that are in flux and vulnerable to contestation” (p. 12). By viewing gender and power as flexible, moveable and subject to change, Boldt identifies a key area in which educators can positively influence these constructs in their students.

Rands (2009) discusses the need for educators to be able and willing to discuss gender in the classroom. She writes, “if the field of education is committed to equity and social justice, then teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people…[and in doing so] must develop a vocabulary of gender” (p. 419). Importantly, Rands also identifies the distinct lack of research related to transgender people and issues in education. She notes that
the scarcity of research on transgender issues in education is problematic because transgender people participate in the educational system at all levels. The number of transgender people who participate in the education system is difficult to measure because the high level of societal transphobia ensures that many transgender individuals are not comfortable publicly acknowledging their identity. (p. 421)

Furthermore, young transgendered individuals are much more likely to face harassment in school: 90% of transgender students have witnessed negative comments related to gender in school, and are the least likely group of students to believe that their school communities are safe places in which they can freely express their gender identities (p. 422). This is significant, and teachers, as the adult in the classroom, are agents of change. One way in which this paradigm can shift is through educating both teachers and students about gender. Rands (2009) advocates for the teaching of the gender oppression matrix, which “allows people to see the effects of the intersection of these two conceptually distinct forms of sexism, [and] provides a more powerful framework for explaining the complex sets of gender privilege and oppression that individuals experience” (p. 423). If teachers are unable or unwilling to explore these constructs in the classroom, students are not likely to feel that they have a safe space in which to do so. Additionally, placing emphasis on challenging societal norms will facilitate critical thinking; this is ultimately the purpose of educating children. Rands posits that teachers must be challenged to pose their own ‘what if’ questions in relation to gender, such as “what if all students in our society started out using gender-neutral pronouns and then chose from 4 possible pronouns at the beginning of middle school?” (p. 429). She also suggests that teachers and students might then expand these ‘what if’ questions into the creation of their own literature, such as a short story or poem (p. 429). Importantly, Rands also touches on the external
challenges educators face when considering the question of gender in the classroom. For example, she asks what a teacher might do when interacting with transphobic parents, administration, colleagues, or students (p. 429). Just as the question of gender is complex and multilayered, so too is the struggle for equality and critical questioning in the classroom.

Wood, Kissel and Miller (2016) write about ‘safe zones’ in schools, which refer to “spaces where students feel free to be themselves without fear of reproach or disdain from peers”, and that “every classroom should be a safe zone for students” (p. 47). Poignantly, they write that “the path to enact changes in thinking is through conversation” (p. 52). The researchers suggest that “the best way to promote this positive climate is for teachers to begin the school year by declaring their classrooms ‘safe spaces’” (p. 46). Such safety can be achieved by using approaches such as the “Socratic dialogue,” a well-documented instructional method that allows for open discussion among students, where they can both independently and collaboratively explore complex questions about society and the human condition that may arise through their engagement with literature. In speaking of safe zones, the researchers point to open-ended, student-led discussion where multiple perspectives can be examined (Wood, Kissel and Miller, 2016). Further, they regard literature as a way in which to promote conversations that lead to safety in the classroom:

positioning the study of literature on gender identity is critical to exploring issues relevant to LGBTQ youth. Teachers can use literary strategies in combination with LGBTQ literature to promote conversation, address stereotypes, and create a safe zone of kindness and acceptance within classrooms. (p. 47)

The researchers write about a teacher that uses ‘extended reaction guides’, in which students must fill out reactions before, during, and after engaging with the novel, in order to “model how
to use personal experiences to reflect the themes of the novels her students read”, and she “designed them to be general enough to elicit thinking, experiences, and prior knowledge” (p. 48). In the extended reaction guide, students had “conversations about compassion” and had to agree, disagree, and justify their feelings on a variety of broad statements, such as ‘coming out is different any time, but especially in middle school’ and ‘being who you are isn’t really a choice’ (p. 49). This highly collaborative activity allows students to engage with literature while relating it to broader issues of gender, identity, and growing up. Literature was chosen by the teacher specifically to open this dialogue among students. For example,  

_The Misfits_ tells the story of four students, who, while different from one another, don’t seem to fit in with the other students in their school. We are introduced to Bobbie, who is overweight, Addie, who is considered a nerd because of her intelligence, Skeezie, who is viewed as a troublemaker, and Joe, who is effeminate and gay. Their own differences have caused them to bond and work together. (p. 50).

It is important to note that in this study, the responsibility in choosing literature that lends itself easily to open dialogue fell on the classroom teacher. As such, the educator must be willing and able to do this effectively.

### 5.4 Concluding Thoughts

We engage with literature for a variety of reasons. We read to explore; we read to improve ourselves; we read to understand the world around us and how we might fit within it. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the process of reading can be therapeutic for individuals who might use it as a platform to explore challenging aspects of themselves and their world. It can also challenge our existing belief structures and push us to become more insightful individuals.
In our ever-changing world, literature serves as a tool for grounding oneself in the ability to shift with flowing ideologies.

Gender is a large part of how we categorize ourselves and others around us, and people, particularly young people, develop gender identity through experiences, including those with literature. Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, both wildly popular works of literature, have been described as subverting traditional notions of gender and featuring strong, capable female protagonists (e.g., Skinner, 2009; Heilman and Donaldson, 2009). The nagging question that remains in exploring these texts is whether they have in fact done what is claimed. As extraordinarily successful and popular representations of the young adult literary canon, do Hermione and Katniss actually break these barriers, or do they ultimately fall into the gender dynamics they are said to destroy? Considering this question has broad implications for educators and young readers alike.
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