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Gender Themes in Jeff Kinney's Diaries of a Wimpy Kid

Abstract

The paper reports on findings of a qualitative content analysis of four of the sixteen “novels in cartoons” books written by Jeff Kinney. Connell’s theory of masculinity underpins this study. The aim of this paper is to answer the following two research questions: What are the most important gender themes in Kinney’s cartoon diaries? Can teachers use Kinney’s cartoon diaries to create an awareness of gender inequality? I identified the following gender themes that permitted hegemonic masculinities: bullying and violence, bravery, the importance of sport, gender relations and the tension of growing up in a matriarchal-patriarchal household. The study found that Kinney’s books could be used as a point of departure to explain to children that the alpha male is not solely responsible for gender inequality and violence. The wimpy, seemingly innocent and helpless kid can also be the instigator of inequality between genders or within genders. The popularity and availability of Kinney’s books make them an ideal vehicle for teachers worldwide to create a sensitivity for gender issues.

Keywords: children’s cartoon novels, Connell’s theory, gender inequality, hegemonic masculinities

Introduction

Adults write most children’s books. Explicitly or implicitly, these authors convey their beliefs, thoughts and values to the young readers whether or not the intention is entertainment or education. Kim and Wee (2020, p. 364) write, “children’s literature can be a powerful site for children to interact with the ideological, political and pedagogical viewpoints in society”. Gooden and Gooden (2001, p. 91) expand on this point of view when referencing gender roles in society: “books are often the primary source for the presentation of societal values to the young child [and] are a powerful vehicle for the socialization of gender roles”. Gooden and Gooden (2001) found that gender stereotyping in children’s books has a negative impact on children’s insights into women’s role in society and at home and lowers girls’ self-worth and career aspirations.

On the other hand, the archetypal male protagonist is often known for his “admirable physical and moral courage, outstanding athletic prowess, honesty and strict though cheerful adherence to a rigid code of honour that scorns backing down from a fight, discourages the outward display of emotions and rejects any form of snitching” (Robertson, 2011, p. 37).

Taber and Woloshyn (2011, p. 228) found that “even in books that appear to be challenging gender stereotypes, normalizations are often reinforced”. I therefore decided to study children’s books in which the male protagonist deviates from the “traditional boy-hero” (Robertson, 2011, p. 41), and embodies non-hegemonic masculinities. Male characters who, according to Myers (2012, p. 132), embody non-hegemonic masculinities and are not competitive, domineering or sexually

predatory. These males are emotional and gentle. Rather than ostracising femininity, they often “mark themselves in feminine ways” (Myers, 2012, p. 132).

In my discussion of four of the *Dairy of a Wimpy Kid*-books I will argue that notwithstanding the non-hegemonic representation of the protagonist, these books reinforce hegemonic masculinities. The aim of this paper is to answer the following two research questions:

- What are the most important gender themes in Kinney’s cartoon diaries?
- Can teachers use Kinney’s cartoon diaries to create an awareness of gender inequality?

Theoretical framework

Connell’s theory of masculinity underpins this study. Most of the research on men and masculinities focus on the idea of hegemonic masculinity. According to Carrigan et al. (1987, p. 92, in Coles, 2009, p. 31) hegemonic masculinity is “a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance”.

Hegemonic masculinity is thus a “form of masculinity that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, and among men” (Connell, 1995, p. 92). According to Dragowski and Sharrón-del Río (2014, p. 1), Connell recognises “the hierarchies and interrelationships between the hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities, and theorized that, in our society, hegemonic masculinities subordinates other masculinities”. Boys and men use a variety of strategies, among others bullying and violence, to assert power over women and other men, and to normalise their domination (Mayeza & Bhana, 2021).

Research methodology

Four of the sixteen *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* “novels in cartoons” books, written by Jeff Kinney, and originally published between 2007 and 2021, were used as data for this study (cf. Robertson, 2011, for the use of literature as data). These books are freely available in libraries and bookshops in printed, e-book and audio format. According to the cover page of the 2021-novel, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Big Shot*, over 250 million books have been sold and translated into 56 languages. The universal appeal and availability of the books open up the possibility of teachers worldwide using these novels as point of departure to discuss gender issues.

I followed Henning et al.’s (2011) guidelines for qualitative content analysis to reduce, condense and group the content of the four diaries. Guided by the research questions and Connell’s (1995) theory of masculinity I immersed myself in the data (the four diaries). I gave codes to different “segments or units of meaning” (Henning et al., 2011, p. 105). After that, related codes were categorised and thematically organised. It is important to note that the data are a mix of text and images/cartoons. To enhance the credibility and quality of my study, I chose quotes to support the data carefully and avoided generalisations.

Findings and discussion: Gender themes permitting hegemonic masculinities

Bullying

Bullying is characterised by the power imbalance between the bully and the bullied. According to the protagonist (Greg) bullying is a given during middle school due to this power imbalance: "You've got kids like me who haven't hit their growth spurt yet mixed in with these gorillas who need to shave twice a day. ... And then they wonder why bullying is such a problem in middle school" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 3). The diaries provide examples of different types of bullying – verbal, public humiliation: "Barry Palmer, you still owe Bryan five dollars, you BUM!" (Emphasis in the original) (Kinney, 2015a, p. 165), shaming by mean, popular girls, "don't walk near our lunch table ... you're not even cute!" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 173), student-on-teacher bullying, "Hey, Mr. Ira, you pooped your pants again" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 175), as well as Internet bullying, "...the pictures were posted all over the Internet" (Kinney, 2016, p. 60).

Despite being a victim of bullying, Greg had no hesitation bullying other children. He bullied the kindergarteners that he had to walk home, under the guise of having "some fun with the kids" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 180). Greg took pride in initiating the verbal abuse of one of his classmates ("I STARTED THAT") (Kinney, 2015b, p. 12). The protagonist deliberately and cruelly ignored his friend, Chirag (Kinney, 2015b, p. 56). Greg did not hesitate to use mudslinging to take down the opposing candidate during his campaign for treasurer of the student government. One of his posters read: "Remember in second grade how Marty Poster had head lice. Do you want him touching YOUR money?" Greg was also guilty of body shaming his neighbour's son who wanted to be a professional basketball player when he grew up: "THINK AGAIN, SHAWN! NEITHER ONE OF YOUR PARENTS IS TALLER THAN FIVE-FOOT-TWO, AND YOU'RE THE ONLY 200-POUND SIX-YEAR-OLD I KNOW!" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 80). Greg justifies his bullying: "Before you go and say I'm a bad friend for Chirag, let me just say that in my own defence I'm smaller than about 95% of the kids at my school so, when it comes to finding someone I can actually pick on, my options are pretty limited" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 56).

The central theme of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules* is Rodrick's relentless physical and verbal bullying of his younger brother, Greg. The protagonist is a helpless victim: "Rodrick can pretty much treat me any way he wants, because he knows there's nothing I can do about it" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 24). Greg was elated when his parents told him they were expecting another boy: "After all those years of getting pushed around by Rodrick, I was definitely ready to move up a notch on the totem pole" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 41). Unfortunately for him "Mom and Dad have always been SUPER protective of Manny, and they won't let me lay a finger on him, even if he totally deserves it" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 41).

While his older brother bullies Greg, Greg bullies his friend Rowley: "I guess I kind of felt sorry for Rowley, and I decided to take him under my wing. It's been great having him around, mostly because I get to use all the tricks Rodrick pulls on ME" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 20). The protagonist verbally, physically and emotionally

bullies his friend. He even let Rowley take the blame for his wrongdoings (Kinney, 2015a).

Power imbalance between the bully and the bullied is fundamental in bullying. Therefore, it is understandable that one of the aims of the protagonist was to protect himself from bullying. He believes that one's popularity among fellow-students, physique and involvement in student government will safeguard him against bullying and gives him power over the football "jocks" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 44). Greg therefore spends time in a makeshift and a real gym, reads about wrestling, runs for the position of treasurer and volunteers for the position of safety patrol officer.

Violence

Violent confrontation between males is important in cementing the alpha male's dominance over other males. Reading the books reveals that the protagonist was often the victim of attacks by bigger boys. The diagram accompanying Greg's explanation why he prefers to call the diary a "journal" has a big boy punching Greg and calling him "SISSY!" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 183). It is important to note that Greg's cocky demeanour is often the reason why older or bigger boys chase or attack him. A point in case was the protagonist's description of how senior students, whom he and Rowley mocked and leered at during Halloween, chased them. The two boys took refuge at Greg's grandma's house until the coast was clear. A few months later, the boys caught up with Greg and Rowley: "Before we could make a run for it, we had our arms pinned behind our backs" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 210). The teenagers forced Rowley to eat a piece of "cursed" cheese that had been lying on the basketball court for months. Greg escaped a similar fate by telling the teenagers that he was allergic to dairy products (Kinney, 2015a, p. 215).

Despite his smug demeanour, the protagonist did not know how to fight. He therefore preferred to run for his life or hide the moment he smelled trouble. The following extracts from the diary highlights Greg and his friend's cluelessness when it comes to fighting. A heated verbal confrontation between Greg and Rowley regarding the intellectual ownership of cartoons attracted a crowd shouting "FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 206). The protagonist emphasises the culture of violence at the school: "The kids at my school are ALWAYS itching to see a fight. Me and Rowley tried to walk away, but those guys weren't going to let us go until they saw us throw some punches" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 206). Neither Greg nor Rowley was in a "real fight before: I didn't know how I was supposed to stand or hold my fist or anything ... Rowley ... just started pacing around" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 207). The crowd dissolved at the arrival of a group of teenagers.

Bravery

The protagonists of children's books are usually brave and adventurous. Greg, however, is often portrayed as a scared boy who did his utmost to avoid confrontations or scary situations. During his class's trip to Hardscrabble Farm, he was for example petrified when he heard about Silas Scratch, who lived in the forest "and grew his fingernails really long" (Kinney, 2016, p. 135). Circumstances on the farm, however, seemed to force the frightened protagonist to dig deep and act as a leader: "Once it got DARK ... the guys in my group were too scared to leave the fire to help me collect sticks. ... So I went to look for firewood by myself" (Kinney,

2016, pp. 206-207). The latter example is one of only a few identified in the analysed data not depicting Greg as a clumsy and frightened boy.

Importance of sport

Hegemonic masculinity plays a fundamental role in sport due to the overemphasis on winning. According to English (2017, p. 183) hegemonic masculinity “marginalizes those that do not possess specific traits”. The first paragraph of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Big Shot* leaves the reader with no illusions about the lack of athleticism of the protagonist: “I’ve heard that athletes are born with special genes that make them good at sports. Well, whatever those genes are, I guess I was born WITHOUT them” (Kinney, 2021, p. 1). According to Greg “Mom’s always saying that everyone who’s part of a team has an important role to play. But when it comes to sports it seems like my job is to make everybody ELSE look good” (Kinney, 2021, p. 1). The protagonist realises the importance of sport for men (his father): “I feel bad that I’ve never been good at sports, because I think Dad was hoping I’d be a star athlete” (Kinney, 2021, p. 9). Yet, he is upfront about his dislike of sport: He hated the physicality, “The thing I hate the most about running is that it makes you SWEAT” (Kinney, 2021, p. 102) and the aggressiveness thereof, “Our team was ready to fight for REAL” (Kinney, 2021, p. 158).

Greg’s efforts on the sports field and in the swimming pool read like a comedy of errors: He did not get last place in the 50-meter sprint, because one of the athletes fell flat on his face. During a baseball match, he threw the ball through his team’s net (Kinney, 2021). Greg’s father forced him to join the swim team, because “Dad’s got this idea that I’m destined to be a great swimmer or something” (Kinney, 2015b, p. 2). Greg did his utmost to skip swimming classes: He unsuccessfully tried to convince his dad to let him do Water Jazz with a group of elderly women. His only way out of the swimming classes was to “hide out in the locker room until practice was over” (Kinney, 2015b, p. 2). Greg’s efforts to learn wrestling was a fiasco: After the school’s Physical Education teacher announced that the boys would do a wrestling unit for six weeks, Greg rented a few video games “to learn some moves” (Kinney, 2015a, p. 78). With shock, Greg realised that the wrestling the teacher taught “is COMPLETELY different from the kind they do on TV”. Greg was paired with Fregley – “the only kid light enough to be in [his] weight class”. Fregley was too good for Greg: “he pinned me every which way you could imagine” (Kinney, 2015a, p. 83). Greg was in an inevitable position – he would have to fight Fregley every day for six weeks.

Gender relations

The diaries are about boys for boys. Although girls play a minor role in the diaries, it is important for the protagonist to emphasise his heterosexual orientation: “I have ALWAYS been into girls” (Kinney, 2015a, p. 7). It is thus important for him to be popular among the girls. Relationships with girls and popularity among them are, according to Greg, forever changing. During elementary school “the deal was, if you were the fastest runner in the school, you got all the girls ... nowadays, it is a whole lot more complicated. Now it is about the kind of clothes you wear or how rich you are or if you have a cute butt or whatever” (Kinney, 2015a, p. 6). Greg figures that he is “somewhere around 52nd or 53rd most popular this year. But the

good news is that I'm about to move up one spot because Charlie Davies is above me, and he's getting his braces next week" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 7).

Despite the protagonist's need to be acknowledged and admired by girls, his conduct towards them is humiliating and arrogant. The following two examples typify the power relations between the dominant male and the subordinate women, as well as the male's objectification of girls.

Greg had a bone to pick with Patty Farrell when she snitched on him during a Geography quiz. Greg signed up for the role of a tree in the school's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. This will give him the opportunity to throw apples at Patty, who plays the part of Dorothy. Greg got his revenge: "Seeing Patty standing [in the wings] reminded me why I signed up to be a Tree in the first place. ... Pretty soon, the rest of the Trees started throwing apples, too. ... Somebody knocked the glasses off of Patty's head, and one of the lenses broke" (Kinney, 2015a, pp. 112-113). Greg was quite thrilled with Patty's public humiliation: "I just hope that everyone who came to see the play was as entertained as I was" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 113).

In an effort to escape from his brother's wrath, Greg tried to hide in the bathroom of the old age home while visiting their grandfather. To his embarrassment, he was stuck in the women's bathroom for an hour and a half. Security escorted the "peeping tom" out. With time "the story went from me accidentally walking into the women's bathroom at Leisure Towers to me infiltrating the girls' locker room at Crossland HIGH SCHOOL" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 213). This resulted in boys congratulating him, calling him the "Stealthinator", and giving him high fives. "And for the first time ever I knew what it felt like to be the most popular kid at school" (Kinney, 2015b, p. 215).

Growing up in a matriarchal-patriarchal household

The protagonist grows up in a household that is neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. Greg's mum is more than a homemaker and mother – she is an activist petitioning for people "to stop using their phones and electronic gadgets for forty-eight hours" (Kinney, 2016, p. 3), a substitute teacher (Kinney, 2015b), and a baseball coach (Kinney, 2021). When Greg asked for a Barbie Dream House for Christmas when he was seven, his freethinking mom said "... it was healthy for me to 'experiment' with whatever kind of toys I wanted to play with" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 117). His dad, on the other hand "told me to start my wish list over and pick some toys that were more 'appropriate' for boys" (Kinney, 2015a, p. 117). It was important for Greg's dad to support any "manly" activities. He thus gave his son a new weight set, "that must have cost a fortune", for Christmas (Kinney, 2015a, p. 126) and forced him to be part of the swimming team. It was important for Greg's dad that he "learn how to do things by MYSELF [otherwise] I'm not gonna be able to survive in the 'real' world" (Kinney, 2016, p. 26). Greg tells the readers that his dad "hates how Mom still helps me get ready for school in the morning. She picks out my clothes the night before, and she has a chart hanging in the kitchen to help me stay on track" (Kinney, 2016, p. 26).

Conclusion

The four diaries that I used as data for my study tell the story of a small, clumsy, often cowardly and ineffective protagonist. Despite being subjected to verbal,

physical and emotional bullying, violence and humiliation on and off the sports field, the protagonist fails to be an empathetic and caring person. On the contrary, the protagonist found pleasure in humiliating those smaller than him, his loyal friend and members of the opposite gender. The diaries are full of paradoxes: the normalisation of heterosexuality is juxtaposed with femininity; the need for a man/boy to excel in sports is contrasted with an aversion to sweat, physicality and competitiveness; bravery and adventurisms as essential characteristics of the boy-hero is contrasted with faint-heartedness; and a strong-willed, freethinking mother is juxtaposed with a patriarchal father.

The popularity and availability of Kinney's books make them an ideal vehicle for teachers to create a sensitivity for gender issues. Teachers worldwide can use Kinney's diaries as vehicle to explain to children that the alpha male is not solely responsible for gender inequality and violence. The wimpy, seemingly innocent and helpless kid can also be the instigator of inequality between genders or within genders.

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