The Function and Practicality of Alternate Realities within Modern Children’s Literature

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Since its contemporary resurgence in popular culture in the mid-19th century, the plane of children’s literature has been populated by a number of specific tropes: fantastic and courageous heroes, valiant triumphs of good over evil, but more uniquely to this genre, the concept of the alternate reality, a world different from that of the reader. However, this definition is an oversimplification of the term, as there are many factors that contribute to this notion. Though these magical or otherwise eccentric worlds may be either familiar to the protagonist or discovered through fantastical channels, their unfamiliarity to the reader is what characterizes them as being an alternate reality. Whether this foreignness comes through unfamiliar species, political ideologies, or laws of nature, some form or another has been consistently present in children’s literature. From L. Frank Baum’s absurd *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900, to the present-day dystopian Panem of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, alternate realities remain almost inseparable from children’s literature.

One of the more notable aspects of these realities is not their existence, but rather their inhabitants. Where other forms of fiction are often more androcentric, children’s literature has been populated by a significant number of female protagonists. From Dorothy Gale to Katniss Everdeen, young women have been perennial explorers of these domains. Moreover, the past twenty years in particular have seen a significant rise in positive female characters. Beginning
with the publication of the first *Harry Potter* novel in 1997, many works have depicted well-rounded young women that show varied and diverse traits, most notably that of androgyny rather than overarching femininity, and it is this particular characteristic that allows female characters to gain more agency within their actions. This paper will explore and examine three contemporary characters exemplary of these androgynous traits: Hermione Granger of the *Harry Potter* series, Lyra Belacqua of the *His Dark Materials* series, and Violet Baudelaire of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Each of the characters populate wildly successful series, and do so while breaking gender norms.

The combination of these modern female characters and the alternate realities they inhabit creates a significant situation for young readers. While a child may first be drawn to a work featuring an imaginary world due to its fantastical nature, they are also provided the opportunity to engage with a reliable role model in the form of a female protagonist. Therefore, these stories serve as safe spaces for young female readers to explore their own femininity and personhood in an engaging and exciting world.

**ORIGIN OF THE IMAGINARY WORLD**

The concept of the imaginary world may seem like a modern phenomenon, particularly due to the popularity of Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, but in fact it has existed since the beginning of modern children’s literature in the 19th century. Although literary works for children have existed in one fashion or another for as long as there have been folk and fairy tales, the modern origins of the genre as a form of entertainment began with Lewis Carroll’s
1865 publication of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Prior to its introduction into the literary world, children’s stories were limited to poems, short fables, and songs. Famous works, such as the Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1812) or Hans Christian Andersen’s 1835 Fairy Tales were used as teaching tools and morality lessons rather than entertainment for their readers. In fact, it should be noted that the work of the Brothers Grimm was critiqued as being unsuitable for children due to its violent and unsettling nature, being referred to by Friedrich Ruhs in an 1812 review as “the most pathetic and tasteless material imaginable.”

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, more famously known as Lewis Carroll, originally created the story of Alice’s journey into Wonderland as a time-passing activity for the daughters of his personal friend, Henry Liddell. Liddell’s middle child, Alice, begged Dodgson to write down the story for her, and thus the famous story was born.

What makes Carroll’s tale particularly relevant to a comprehensive understanding of the genre are two things. Firstly, its origin lies in entertainment value, rather than as a method to reinforce any sort of moral doctrines. The story began exclusively to engage children on a boat ride, and continued in a similar whimsical fashion after Alice Liddell asked for a written version. Secondly, as Carroll’s novel set off the genre’s rebirth into its modern understanding, it did so through the use of another reality. As children’s literature was being redefined, it was doing so with a convention that provides both a captivating and accessible way for children to

3 “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” (The Harry Ransom Center, 300 West 21st Street, Austin, Texas 78712, 12 February 2015).
identify and connect to the themes of the story. Its value as entertainment combined with the imaginary world inside is what separates *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* from previous literary works, and what ultimately solidified contemporary children’s literature as a successful learning tool.

While novels geared toward children were by no means absent in the past, the success of alternate realities as it stands in the modern literary era is best exemplified through the worldwide phenomenon that is the *Harry Potter* series. The series’ publication in the mid-1990’s ignited a cross-cultural boom of children becoming interested in reading. The success of this series and the continued success of its contemporaries is in no small part due to several key traits. Unlike the works of more niche authors, these books have universal appeal. Rather than attempt to convey certain concepts through dense political rhetoric or graphic sexual content, *Harry Potter* features lighter and more palatable vehicles, such as magic and adventure, elements that are easily understandable and universally loved. Thus, these imaginary worlds provide the perfect stage to both intrigue with their mystery, and communicate with children on a level understandable to them.

These key elements contributed to the widespread success of the series, and the values are applicable to Potter’s contemporaries, especially Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series and Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which feature universally alluring themes of adventure and fantasy without, however, straying too far from the reader’s normal

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perception of reality. While elements such as flying broomsticks, talking animals, and
carnivorous leeches are decidedly strange, each story always retains some connection to the
normal world of the child reader. For example, within the context of *A Series of Unfortunate
Events*, Violet Baudelaire and her two siblings live in a world that is both familiar and
unfamiliar to the reader. The gothic world is reminiscent of 19th century England and contains
vaguely steampunk elements. In addition, the world places emphasis on the intelligence of
children over the stupidity of adults. Both of these factors construct an environment in which
the child feels more comfortable, even in the face of the unfamiliar. The unknown may be
daunting to some, but successful children’s books harness this mystery and use it as part of the
intrigue. Additionally, Pullman’s series uses the idea of an alternate reality in a more unique
way. The central protagonist, Lyra, lives within an alternate reality, but travels into our own
world within the series. The world is unique and new to Lyra, but not to the reader. By utilizing
these key elements of the fantasy genre, modern works of children’s literature capitalize on
universal pleasures while still being accessible to their readers.

**BENEFITS OF LEARNING THROUGH THE IMAGINARY**

For all the excitement these fictitious realities bring, they work equally well as a practical
method of teaching. In an obvious sense, early works such as *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* and Hans
Christian Andersen’s fairy tales explicitly lay out lessons that a child must take away in order to
have successfully interacted with a work. The imaginary world is often associated with
childhood and plays a vital role in a child’s development. In fact, it may be considered that the
primary goal of these works is to teach lessons. However, as noted earlier, what divides modern
literature from its early counterpart is the shifting purpose of the work. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* stood as the first children’s novel that serves as entertainment rather than education. Thus, the lessons within modern works must be presented in a much more subtle manner. In many ways, these lessons come from the imaginary worlds themselves.

Although these worlds can be constructed by the child during play, children are also given this opportunity through literature. Pretend worlds allow the child to examine their understanding of their own existence and negotiate their place within it. Michele Root-Bernstein’s book *Inventing Imaginary Worlds: From Childhood Play to Adult Creativity Across the Arts and Sciences* argues that “pretend play enables the child to construct internal pictures of schemas of reality,” a process that allows them to comprehend reality on a mental level appropriate to them. Root-Bernstein’s neurological studies show that the processing of reality through the imaginary produces a positive emotional response within the child’s brain, proving that the child’s utilization of the imaginary not only holds practical use, but engages the child as well.

The merging of both the familiar and unfamiliar creates an approachable means of telling a story, but while this system works for entertainment purposes, it also functions as a method of facilitating education. While the conventions and nature of the alternate world may be new to a child, the issues the characters face are rooted strongly in reality. In Claire Golomb’s *The Creation of Imaginary Worlds: The Role of Art, Magic and Dreams in Child Development*, she

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notes of alternate realities that “problems that confront its characters are...familiar to the child listener who resonates to the emotion the story evokes,” and thus assist in their understanding of their own world through the use of their fictional counterparts. Common childhood issues such as peer pressure, body image, and loss are often addressed within alternate realities, but arise organically within the context of the story. For example, when Harry Potter is tempted by his snide nemesis Draco Malfoy to join him, he replies “I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself,” demonstrating the power and validity of standing up for oneself in a situation that, despite its setting in a magical castle, is strongly based in real world principles.

In a similar vein, the alternate world helps children to understand larger negative aspects of the world of which the child might be otherwise unaware. Ambika Gopalakrishnan argues in *Multicultural Children’s Literature: a Critical Issues Approach* that while “[war, terrorism, and justice] are difficult topics to broach with children...an alternate world may help...facilitate empathy and understanding.” When children are introduced to a topic in a manner that is appealing to their sensibilities, such as a gripping story of magic and adventure, they are more willing to engage with the topic and thus more easily comprehend it. For example, a child may have an easier time understanding the concept of war through Voldemort and his cohorts’ reign of terror and destruction, rather than have an adult explain to them the harsh reality of terrorism. By having a relatable character as an entryway into a more detached form of a real

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world dilemma, a child is able to be distant enough from sensitive issues to feel safe, but close enough to appropriately discern their severity.

Another benefit of these alternate realities is that real problems are often more understandable because the lines of good and bad are more obvious. Where real world evil may manifest in subtler ways, these imaginary worlds are by design more exaggerated in scope. Golomb argues that because the plot of good versus evil is so common within alternate realities, it is “easy for children to identify the protagonist,” and thus emulate their prevailing traits of goodness in their own lives.9 The Baudelaire orphans spend their time trying to escape the clutches of their evil uncle, Count Olaf, whose negative characteristics such as greed, misogyny, and even murderous tendencies are more drastic, a direct result of Snicket’s construction of his imaginary child-positive world. To a child, the orphans’ opposing traits of intelligence, bravery, and kindness are highlighted as positive when juxtaposed with Olaf’s unnaturally devious nature. The framework of alternate realities as a more heightened version of our reality yields more easily identifiable sources of good and evil, proving beneficial to young readers who may have not otherwise seen such clear cut examples. The complex concepts of evil and badness are personified into singular characters, noted by Golomb as being “externalized [and] embodied as...the antagonist,” creating a situation where the protagonists’ ultimate triumph over the antagonist symbolizes the fallibility of all objectionable emotions and behavior.10 Rather than learn goodness by navigating a convoluted world of values, the hyperbolic nature of alternate

9 Golomb. The Creation of Imaginary Worlds, 158.
10 Ibid.
realities provides a child faced with unexplainable troubles an avenue that is both safe to maneuver and filled with unequivocal models of right and wrong.

As this system has proven fruitful for teaching children complex concepts such as good and evil or how to deal with loss, it is therefore a prime mode for tackling other important issues such as the representation of marginalized groups, especially that of females. Nina Huntemann and Michael Morgan of the University of Massachusetts Amherst state that “the massive flow of… symbolic models disseminated by the media profoundly shapes what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it.”

They note that when a child sees a constant stereotypical character, for example, a heroic white male, they assume this to be the default representation of personhood. Therefore, when a female child only sees representations of men in media, they assume themselves to be the other. Similarly, if they see only dainty demure women in the media, they assume that to be what the typical or ideal woman is supposed to be. Therefore, with such an influential and powerful medium as children’s literature, it is crucial that the women in these works be represented fairly. When young females interact with stories that depict strong well-rounded women, children understand those characters to be normal and accepted, reinforcing the positive traits within themselves and consequently invalidating the harmful and stereotypical conceptualizations of women abroad.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF ANDROGENY

A notable shift in female representation within children’s literature that has defined the modern period of the genre is the concept of androgyny. While children’s literature has regularly featured female characters, older works are largely populated with strict gender roles thrust upon female characters forced to behave in exclusively feminine ways. For example, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy’s and Susan’s interaction with Father Christmas directly censor their desire for masculine behavior. Lucy suggests she “thinks [she] could be brave enough” to participate in battle, but Father Christmas states that “that is not the point...battles are ugly when women fight.”

Although he acknowledges her self-assurance, Father Christmas limits her solely on the basis of gender. Additionally, his comment suggests that no woman, regardless of her traits or character, is fit to fight in any battle, asserting that no matter who they are, their gender confines them to one specific path. Although they desire to break gendered boundaries, they are explicitly forbidden from doing so. Their restricted representation informs readers that fighting is a trait reserved only for men, which automatically negates feminist ideas of breaking these stereotypes. In fact, Philip Pullman has chastised the *Chronicles of Narnia* series’ characterization of female characters as “monumentally disparaging of women,” and has called his series, including his protagonist, Lyra, a reaction against the demure Lucy and Susan.

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As children’s literature progressed into the modern era, however, its ability to navigate issues of gender limitations became unmistakably stronger. When Lucy and Susan are forbidden to act in masculine ways, they are forced to submit due to Father Christmas’ benevolent nature. His status as a childhood hero codifies his opinions as inherently correct. However, when Violet faces a similar situation in *The Bad Beginning*, her oppressor is characterized as evil, and is later defeated and humiliated. Count Olaf restricts Violet from building sets for his extravagant play, stating that “a pretty girl like [her] shouldn’t be working backstage,” to which Violet defiantly replies, “but I’d like to.”\(^{14}\) While her talents are similarly discredited on the mere basis of her sex, she disregards this, unlike Lucy and Susan, and puts those talents to use within the series. In fact, she frequently saves her family from danger using skills stereotypically thought of as masculine. She refuses to let the adults in her life inhibit her, thereby demonstrating the power of androgynous behavior.

**ANDROGENY WITHIN MODERN LITERATURE**

Thus, the concept of androgyny is vital to the understanding of positive female representation. Rather than being restricted to a predetermined set of acceptable behaviors, modern characters have the freedom to function in ways that combine both the feminine and masculine. For example, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the reader is frequently reminded of Violet’s two distinct attributes: her stereotypically masculine skill of inventing and the fact that when she “think[s] hard, her long hair [is] tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes.”\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Snicket, *The Bad Beginning*, 3.
Violet represents a modern understanding of womanhood as she combines both the masculine with a feminine image. As Tison Pugh notes in his book *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and Queerness in Children’s Literature*, within the series “retrograde constructions of gender are tossed aside, and girls and boys engage in activities historically gendered for the opposite sex.”\(^{16}\) Violet does not struggle with the choice of feminine or masculine, rather, she embraces both these identities wholly, and in doing so, she is free to act with greater agency.

In fact, it is the unfettered androgyny of Violet that makes her such a powerful character. Violet moves effortlessly between the feminine and masculine without fear of consequence, combining her matronly nurturing manner her knowledge of inventing and mechanics. In regard to the series, Pugh says, “freedom from gender roles allows the Baudelaire children to be blissfully innocent of the ways in which biologically sexed stereotypes might inhibit one’s psychosexual maturation,” which in turn demonstrates to young readers the benefits of defying gender stereotypes.\(^{17}\) Although Violet may be labeled in gender, this in no way determines her behavior. Thus, her androgynous habits are an expression of her freedom from gender roles, a trait codified as both acceptable and beneficial.

While Violet expresses her gender freely through both masculine and feminine traits, in *His Dark Materials*, Lyra’s androgyny is defined more so in her inclination toward the masculine. While still identifying as female, she disregards all preconceptions of her gender and


\(^{17}\) Pugh. “What Then Does Beatrice Mean,” 101.
behaves as fiercely and as bravely as the most heroic of men. In fact, as Sigrid Ingebord Solhaug says in his essay “The Fantastic Identity: De/constructing the Feminine Hero in Philip Pullman’s The Golden Compass,” Lyra is the ultimate symbol of foiled gender roles, as she is a “female in the place of a male.”18 She behaves as a stereotypically male hero would, fighting fiercely and with a drive to explore. For example, in a moment of valor, she stops an armored sentient bear, Iorek, from destroying a village out of revenge:

‘Iorek!’ she said in a fierce undertone. ‘Listen! You owe me a debt, right. Well, now you can repay it. Do as I ask. Don’t fight these men. Just turn around and walk away with me.’19

Despite her position as a 14-year-old girl, she behaves in a way typically reserved for only the strongest of men, and uses this to her advantage.

Lyra’s gender fluidity, similar to Violet’s, is what leads her to success as a character. By rejecting the idea that she should be nothing but prim and reticent, she obtains literary agency despite the expectations of her gender. As Solhaug indicates, Lyra “rejects the identity society attributes to her...Lyra’s strength and agency thus become even more substantial, considering the male dominated world in which she lives.”20 She even renounces the glamorous and hyper-feminized world of her mother, the nefarious Ms. Coulter. After spending a few weeks of affluence with her, Lyra begins to feel “confined and cramped by this polite life, however luxurious it was,” instead longing for “a day with...her Oxford ragamuffin friends, with a battle

in the clay beds and a race along the canal.”

Rather than be swayed by the alluring pleasantries of fanciful femininity, Lyra remains committed to her true desires, an unfeminine rough-and-tumble lifestyle, and it is this refusal to conform that allows Lyra the capacity to achieve what she really wants.

Similarly to Lyra and Violet, the character of Hermione Granger from J.K. Rowling’s beloved *Harry Potter* series demonstrates the ability to move freely between traditional gender roles in order to achieve success. Although she carries distinctly feminine traits, from crying frequently to an overly compassionate nature, she also masters the masculine attributes of bossiness and leadership and is repetitively called “the cleverest witch of [her] age.”

Although a secondary character, she establishes herself as having agency within the series, and does not simply remain a supporter to Harry throughout the series. Her strength comes from the fact that she establishes her own literary agency, and as Sarah Margaret Kniesler’s essay “Alohomora!: Unlocking Hermione’s Feminism” puts it, “refused to be shackled by the role of supporting character and establishes an identity for herself within Harry’s narrative.”

However, it is through the implementation of both her masculine and feminine characteristics that she is able to prosper.

What makes Hermione’s androgyny unique is that rather than primarily exhibit two distinctly gendered behaviors, as Violet does, or one extreme gendered behavior, as Lyra does,

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she reappropriates certain behaviors for use in a manner typical of the opposing gender.

Kniesler argues that Hermione “exhibits androgynous character traits, not only in her use of ‘masculine tendencies, but in her reappropriation and positive reimagining of conventional ‘feminine’ ones as well”24. This is best exemplified when she is faced with the task of stopping Neville from thwarting her group’s plans:

‘Go on then, try and hit me!’ said Neville, raising his fists. ‘I’m ready!’
Harry turned to Hermione.
‘Do something,’ he said desperately. Hermione stepped forward.
‘Neville,’ she said, ‘I’m really, really sorry about this.’ She raised her wand.
‘Petrificus Totalus!’ she cried, pointing it at Neville.
Neville’s arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.25

When faced with an obstacle, Hermione takes command of the situation, a behavior often regarded as solely masculine. However, under her control, rather than settle the matter through brute force or violence, she acts politely and calmly, quietly sedating Neville amidst a wave of apology. Her feminine compassion is here transformed into masculine leadership. She knows Neville is acting out of concern for his friends and sympathizes, but still does what is necessary to ultimately bring about the most good. In order to act effectively, she fuses the masculine characteristic of authority with feminine tenderness.

Hermione continues this redefinition of gender four books into the series with *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* when she attends the Yule Ball, dressed femininely for the first time in the series. Harry notices:

She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow.26

What is interesting is that although Hermione can shed her ordinary appearance for a more glamorous one, she chooses to do so only in this singular scene at the ball. She proves her ability to shift in and out of certain gender roles to her advantage, in this case to entice her date, Viktor Krum, but by never dressing in such a radical manner again, she demonstrates that she does not feel the need to conform to everyday femininity. Kniesler argues that “some of the more ‘feminine’ aspects of Hermione’s androgyny are also presented in positive ways, allowing Hermione to depict a reinvented femininity...not defined by weakness,”27 so that even though she momentarily conforms to femininity it is as a display of power. The plume of brilliantly feathered peacock is used to assert dominance in order to attract a female, but Hermione reappropriates this ritual for her own feminine gain. Her hyper-femininity is not a demonstration of submission, but rather the opposite, because by dressing in such a way just this once, she asserts her control over her gender identity and freedom from the societal pressure to never stray from it.

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INTERACTIONS WITHIN THE IMAGINARY

Although these worlds are not themselves safe spaces for the characters, the way in which they depict said characters creates safe spaces for their readers. These alternate realities emphasize the beneficent nature of the female protagonists in juxtaposition with the chauvinistic antagonists, thus establishing the traits of the young women as positive. For example, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, although she is undeniably oppressed, those who belittle Violet are consistently shown in a negative light, characterized as evil henchmen or pompous adults, demonstrating that sexist behavior is only present in the forces detrimental to the protagonist. Additionally, the alternate reality of the series functions to emphasize the intelligence of Violet as a woman. She is depicted as highly skilled and knowledgeable, not plain and simple as stereotypes would dictate. In *The Miserable Mill*, the orphans spend the entirety of the novel trying in vain to convince their guardians that Count Olaf is once again stalking them. After Olaf finally reveals his disguise, the incompetent Mr. Poe becomes distracted and Olaf makes his escape, prompting Violet to say:

‘Can we please discuss this matter later,’ Violet asked, ‘and call the police now? Maybe Count Olaf can be caught.’ ‘Excellent idea, Violet,’ Mr. Poe said, although of course he should have thought of this idea earlier himself.28

Mr. Poe’s persistent foolishness depicts a world in which children are not only intelligent and cunning, but these skills are necessary for their survival. Violet’s embodiment of these qualities as a woman establishes a space in which young females may begin to take an actively negative role.


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view on issues of discrimination and belittlement, while at the same time offering a way to successfully fight back and triumph over such issues.

Additionally, it is Lyra’s worlds to begin with that also give her agency as a character. The series itself is comprised of her exploration of several different alternate realities, all in the search for peace and justice. In fact, without her ability to travel to other worlds, she could not fulfill her literary destiny of restoring knowledge to her world. She is unknowingly given a prophecy that “she was to have the power to make a fateful choice, on which the future of all the worlds depended,” meaning that her actions, which stem from her agendered fierceness will end up restoring order to her world.29 Liberated from fear of gendered repercussions, she is able to perform with greater agency. This ability to act, combined with her ferocity, demonstrates to the reader the positive aspects of acting outside of one’s gender restrictions, for without it, Lyra’s world would fall into destruction. The reader may see Lyra’s magical world as corrupt and complicated, but the main character gives the reader not only a way to navigate the world, but also a gender role-breaking figure.

The world that Hermione Granger exists in is unique in that it is, for the most part, agendered, due to the fact that its defining element, magic, is a universal skill. While modern stereotypes originate in sexed traits such as strength being masculine due to higher levels of male testosterone, the ability to practice and perform magic is free from any inherently sexed skill. Thus, the nature of magic as it exists in the wizarding world is itself agendered. This sense

of equality is exhibited as far back as the initial founding of Hogwarts, which was performed by two men and two women. This concept is supported by Janet Croft in The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld, who notes that “there seems to be no difference in which subjects boys and girls are expected to excel, no difference in teaching methods, no difference in expectations of students’ academic or athletic achievement.” Classes and sports teams are co-ed, leadership positions are held by both men and women, and even the malevolent Death Eaters have several female members.

Because Hogwarts lacks any clear gender boundaries, Hermione is able to flourish into a positive female figure. She excels at her studies with full support from male and female teachers alike. This freedom from the expectations of gender roles allows Hermione the space she needs to demonstrate the value of androgyny. She is able to be both commanding and intelligent as well as compassionate and caring without as large a system of oppression that exists in reality. While characters may hold their own sexist prejudices, the overall magical environment creates an ideal place for her androgynous behavior to prosper.

CONCLUSION

All three of these individual characters within modern children’s literature have one thing in common: they are able to find success through the androgynous defiance of gender roles. This shift from the limiting femininity of authors like C.S. Lewis allows female characters

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the ability to fight, lead, and act in masculine ways when needed in order to accomplish their goals. They prove that while femininity is by no means negative, being restricted to predefined roles is. For example, while Lucy and Susan are forbidden from using force to help Narnia, a barrier they both seem to resent, Lyra is fully able to use her violent and fierce nature to escape and defeat enemies. When given the ability to act outside of gendered limitations, female characters flourish as the heroines of their own story. Their agency is not only significant in a literary sense, but demonstrates to young female readers the power and importance of gender fluidity. Each character is deeply loved within their own reality as well as the reader’s, leading each series to great cultural fame, only further solidifying the potential held in emulating these girls’ behaviors. As a result, female readers see that not only is acting intelligent, fierce, and powerful not frowned upon, it is celebrated.

On a very cursory level, it is easy to simply claim the worlds of the earlier period as limited or crudely un-feminist. Alice has been critiqued as spoiled and rude and Dorothy is almost always depicted as a gentle and fragile woman in modern retellings. In fact, in regards to C.S. Lewis’ work, Kath Filmer notes in *The Fiction of C.S. Lewis* that Lewis saw feminism as a “modern evil” and “wished to portray his fictional women as Ladies of the Courtly Love tradition,” and thus did so by creating a world that harkened back to antiquated chivalric values and gendered expectations so that he could “project...his ideal for the twentieth-century woman”31

However, a perspective which categorizes these works are un-feminist is an extremely limited understanding of these worlds. Particularly, the depiction of Dorothy Gale within the novel can be considered somewhat feminist in comparison to the rather limited reality the novel existed in due to her defiant nature and status as a leader among a group of men. Additionally, Carroll looked upon his character lovingly, having referred to her as “wildly curious, and with the eager enjoyment of Life that comes only in the happy hours of childhood.”32 For the women of the culture, reading about a female child who defies the powers that attempt to suppress her would be relatively revolutionary. Even Lucy and Susan, who can be critiqued extensively for their limited and rather misogynistic characteristics, are depicted as leaders of the world of Narnia.

That being said, perhaps the largest difference between these early and modern periods, and what makes the contemporary period unique, is the variation of characteristics that can be applied to the women of the contemporary genre. While the earlier period depicts a preliminary fight against the patriarchal establishment in imagining worlds where women could begin testing their own agency, the contemporary period instead depicts a reality that, much like our own, still suppresses women in many ways. However, the women of the world refuse to be confined; rather, they reclaim their own agency and fight against their world’s problems. While one of the main reasons these worlds are valuable to the child readers is how interesting each is, the female characters demonstrate that, no matter how wonderful or exciting a world may be, one must always stand in resistance to oppression. In this case, the characters demonstrate this

32 Lewis Carroll. “Alice on Stage.” The Theatre (1887): Print.
idea through their widely different personality traits. No matter what type of women each
ccharacter is, from aggressive warrior to intelligent bookworm, they are able to defeat the
ultimate evil of their world. To a child, this idea proves that no matter who they are, they are
powerful.

The extraordinary worlds of the cunning Violet Baudelaire, the fearless Lyra Belacqua,
and the brilliant Hermione Granger offer young women both an enchanting and convenient
place to examine femininity. The alternate realities present each female character with her own
unique experiences, allowing the young women who idolize them to find a world within which
to explore their own agency as a person. In fact, Pullman explained the concept thus:

...if you like the characters in the story and you want them to think well of you,
then you behave well in a situation [that is comparable to the character’s]...it’s
because you want the approval of the people you’ve read about...you like to think
that they would think well of you.33

These worlds provide safe consequence-free places for young girls to analyze not only
the repercussions of negative behavior through villainous characters, but also the benefits of
expressing one’s femininity in an androgynous manner through the female protagonists. The
girls in these worlds are more than just characters; they are guides that help navigate young
women through a world full of turmoil and show them that whether it be a murderous miser,
an inter-dimensional war, or a rogue terroristic sorcerer, a strong and powerful woman can
always find a solution.