

How children's fiction helps to uphold gender stereotypes, especially within the family unit.

Many critics and theorists have stated that gender is not related to a person's biological sex but is actually socially constructed through discourse and ideology (Butler, 1990; Risman 2004). Others have shown that our modern idea of what the family should be has also been socially constructed through ideological discourses which gradually become hegemonic (Alston, 2008; Lundin, 2009). So that, even if the ideals of gender binaries masculine and feminine, and the nuclear family, only represent a minority in reality, because the majority of society have bought into these ideals and come to see them as natural and common-sense, we all become bound by their normative structures. One of the key ways of inculcating ideology into hegemonic belief is via the mass media, including literary texts (Grauerholz 1989; Palmer et al, 2006). If we add to this the fact that psychologists since Freud and ethnographic studies since at least the 1970s have shown that stories read in childhood impact upon the psyche and world-view of people for the rest of their lives, we can see how important children's literature is in the creation, contestation or perpetuation of hegemonic discourses. (Educational Publishers Council, 1981; Gabriel, 2007).

Stories create this impact both explicitly and implicitly (Grenby and Reynolds, 2011). Through the language of the text; the layout of the book; plot sequence; subtle indicators such as use of colours to indicate mood and even to uphold gender biases. For example, showing boys always dressed in blue and having rosy cheeks, dirty skin and clothes, indicating action and a lack of interest in physical appearance, and illustrations that normalize the family as consisting of Mum, Dad and children and uphold gender stereotypical roles like Mum and daughter washing dishes while Dad reads a newspaper or plays football with his son (Evans, 1998; McMahon, 2010). Implicitly, messages are reinforced through the interaction of the reader's existing ideology and understanding of the world with the text and images in the book to create individual responses (McMahon, 2010; Melrose, 2012). Anne Fine (2013) said '[if] children read lots of books [the] less impact any one book will have'. It is therefore important that children are exposed to books with a variety of interpretations of the world and not just stereotypes. For young children with a developing, basic understanding of the world, their interaction with the book is often mediated through parents' views. Parents, religious groups, schools and other social institutions will use story books to emphasize and validate existing ideology (Brown cited in Palmer et al, 2006).

This essay will look at three examples of books for children that span an historical period from the 1930s to the very end of the twentieth century, to demonstrate how the essential view of family and the gender roles it requires, portrayed in children's literature, has remained constant in essence, with variations to reflect social changes (Johnston, 2011; McMahon, 2010). Each book will be examined for instances of language/text, illustrations, plot and layout that either uphold or challenge hegemonic ideals of family and gender through the techniques described above; with an emphasis on the 1968 story *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*. The 1937 book, *The Family from One End Street*, and the 1999 book, *The Illustrated Mum*, will be used for comparison.

On the surface *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* is a gentle, everyday story about one day in the life of an ordinary family; with a fantasy element about a little girl befriending a tiger who visits them at tea-time and consumes everything in the house. Beyond the surface the story can also be seen as a social statement about the plight of everyday families in the 1960s struggling to make ends meet. The tiger representing the capitalist culture of consumption which eats all of the family's resources

by the end of the week until 'Daddy' comes home with his pay-packet to replenish stocks (Melrose, 2012). Within this portrayal there are unquestioned, fixed gender roles in which 'Mummy' stays at home doing the domestic chores and child-care and 'Daddy' goes out to work. Daddy is given the heroic role of provider, 'bread-winner' and bringer of salvation by the end of the book. In fact, all of the work roles in the book are carried out by male characters: the milkman, the grocery boy and Daddy. Mummy's work goes unstated in the text, the results of her labour simply there in the pictures (table laid with home-made cakes, pots on the stove) until the final pages when we see Mummy with a broom in her hand amidst the debris of the tiger's rampage through the kitchen but no textual reference to the task ahead of her, simply "I've got nothing for Daddy's supper". Only the now empty pots on the stove indicating that this means she should have cooked something for Daddy to eat when he gets home. This represents a typical 1950s/60s ideal of family life, promoted by Western governments from 1950 onwards, in a drive to get women back into the home and domestic roles and away from the wage-earning jobs they had taken on during World War Two (Tucker and Gamble, 2001).

It is also Mummy who takes the socially acceptable (for the time) action of inviting the stranger, a tiger, in for tea. Looking at this from a twenty-first century perspective, Anne Fine is horrified that the book presents the lack of anything 'for Daddy's tea' as 'more of a worry than having a tiger in the house' (2013). Her reaction shows how contemporary discourses, in this case "stranger danger", influence our interpretations of the text (Reynolds, 2005). However, this aspect of the book could also be seen as a veiled social comment on the wastefulness of the middle-classes and an endorsement of patriarchal views of the time that the females were to blame for 'Daddy's' pay not quite stretching to the next pay-packet. In contrast to *The Family from One End Street*, published in 1937, where the story acknowledges that working-class women would take home-based paid employment on top of the household and child-rearing everyday tasks expected of them; by the time we come to the 1960s, and to a more middle-class family, the expectation is that the wife would stay at home and focus on child-rearing and supporting the wage-earning husband. The female children in *The Family from One End Street* are also expected to take on a share of the house-hold work, especially the eldest child, Lily-Rose who, at twelve-and-a-half, was 'handy with the mangle' (p.6) and 'was an expert at[...]scrubbing[...]her young brothers and sisters'(p.22). In *The Tiger who came to Tea*, the young Sophie be-friends, cuddles and even seems to idolize the tiger whilst he devours everything. Mummy stands idly by, reflecting the passive female role often bemoaned by feminist critics of literature throughout the ages (Evans, 1998; Johnston, 2011). Implicitly, the tiger has an alpha-male presence, which the females simultaneously bow down to, respect, and decry. Although Mummy and Sophie could be said to have had an adventure, having a tiger to tea, it is not portrayed that way. If Sophie had been a little boy, the trend in children's literature would have been for the focus to be centred on this adventurous aspect rather than the domestic focus that the book actually has (Children's Rights Workshop, 1976). This trend goes back to the very beginning of books being published for children, when they were mostly separated into books for boys and books for girls (Chambers, 1985; Richardson, 1993). Although this practice has mostly died out under pressure from feminist and other egalitarian social phenomena this book illustrates that it still implicitly influences narrative structure (Reynolds, 2005; Lundin, 2009).

As the book progresses the pictures of Mummy go from polite cheerfulness to growing concern and finally dejected misery in the picture where she is undressing Sophie for the bath for which there is no water. In real terms this would be the absence of any money to heat the water for the bath,

which explains why Mummy is still undressing Sophie resignedly, miserably, to wash her in cold water ready for bed. In the illustrations the passive Mummy carries out her expected duties even when the text indicates that this action is futile. Throughout the book Mummy and Sophie are shown to be reactive, never acting impulsively or proactively. This is reserved for Daddy. On the next page, although the text merely states 'Just then Sophie's daddy came home', the picture shows Daddy in an heroic, conjurer's, pose; a strong, smiling man who fills the frame of the open door (and of the picture) and stands bright but solid against the darkness outside. With a flourish of his hat Daddy produces the solution to all of Mummy's worries.

Little Sophie seems to remain smilingly innocent of the worries and drama throughout, reflecting the 'innocent' view of the child still in vogue at the time and indicating that Mummy has done a good job of parenting, providing an emotionally secure environment for her child in-line with expectations of the parenting experts whose advice had been steadily increasing in influence since their inception in the modernist period (Richardson, 1993; Reynolds, 2005). The next picture portrays the ideal nuclear family: Daddy sits centre-stage, dominating the picture, surrounded by icons of a working man (briefcase, hat, tie) patiently listening to the tales of woe from his wife, whilst little Sophie stands quietly, obediently but happily, at her mother's side, both waiting for Daddy's verdict. On the facing page peace has been restored. Everyone is smiling again as Daddy has saved the day. 'I know what we'll do[...] We'll put on our coats and go to a café' says Daddy. The text seems to imply that Mummy or Sophie, being female, could never have thought of such a "very good idea". So Daddy is also clever and thoughtful because now Mummy won't have to cook and Daddy won't have to traipse round the shops to get food; Mummy and Sophie do this on the next page when Daddy is presumably back at work. The previous illustration also emphasizes the 'new' role of the successful 1960s father, who takes a hand in the childcare when he returns from work. Daddy is pictured front and centre helping Sophie to button her winter coat before taking his family out into the cold. Mummy is happy to retire to the back-ground relieved that Daddy has saved the day.

The next two pages are significantly different from the rest of the book. The illustration is a double-page spread (the only one in the book) showing the family happily walking down the road. Daddy is again central, both to the picture and because he stands in the centre of the family group, supporting the females who hold on to his arms. Daddy looks purposefully ahead, steering a clear path for his family whilst Mummy and Sophie are free to look at each other, safe in the knowledge that Daddy will guide them. Daddy takes the 'manly' posture of striding purposefully, legs outstretched, hands in pockets. On the facing page, safely behind them, the spectre of the tiger has been reduced to a humble domestic cat. This is also the only illustration in the book that bleeds to the edges of the pages. Reynolds (2005) informs us that the effect of this technique 'is to pull the reader more actively into the picture' (p.213). So the reader is actively drawn into the safe, cosy image of the nuclear family united against the cold outside world. This picture, with all of its extra background details, invites the reader to stop and spend time with this image (Nodelman, 2008). The narrative also does not run on to the next page. This could easily be the end of the book. So, the most interesting and enticing image in the whole book is of the united nuclear family centred round the father.

The following few pages revert to the individual, page opening, illustrations as the text reverts to domesticity. The next page contains cheerful, straightforward text 'they had a lovely supper with

sausages and chips and ice-cream' but the picture shows that only Daddy had the luxury of a drink with his meal, which appears to be beer in a tankard-type glass (reminiscent of masculine environments such as public houses, rather than cafes). Mummy and Sophie could be seen to be behaving in the way they ought to do in public in the 1960s – not chatting but looking down at their plates, eating whilst Daddy looks ahead, overseeing the scene (Reynolds, 2005). On the penultimate page a happier Mummy and Sophie are back to their domestic chores, grocery shopping for the family. Sophie holds a very large tin of tiger food to ward off any repetition of the books events. But we need not worry, because Daddy's salvation is apparently permanent and the tiger never returns. On the final page the tiger is depicted facing away from us. Perhaps he is an ever-present threat but for now he will not bother us. Illustrations and text have worked together to leave the reader feeling safe, happy and reassured and thus reinforcing hegemonic stereotypes of family and gender roles and attributes.

The simplicity of the language used has reinforced this throughout. Of course, simple language is used to make the story accessible to young readers. However the effect is also to normalize the story's ideology (Evans, 1998). It simply states 'Sophie's daddy came home'. The illustration indicates, with easily recognizable visual clues such as suit and tie, he has come home from work. The inference is that this is so obvious that it does not need to be stated: of course he has come home from work, where else would a father be? The reality for many families could be that daddy had come home from the pub, the betting shop, the allotment, the job-centre. I am, of course, drawing here on negative male stereotypes to make my point; but they are as likely possibilities in many children's lives as daddy coming home from work. The point is that only one outcome is validated and normalized through its unstated acceptance (Evans, 1998). And the point can be applied equally to the unstated fact that Mummy does not go out to work, that Mummy has, of course, cooked tea and not popped out to the chip-shop/takeaway or bakery or, in fact, that Daddy is around at all. On the very first page it is just Sophie and Mummy having tea alone and yet somehow we know Daddy is in the background waiting to come home and just to reassert this fact, he is introduced to the story on the third page.

Portraying 'realistic' family life is the theme of Eve Garnett's 1937 story *The Family from One End Street*. The book simultaneously depicts 'ordinary children from the poorer area of London' (introduction) and the modern nuclear family, who no longer lived in an extended family group with grand-parents, aunts and uncles (Gabriel, 2007). Although the neighbours call the large family "Victorian" (p.2) they are depicted as a family that is moving with the times. Mrs Ruggles proudly tells her best customer that she takes baby William to the new 'Welfare Centre[...]once a week to be weighed' (p.34). This was a new social practice introduced by the government in the 1920s to 'improve the physiques of the workforce and[...] make them less costly' (Reynolds, 2005, p.27). The adventures had by all the family include motor-cars, lorries, cinema and visits to London, most of which would have been beyond the experience of the majority of poor working-class families of the time. The family are also portrayed as modern in outlook: both parents are proud that their daughters are intelligent and do well at school, as Mrs Ruggles keenly points out to Kate's head-teacher: 'I'm not one of those mothers what wants their children home and earning at fourteen'" (pp.40-41) and the girls themselves dream of being independent business women, albeit with a domestic base: Lily-Rose of owning a modern 'steam laundry' (p.37) and Kate of being a modern farmer employing the latest techniques with 'motor-ploughs and chemicals' (p.44). Other characters also promote progressive ideas: the neighbouring shop-owner, who wins a large amount of money in a

competition, 'promptly invested most of it in the better education of his daughter' (p.55) against the opinion of many.

The book also challenges some long-held gender attribute stereotypes. Mr Ruggles is shown as the day-dreamer, an attribute usually depicted in children's literature as feminine (Richardson, 1993). "He gets *Ideas* in his Head"(p.34) says his wife, who is the one to always point out the practical issues. This is highlighted in chapter three, when Kate is offered a scholarship. 'Mr Ruggles was delighted, and declared that nothing should stand in the way of Kate's continuing to cultivate the good brains[...]bestowed on her' but Mrs Ruggles responds "do realize[...]clothes will have to be found for Kate for the next five years".

The Family from One End Street also breaks away from the mould of producing books for boys and books for girls, giving us instead chapters that seem gendered within the one book. Framed by chapters about the whole family are those focused around girls adventures, which are more like 'mishaps' (introduction), and others focused on the exciting adventures of the boys. So the structure of the book emphasizes the social structure of the nuclear family, beginning and ending with them all together. It also seems to naturalize the idea that boys and girls should have different types of adventures, separately from each other, and that girls' adventures should focus predominantly around domestic life whereas boys should go out into the wider world. However, Kate does take on the mushroom scavenging adventure in the local fields, showing again the book's attempts to break these stereotypes. The book's peritext also seems to aim at a female readership, with a pink background on the front cover behind two line drawings of a boy and a girl. So the structure and plot seem to undermine the attempts at bringing the book in line with the contemporaneous modernist movement or showing the family to be 'modern' in outlook.

The use of language also highlights hegemonic ideals in a way that suggests Garnett hoped readers would question them. The very first sentence of chapter two tells us that Lily-Rose was 'Helpful in the Home'. The unnecessarily capitalized words draw attention and make this phrase stand out as if to highlight a commonly accepted gender-role label which is then underscored by the description of the many domestic chores this twelve-year-old is required to do. The same paragraph also tells us that she has a 'great ambition' to own a modern steam laundry when she is older. The choice of such strong language in connection with an almost adolescent girl contradicts the literary trend of depicting females as insipid, demur and passive (Children's Rights Workshop, 1976; Grenby and Reynolds, 2011). All of the characters in this book, male and female, adult and child, are strong resourceful and active despite their socio-economic situation. The dialogue between Mr and Mrs Ruggles in chapter one also exposes stereotyped ideas about masculinity and femininity in their good-natured banter over naming their children. Mr Ruggles acquiesces to his wife's naming of their first child, a girl, Lily-Rose, but 'drew the line at fancy and flowery names for boys' (p.14). Unlike *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* the humorous way in which this book draws attention to such issues serves to highlight them to readers who must then draw their own inferences. Since this book is aimed at much older readers than *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* these techniques can be seen as a subtle attempt to encourage child readers to think about hegemonic ideology, which they would only be aware of subconsciously, to bring it to their attention in the hope that they may begin to question why such assumptions are there and whether they ought to change (Grenby and Reynolds, 2011). It is interesting to note that it is the earlier, historically, of these books which attempts to highlight and perhaps challenge at least gendered, if not family, constructions.

The most recent of the books under consideration here is *The Illustrated Mum* by Jacqueline Wilson (1999). Similarly to Eve Garnett, Wilson wrote a social realist story that aims to highlight the lives of those families who do not conform to the normative hegemonic ideal (Eccleshare, 2013; Tucker and Gamble, 2011). Gone is the nuclear family of the previous two books. Written from the point of view of a ten-year-old girl, this is about a single-parent family in which the mother has serious mental health issues that cause her to swing from childish irresponsibility, including outlandish attempts to 'mother' her girls, to bouts of self-loathing and depression. The two young sisters take on parental responsibilities towards themselves and their mother. However, although the book takes on difficult, real-life issues that face families and portrays female child characters as strong and resourceful, the underlying message is still that the nuclear family, or at least the stability of two loving, caring, responsible parents, is the ideal. Behind the strong, active, imaginative female characters also lurks the stereotypical passive female searching for the dominant male to provide for and protect her. The plot is driven by the mother's search for her lost ideal love (Star's father) and the girls' search for their respective fathers and their wish to 'achieve their fantasy of a two-parent, happy family unit' (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2008, p.60). The ideal of this supportive, nuclear family is further emphasized by revealing that the mother's troubles stem from the fact that she was abandoned as a young child and raised in a 'care-home'.

All three of the children's books looked at represent different ideas of the family but the hegemonic ideal of the nuclear family has been shown to persist until the present day. Gender consciousness and stereotypical gender-attributes are slowly changing in the portrayal of both adult and child characters to reflect modern understanding of the range of gender possibilities and the way that these are not biological but socially constructed (Chambers, 1985). Contemporary realist fiction may have changed to reflect the disjointed nature of children's real lives but the ideal of the nuclear family, and its attendant gender roles of nurturing mother and protective father creating a strong supportive, socializing unit can still be seen to lie at the heart of all fiction for children. Whilst capitalism is still the dominant ideology fiction, especially that for children, will most likely continue to predominantly uphold rather than challenge these ideals (Richardson, 1993; Tucker and Gamble, 2001).

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