Panel 15: Communities and Outsiders

Claudia Nelson, Alienated Girlhood in Works by Christabel Coleridge

Like her more famous mentor Charlotte Yonge, Christabel Coleridge (1843–1921) spent much of her writing life thinking about girlhood and its travails. In her youth, Coleridge was a member of the Goslings (to Yonge’s “Mother Goose”), a group of privileged “home daughters” who produced the manuscript magazine The Barnacle as an outlet for their creative and intellectual aspirations. A fragment of one of Coleridge’s Barnacle contributions, a serialized historical novel from 1867 titled “Giftie the Changeling,” is among the first known literary productions of a writing career that extended well into the twentieth century. Shut out emotionally by her family because they believe her to be a changeling (a child of the fairy folk left to replace a stolen human infant), Giftie inaugurates a series of girls in Coleridge’s works who are characterized as out of place, unable to conform to the pattern of girlhood considered appropriate by their society. In later works such as the school story The Green Girls of Greythorpe (1890) and an essay collection addressing depression among “middle-aged maids,” The Daughters Who Have Not Revolted (1894), Coleridge continues to explore alienation among girls and former girls. In this preoccupation she was by no means unusual among the writers of her era, as both conservatives such as Dinah Mulock Craik and New Women feminists such as Sarah Grand also spent considerable time on the topic. But discussion of alienation in works by Coleridge is desirable not only because she has received little attention from scholars but also because in her role as editor of The Monthly Packet – a role that she inherited from Yonge, who founded the magazine to educate affluent Tractarian girls and nurture their literary aspirations – she influenced understandings of girlhood among the magazine’s young female readers and contributors.

Claudia Nelson is Professor of English, Emerita, at Texas A&M University. A former president of the Children’s Literature Association and former editor of the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, she has published six edited books and six monographs, most recently Topologies of the Classical World in Children’s Literature: Palimpsests, Maps, and Fractals, coauthored with Anne Morey (Oxford UP, 2019). Two of her books are being translated into Chinese. She is also the editor of the book series Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present, now published by Routledge.

Sara Pini, Brave New Heroine? Katniss Everdeen, the Burnt “Girl on Fire” Who Did Not Revolutionise Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

Praised by most of the critics (for example, Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis, McFarland & Company, 2012; Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy, McFarland & Company, 2012) both as a revolutionary, long-awaited female character and a solid, independent model for young generations, who defies traditional gender roles and the usual limitations imposed to “female heroes”, Katniss Everdeen seems to be the best example of those “tomboy” heroines at the basis
of contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults. Katniss is considered pivotal to show how
girlhood is presented nowadays: she is an inspiring leader and she saves others rather than being
have paved the way to a radical change in how girls are presented (and expected to be) in young
adult fiction. Thus, all’s well that ends well?

Not at all. This paper will show how Katniss is all but a revolutionary heroine and how she is
more a potential danger than a model for young readers. Not only is she a passive, selfish
character – it is also doubtful that she should be addressed as a heroine at all, as she reacts to
other characters’ stimuli rather than making decisions on her own and pursuing aims beyond
her own benefit. She refuses to take on an active role in the community as well as to socialise
with her peers and the society, which are basilar steps to reach adulthood. The paper will offer
eamples according to two recurring themes – fire and voice – that will be analysed by making
reference to the concepts of empowerment and agency, as well as Roberta Seelinger Trites’
toey on the relationship between adolescents and institutional authority (*Disturbing the
Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, University of Iowa Press, 2000).
The excerpts will make clear that fire is not Katniss’ weapon, but her enemy, and that despite
being given many chances to make her voice heard, she remains silent, gradually dying as
symbol of the rebellion, as promising revolutionary character, and as model for adolescent
readers. Thus, she embodies a missed chance to offer a proper heroine to young readers.

**Sara Pini** is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures of the
University of Bologna, Italy. She has been awarded a three-year scholarship for her PhD research project
about contemporary Holocaust literature in English for young readers. She is part of the WeTell project
and she has translated Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into Italian. She has previously obtained a
BA in Foreign Languages and Literatures and a two-year MA in Modern, Comparative, and Postcolonial
Literatures at the same University, both with honours. This paper is based on her MA dissertation “‘She
has no idea. The effect she can have.’: Power and Agency in *The Hunger Games*”.

**Birgitta Theander, Girls Living Together: A Feministic Utopia?**

In this paper I will analyse three kinds of all-female communities that are not infrequent in
classic girls’ literature, and discuss their relation to the surrounding society.

I will concentrate on the following examples:

- The collective accommodation in Patty’s Place (Carolinas tjäll) in Lucy Maud
  Montgomery’s *Anne of the Island*, 1915.
- The pair of self-supporting young women setting up a home in Astrid Lindgren’s
  *Kati på Kaptensgatan*, 1952.
- The boarding school life depicted in the Dimsie-books by Dorita Fairlie Bruce. These
  were written in the 1920’s and translated to Swedish in the 1950’s.

These kinds of accommodations are loved by the protagonists themselves, and they have, as
Gabriella Åhmansson (1991) says about Patty’s Place, also had “an endless appeal to girls all
over the world”. From the 1990’s and onward these all-female communities have by several scholars been called “female Utopias”.

In my analysis I show how this epithet is, in many ways, quite adequate. But then I take a step further and discuss different meanings of the concept ”Utopia” and the intriguing question: How do these texts relate to the feminist notion of an oppressive patriarchal society?

**Birgitta Theander** is PhD in literature since 2006. She is now affiliated researcher at Lund University. Her main interest is girls’ fiction from the early and middle twentieth century, on which subject she has written two books, *Loved and Denied: Girls’ Fiction in Sweden 1945–65*, and *To the Work! Vocational Dreams and Working Life in Girls’ Fiction 1920–65*. She has also presented Astrid Lindgren’s Kati-books on the net-based *Litteraturbanken* and contributed with several articles for *The Swedish Biographic Encyclopaedia of Women*. 