Panel 9: Reimagining Girlhood

Jade Dillon, (Re)Imagining Girlhood: The Artistic Evolution of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

This paper will perform an iconographic reading of multimodal creations of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. I will outline the visualization of the ‘Alice’ figure through a selection of radical artistic representations including Kaneko Kuniyoshi, Camille Rose Garcia and Benjamin Lacombe. The visual gaze will be used to frame the discussion of Kuniyoshi’s ‘Alice’ figure through Lolita fashion and the Japanese idealization of shōjo. While the term ‘shōjo’ is associated primarily with Japanese culture, there are also evident assertions of shōjo – or, cuteness – in Garcia’s artwork that contain elements of metapicture through allusions to Walt Disney’s 1951 Alice in Wonderland. Garcia fuses the uncanny and the cute in her selection of images to capture the layers of meaning and interpretation in relation to the ‘Alice’ figure. Meanwhile, Lacombe’s collection of illustrations is formative of a modified Alice who exists on the cusp of puberty and womanhood. He presents a gothic and abstract Alice who distorts the normative view of feminine identity. This paper will analyse the changing representation of girlhood in Alice illustrations in order to investigate how the interpretation of girlhood can create a transcultural and transtemporal character identity for the ‘Alice’ figure. This work is important because it challenges the gender stereotyping of young girls in literature and illustration. Children’s literature has a significant impact on the mindset of a child, and the representations of gender that are presented to the reader can create an unconscious bias of what is classed as ‘typical’ feminine or masculine portrayal. Alice is often misconceived as a doe-eyed child who is docile and unassuming; however, this representation does her a disservice. She is a strong and self-assured character who independently seeks adventure by herself. This paper will prove how multifaceted female representation in children’s stories can, and should, be.

Dr Jade Dillon holds a PhD in children’s literature and visual culture. Her research focuses on the visual iconography of the ‘Alice’ figure created in Lewis Carroll’s Alice books and it traces the progression of Alice’s characterization through multimodal platforms including illustration and fine art photography. She has published her research with numerous academic journals and books, as well as general articles on children’s literature with RTE Brainstorm (Ireland).

Mette Hildeman Sjölin, The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines

In 1850, a story collection called The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines was published, written by the author and Shakespeare scholar Mary Cowden Clarke. The stories are what we would now call ‘prequels’ to Shakespeare’s plays, following some of his female characters from birth to the point where Shakespeare’s story begins. These coming-of-age stories, written about and (at least partly) for girls, might be counted as examples of Victorian ‘girls’ literature’.

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Cowden Clarke’s work can be compared to Henrietta Bowdler’s *The Family Shakespeare* (1807), a family-friendly edition of Shakespeare’s works, and Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), a collection of stories retelling Shakespeare’s plots in narrative form. Where Bowdler and the Lambs present the events from Shakespeare’s plays in versions aimed at children, Cowden Clarke invents new stories, focusing not on the most central (male and adult) characters of the plays, but specifically on the girls in their shadows.

The stories can also be contrasted with feminist re-visions of Shakespeare’s plays from more recent times. The Women’s Theatre Group’s play *Lear’s Daughters* (1987) is also a prequel offering an explanation for why Shakespeare’s female characters have turned out the way they have and what they may have been like as girls; this re-vision, however, has a more obviously political aim in its analysis of the power structures in *King Lear*. Like *Lear’s Daughters*, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* gives young girls more space than Shakespeare’s plays do, but these prequels confirm Shakespeare’s versions rather than question or contradict them.

Cowden Clarke does, however, offer psychological readings of Shakespeare’s female characters and sees their girlhoods as determining their fates. This paper explores the conception of girlhood in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*, contrasting it with the conception of girlhood in Shakespeare’s plays.

Mette Hildeman Sjölin defended her doctoral thesis in English literature at Lund University in 2017. Her thesis deals with appropriations of Shakespeare’s tragedies, written for the stage between 1980 and 2010, with a particular focus on the depiction and performance of women and familial relationships. A revised version will be published in the series Lund Studies in English in 2020. Sjölin is also co-editor of *Subjectivity and Epistemicity: Corpus, Discourse and Literary Approaches to Stance* (2014). She is currently teaching English at Lund University.

Jennifer Gouck, *Becoming Pixie: Conceptualising and Challenging the Manic Pixie Dream Girl*

Coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin, though arguably in our cultural consciousness for much longer, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) can be found across literature, cinema, and popular culture. A quirky, ethereal figure, the MPDG “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, ‘Bataan March’). In YA fiction, the Pixie can be found in a novel type I call ‘MPDGYA’. Merely a prop for self-actualisation, in these kinds of stories the MPDG has no narrative purpose beyond that of enriching the life of a male, white protagonist – thus sending a troubling message to young, female readers.

In recent years, interventionist MPDGYA has emerged, in which authors seek to challenge, dismantle, and disrupt the trope. Indeed, author John Green argues in a Tumblr post that his 2008 novel *Paper Towns* is devoted IN ITS ENTIRETY to destroying the lie of the manic pixie dream girl.” A more recent interventionist novel can be found in Gretchen McNeil’s *I’m Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (2016), in which brilliant mathematician, Bea, invents a formula for Pixieism as part of an MIT scholarship application – with the seemingly more
important goal of securing the affections of her crush and achieving social success along the way.

This paper seeks to examine how Bea attempts to ‘become Pixie’ and conceptualise the MPDG trope, while also considering the extent to which McNeil is successful, or not, in her challenge of the ever-pervasive trope. Modelling her novel on the traditional YA rom-com and transformation story, and in making use of the makeover paradigm, does McNeil intervene in Pixie patterns? Or does she simply reproduce – and repackage – that which makes the MPDG such a problematic representation of teen girlhood in contemporary American YA?

Jennifer Gouck is a third year PhD student at University College Dublin. Funded by the Irish Research Council, Jennifer’s thesis focuses on representations of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in contemporary American Young Adult Literature, Media, and Culture. She is a contributor to the YA Literature Media and Culture Network blog founded by Dr Leah Phillips. In 2018, Jennifer was shortlisted for the Irish Society for the Study of Children’s Literature Biennial Award for an Outstanding Thesis on Children’s Literature for her work on rape (culture) in Louise O’Neill’s Asking for It (2015).