

Gendered Identities Explored:

The Lord of the Rings as a Text of Alternative Ways of Being

The *Lord of the Rings* is a fantastic and magically woven narrative of adventure, courage, and friendship. Romance and mystique abound in the physical and spiritual journey that a small hobbit makes with a Fellowship of eight other members of Middle Earth. Of course, this world, not unlike our own, suffers from greed, misused power, and war. In other words, it is a world dominated by men.

Identity is shaped by the multiple experiences a person has in the world. Davies (1989) suggests that “our subjectivities are experienced as if they were entirely our own because we take on the discursive practices and story-lines as if they were our own and make sense of them in terms of our own particular experiences” (230). In other words, our individual perceptions and feelings (subjectivities) of the world come from shared discourses and interpretations of texts. Of course, we must also respect that the “reader” of discourses brings past experiences, values, and beliefs that influence her understanding of the new discourses and interpretations (Rosenblatt, 1986, 1990, 1991). DeBlase (2003) suggests that “Transactions with literacy engage individuals not as passive recipients of text and culture but as coproducers of culture” (625) so that gender, class, and racial identities are being created and maintained in complex ways.

Constructing and Deconstructing Gender: Problematising *The Lord of the Rings*

I am concerned with the shaping of a reader’s gendered identity during his/her transaction with

texts, such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien creates a fantastically detailed and lovingly developed world so that a reader is drawn in without much room for reflection. Even after pausing between reads, the reader is left to mull over the descriptions and plot in order to comprehend and manage the multiple narratives. Or perhaps, Middle Earth corresponds with the reader’s world values and beliefs so that gender roles do not appear problematic.

In one study, Davies (1989) found that when elementary students were presented with a feminist story (*Paper Bag Princess*, Munsch, 1980) many of them heard and understood the story as “a variation of a known story line in which males are heroes and females are other to those heroes” (231). These students did not have background experience with which to understand the disruption of the male and female roles; therefore, the consideration of inequality in gender roles did not occur to them, and their understanding of male and female roles was not disrupted with simply reading a text. Similarly, in a study of adolescent female literacy practices, DeBlase (2003) found that the female students did “not merely absorb the values of progressive or multi-cultural texts—particularly when the cultural representations of women in these texts are not supported by a society’s notions of femininity” (633). Thus, students need explicit instruction in deconstructing male and female roles in texts.

Deconstructing Masculinity

A long-term goal of feminist post-structuralists is to disrupt the inequality of gender roles and expecta-

tions through critical reflection with texts. By deconstructing how language constructs gender, students may be able to question and challenge the inequalities that exist. Researchers such as Connell (1995, 1996), Davies (1997), Kimmel (1993), and Martino (1995a, 1995b) suggest that the construction of masculinity be given specific examination because the depiction of one 'correct' version of masculinity is problematic and works to maintain a patriarchal hierarchy in societies that value a hegemonic masculinity over other masculinities and femininities. Martino (1995b) explains that the purpose in exposing students to deconstructing masculinity in texts is not to change their attitudes, "but to make available a space for students to consider other possibilities for making meaning and to consider other gendered positions" (210).

The Lord of the Rings is not a text that invites criticism of hegemonic masculine values, but it is a text that can provoke multiple discussions about its various messages about masculinity. According to Connell (1996) and Martino (1995b), the social practice and ideology of masculinity differs between cultures and throughout history; therefore, multiple definitions of masculinity exist or have existed and are transformative (Connell, 1996). However, some masculinities are valued more than others; the culturally accepted masculinity is referred to as hegemonic masculinity. "The hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity" but it is "highly visible" (3). Often only a few males in a society practice hegemonic masculinity closely, but other males feel pressure to conform to this visible performance of what a society considers normal for men. Hegemonic masculinity and femininity establishes narrow expectations that leave many males and females to be considered and treated as outside the norm. Masculinity and femininity, therefore, need to be deconstructed so that males can understand how masculinity has been constructed, through texts, institutions, and media, but also to create a space for discovering alternative gendered identities to admire and adhere. Through the deconstruction of texts, the power structure of patriarchy can be disrupted and gender equality can be possible.

Feminist Post-Structuralist Perspective

Feminist post-structuralist stance understands that power imbalances are created and maintained through language, so that in deconstructing and reconstructing words, images, and other language constructs, power imbalances can be disrupted and changed. Riemer (1987), who teaches men's studies, explains that just as feminist literary criticism and theory have changed how we perceive women, so can the examination of men in literature affect and broaden the way we perceive men.

Therefore, in considering the popularity of the *The Lord of the Rings*, an important consideration is to explore the ways that masculinity in the *The Lord of the Rings* can be read and understood. Students can deconstruct the portrayal of gender by examining the role of hero, friendships, leadership, conflict resolution, and relationship to the environment. The complex depiction of friendships and the role of femininity in relation to masculinity are examined here as an example of how examination of language can provide multiple interpretations.

The Lord of the Rings

The Lord of the Rings has been argued to be a myth, epic, romance, or fairy tale, which hints at the complex nature of this trilogy. Set in the fantasy world of Middle Earth, four hobbits from a peaceful, isolated village join a Fellowship of five other members from different parts of Middle Earth on a journey to battle a terrible evil power that wants to conquer and destroy Middle Earth. Frodo and Sam are two of the hobbits who journey right into the heart of the danger to ultimately destroy a ring of power that only they have the courage and ability to do. The Fellowship is created to protect and aid Frodo in getting the ring to its final destination. Besides Gandalf, the wizard, much of the responsibility of the Fellowship falls on Aragorn, an enigmatic warrior, who will eventually become king of the men. Gimli is a representative of the Dwarves of Middle Earth, while Legolas is the Elven representative. The rest of the Fellowship includes Boromir, another man, and Pippin and Merry, hobbits from Hobbiton. Themes of heroism, friendship, good and evil, love, and freedom are all evident in this trilogy and are entry points into deconstructing gender roles.

The Layered Depiction of Friendship

Friendship binds much of this trilogy. Old friendships and new friendships are described and developed, and while many of the friendships seem typically masculine, beneath the veneer of loyalty or competition, questions about affection and the value of masculine and feminine characteristics are raised. According to Sherrod (1987), who has studied friendships between men,

Our culture has traditionally viewed male friendship as embodying the ideals of comradeship and brotherhood. Men have buddies, pals, lifelong ties—bonds of unspoken, unshakeable commitment—the kinds of friends for whom one would ‘lay down one’s life’. Yet surveys find most men today name their wife as their closest friend. (p. 215)

Reading *The Lord of the Rings* without examination can make the multiple friendships seem congruent with this traditional view. However, the portrayal of the friendship between Sam and Frodo represents alternative views of male friendships.

Some modern day readers who are influenced by the narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity have reflected on Sam and Frodo’s friendship as homosexual (<http://www.ubersite.com/m/3626> retrieved Sept. 10, 2005) but as Martino (1995a) argues, homophobia is a strategy to police and regulate masculinity for males. Sam is the loyal servant of Frodo who proves that he would lay down his life for him in that he accompanies Frodo on his perilous journey to destroy the Ring. Two male hobbits traversing treacherous landscapes and evading dangerous enemies suggests a hegemonic masculine adventure, but on closer examination, Sam displays deep affection for Frodo through his words, actions, and expressed emotions.

At the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1993) Frodo attempts to leave the Fellowship unnoticed, but Sam guesses his plan and follows him to his boat. He argues with Frodo that he should not have left without him, “Safely!” said Sam. “All alone and without me to help you? I couldn’t have borne it, it’d have been the death of me” (527-528). Sam’s words reveal his deep concern and love for his friend. His words echo the love of a parent for a child which suggests a love beyond that of a traditional male friendship. Sam also often refers to Frodo as dear: “Mr. Frodo dear” (III, 1993, 262).

When Frodo volunteers to bear the Ring himself, Sam also steps forward: “Sam came in. He ran to Frodo and took his left hand, awkwardly and shyly. He stroked it gently and then he blushed and turned hastily away” (I, 1993, 295). Again, after Sam finds Frodo in the Orc tower he comforts Frodo: “Frodo . . . lay back in Sam’s gentle arms, closing his eyes, like a child at rest when night-fears are driven away by some loved voice or hand. Sam felt that he could sit like that in endless happiness: but it was not allowed . . . He kissed Frodo’s forehead” (III, 1993, 222). Near the end of their journey to Mount Doom, Sam tries to speak of positive memories with Frodo, but Frodo is consumed with negative feelings. “Sam went to him and kissed his hand” (258). He also takes Frodo’s hand after the Ring has been destroyed: “laying Frodo’s wounded hand gently to his breast” (274-275). The affectionate actions of Sam and the symbolism of connecting hands as a bond, relationship, and nurturing gesture suggest that male friendship can be more complex than simply protecting a friend

from harm; caring and showing affection is another means of nourishing a friendship. Back in the Shire, Sam’s dilemma of wanting to live with Frodo, but also to marry Rose, echoes Sherrod’s (1987) research of the importance and value of male friendships that existed and exists in different cultures at various times.

The friendship of Frodo and Sam is complex in that it raises questions about the role of male friendships. Similarly, the friendships of Gimli and Legolas, Merry and Pippin, and Aragorn and Boromir, raise questions about the value of different versions of masculinity. These friendships provide entry into further discussions about masculinities, and question the practice of valuing only hegemonic masculinity. Sherrod (1987) suggests that perhaps in the near future, “many men, I believe, will look to other men. Here, in a shared sense of ‘maleness,’ men may find the kind of emotional support and intimacy from a male friend that men have traditionally enjoyed in other times and other cultures” (235).

Sam’s words reveal his deep concern and love for his friend. His words echo the love of a parent for a child which suggests a love beyond that of a traditional male friendship.

Femininity in Relation to Masculinity

The typically feminine traits that appear in the portrayal of Sam and Frodo's friendship are juxtaposed by the typically masculine traits that the female characters exhibit. Often female characters are portrayed as inferior to male characters and are not represented proportionately. *The Lord of the Rings* is no exception to this unequal representation. The trilogy has only three significant female characters: Arwen, Galadriel, and Eowyn and not one of these women is part of the Fellowship. They also have very

The juxtaposition of Galadriel's characteristics suggests that masculinity and femininity are not clearly defined ways of being; there can be movement between masculine and feminine characteristics which can be admired, no matter whether a male or female portrays them.

small roles. The trilogy is dominated by male characters who are deemed more significant in most ways. However, the purpose of examining the female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* is to question what these female characters reveal about masculinity. Riemer (1987) suggests that studying male—female relationships in literature can “disclose the central role that women play in developing the male's sense of masculinity” (296) through her passive role, her definition of, and reinforcement of manly behavior.

Examining the female characters from this perspective sheds light on the potential of masculinity and femininity as fluid ways of being.

Galadriel portrays both traditional masculine and traditional feminine qualities. She is first introduced as sitting “side by side” (I, 1993, 460) with Celeborn, the male Elven leader. “Very tall they were, and the lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful” (460). Describing both the male and female leader as ‘grave’, a traditionally masculine trait, and ‘beautiful’, an adjective traditionally used for a female, suggests that both the male and female character are equal in status and that they both admirably share masculine and feminine qualities.

Galadriel's voice, wisdom, and spirit are all portrayed with hints of masculinity. “Her voice was clear and musical, but deeper than a woman's wont” (I, 1993, 461). Her wisdom, comparable to Gandalf's and Elrond's, is revealed when she admits to having initiated the meeting of the Council that created the Fellowship. Moreover, Aragorn defends her to others who are unsure of her power and intentions: “There is in her and in this land no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself” (465). In this statement, she represents a higher power and purity than the males, who are mostly portrayed in this trilogy as the leaders who sacrifice and deserve honour. She is also described later in the chapter as serving drink to Celeborn. The juxtaposition of Galadriel's characteristics suggests that masculinity and femininity are not clearly defined ways of being; there can be movement between masculine and feminine characteristics which can be admired, no matter whether a male or female portrays them.

The third main female is Eowyn who is not Elven, but part of the human race in Middle Earth. Eowyn represents the oppression of women that hegemonic masculinity endorses in restricting women to limited roles and expectations. Similar to Arwen and Galadriel, Eowyn is described beyond simply having typical feminine features. Her “long hair was like a river of gold” (II, 1993, 146), but in the next sentence it says, “strong she seemed and stern as steel” (146). This juxtaposition of warmth and cold is repeated in descriptions of Eowyn and represents her struggle between the typical feminine practice of nurturing and loving, and the typical masculine practice of being emotionless and stoic.

Her strength and respect from the people are revealed when she is named as the one to rule the people in the King's absence at war. The irony of this honour is that there are no men left to rule except the elderly and very young. Eowyn confronts the reality that, although she may have traditional masculine qualities of strength, fearlessness, and fighting ability, because she is a woman, she will not be allowed the prestige and honour as given to the men:

And she answered: ‘All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death.’ (63)

Since masculine qualities are more valued, she has attempted to embody all of them so that she can escape the “cage” (163) that she is trapped in: being a female who is not perceived or treated as equal. Consequently, Eowyn changes her appearance (and her name), as other women in history (Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I) have done to be involved in arenas typically expected of men.

Another irony of the value of masculinity and femininity occurs during the event in which Eowyn proves her strength, courage, and swordsmanship against a Nazgul and its rider. However, Eowyn’s healing seems to occur when she gains the love and respect of another (Faramir). She stops feeling the need to practice the *hegemonic* masculine traits and instead embraces the strengths that she can be proud of: “I will be a shield maiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren” (III, 1993, 294). Although others may read her resolve not to be a Rider nor practice typical masculine characteristics as a backward step for Eowyn, I would argue that it is only a step back if we, as readers, do not value healing, loving, and nurturing, traditionally feminine qualities.

Hegemonic masculinity *is* opposite to hegemonic femininity. “Hegemonic masculinity is an *idea* of masculinity (as well as something practiced by men) that we generally refer to when we go along with those generalizations that make all men not only superior in terms of strength and power to women, but also *opposite* to women” (Davies, 2001, 283). Masculinity is not the opposite of femininity. Masculinity is only a word used to describe characteristics that are traditionally associated with male actions; the ideologies of what masculinity and femininity mean restrict our identity construction. The portrayal of Galadriel and Eowyn serve to create disruptions in the way a reader considers femininity in relation to masculinity and reveals the complex nature of being human instead of solely defining people into gendered ways of being.

The Lord of the Rings may seem to present a simple approach to masculinity, but upon closer examination of the language used, hegemonic masculinity becomes expanded and even disrupted when considering the portrayal of heroes, friendships, and femininity. Without a close examination of the words

that are used to describe these characters, readers of *The Lord of the Rings* may not notice the descriptions that contradict their own values and assumptions about masculinity and femininity.

Parents, peers, schools, and media teach children the gender roles they are supposed to assume and identify with; however, children are capable of “constructing and maintaining the social world through the very act of recognizing it [the organization of the social world] and through learning its discursive practices” (Davies, 2001, 282). In other words, children learn to position themselves as male or female within the expectations of society, but they can also choose to challenge and transform these positions. According to Riemer (1987) the purpose of examining the role men play in literature is to:

revise the way men live their lives so that they are free to guide their lives by human ideals rather than restrict them with purely manly ones. But to change men’s lives in such a fashion needs more than just recognition of the limitations and negative effects of our present ideals of manhood. There must also be a recognition and reinforcement of positive alternatives to traditional masculine ideals and behaviors. (p. 298)

Many texts create the “preferred reading position . . . that supports traditional ways of thinking about gender” (Martino & Mellor, 2000, 5). These repeated messages about gender roles encourage readers to believe that gender guidelines are accepted and unchangeable since they are in print; however, gender beliefs are flexible and changeable (Martino & Mellor, 2000). When reading novels like *The Lord of the Rings*, students may miss the ways that language suggests alternative ways of viewing gender roles. Students should have opportunities to examine how gender, class, and race are portrayed in literature, movies, magazines, or videogames, so that important social issues can be raised.

Masculinity is not the opposite of femininity. Masculinity is only a word used to describe characteristics that are traditionally associated with male actions; the ideologies of what masculinity and femininity mean restrict our identity construction.

Implications

Teachers need to be provided with space to reflect on their own assumptions and values about gender roles because they can recognize the resistance students might face when exploring alternative ways of being gendered. There are many activities that teachers can do to encourage an examination of the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in *The Lord of the Rings* and other novels. Students could create charts in which they describe the male and female characters as they imagined them from their reading and then compare these descriptions to the language used in the text. They could examine the characters' physical appearances, actions, emotions, and how the characters are treated by others in the story. In addition, students could choose a character and, through a debate, argue whether that character was more masculine or feminine. Ultimately, though, it will be important for the students to question what is masculinity? Why is one masculinity valued more than other versions of masculinity? Can someone ever portray only one version of masculinity or are there multiple masculinities that are practiced depending on the context?

Another useful reference is Martino and Mellor's (2000) book *Gendered Fictions*. Included in the book are short stories of males and females who do not fit into hegemonic gendered roles and discussion questions to provoke further thoughts about our own values and expectations of gender roles. Movies are also another avenue that teachers can use to provoke critique of gender roles and expectations. The movie remake of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Alliance Atlantis, 2001, 2002, 2003) could also be watched and critiqued regarding Peter Jackson's decisions to change or omit particular aspects than the novels. Critiquing the movie in comparison to the novels allows for a discussion about how definitions of masculinity and femininity depend on society's expectations. For example the movie portrays Frodo and Sam's friendship less intimately; Sam never calls Frodo "dear" as he does in the novels, and they hold hands less in the movie; the women's roles are also not as complex as the novels suggest. Unlike the novel *The Lord of the Rings*, the movie of *Whale Rider* (South Pacific Pictures, 2002) conspicuously questions male and female roles in a New Zealand Maori

community. Students could research how masculinity or femininity are represented in past societies (their parents or grandparents) or other cultures and share their findings. Inquiries and discussions about gendered identities using adolescent literature can encourage students to question the role of masculinity and femininity in their own lives and ideally, the students will begin to challenge the language that constructs and maintains the gender inequality that exists in the world around them.

Leanna Madill is a doctoral student and sessional at the University of Victoria. Her scholarly interests include gender, literacy practices, and popular culture.

Works Cited

- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.
- Connell, R. W. "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools." *Teachers College Record* 98.2 (1996): 1-30.
- Davies, B. "The Discursive Production of the Male/Female Dualism in School Settings." *Oxford Review of Education* 15.3 (1989): 229-41.
- Davies, B. "Constructing and Deconstructing Masculinities through Critical Literacy." *Gender and Education* 9.1 (1997): 9-32.
- Davies, B. "Becoming Male or Female." *Gender*. Eds. S. Jackson and S. Scott. London: Routledge, 2001. 280-90.
- DeBlase, G. "Acknowledging Agency While Accommodating Romance: Girls Negotiating Meaning in Literacy Transactions." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 46.8 (2003): 624-36.
- Donovan, R. "Donovan's *Lord of the Rings* Review." 2002. September 10 2005. <<http://www.ubersite.com/m/3626>>.
- The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring*. Dir. P. Jackson. Alliance Atlantis. 2001.
- The Lord of the Rings. The Return of the King*. Dir. P. Jackson. Alliance Atlantis. 2003.
- The Lord of the Rings. The Two Towers*. Dir. P. Jackson. Alliance Atlantis. 2002.
- Kimmel, M. S. "Invisible Masculinity." *Society* 30.6 (1993): 28-36.
- Martino, W., and B. Mellor. *Gendered Fictions*. Western Australia: Chalkface Press, 2000.
- Martino, W. "Boys and Literacy: Exploring the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinities and the Formation of Literate Capacities for Boys in the English Classroom." *English in Australia* 112 (1995): 11-24.
- . "Deconstructing Masculinity in the English Classroom: A Site Reconstituting Gendered Subjectivity." *Gender and Education* 7.2 (1995): 205-19.
- Munsch, R. *The Paper Bag Princess*. Toronto: Annick Press Ltd, 1980.
- Reimer, J. D. "Rereading American Literature from a Men's Perspective: Some Implications." *The Making of Masculinities*.

- Ed. H. Brod. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987. 289-99.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. "Literature—S.O.S.!" *Language Arts* 68 (1991): 444-48.
- . "Retrospect." *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty Year Perspective*. Eds. E. J. Farrel and J. R. Squire. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990. 97-107.
- . "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing." *Theoretical Models and Processes on Reading*. Eds. R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell and H. Singer. 4th ed. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1994. 1057-92.
- Sherrod, D. "The Bonds of Men: Problems and Possibilities in Close Male Relationships." *The Making of Masculinities. The New Men's Studies*. Ed. H. Brod. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987. 213-39.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings. Part One: The Fellowship of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins, 1993.
- . *The Lord of the Rings. Part Three: The Return of the King*. London: HarperCollins, 1993.
- . *The Lord of the Rings. Part Two: The Two Towers*. London: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Whale Rider*. Dir. Niki Caro. South Pacific Pictures Productions. 2002.

Application for ALAN Webmaster

ALAN Online

The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) is seeking a webmaster for its popular, growing website. ALAN Online is the official website of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents. It publishes information about the assembly and its activities, awards, grants, workshop, etc.

Summary

Under the direction of the ALAN Executive Committee, the ALAN Online Webmaster maintains the website, manages the site data, posts information, answers inquiries, corresponds with the server host, and performs other duties as required.

Responsibilities

1. Creates and posts content from ALAN officers and others on the website using the Joomla CMS and other tools.
2. Creates timely backups of data.
3. Reviews all web content prior to and after release to maintain a professional quality of the pages.
4. Responds to e-mails about the site.
5. Attends the annual ALAN Board meeting and submits a report on the status of the site.

Requirements

Self-motivated person with skills in web site design, writing, data and site management, graphic design, and basic HTML knowledge. Experience with mysql, cpanel, CMS, and graphics software or willingness to learn is helpful.

Compensation

The ALAN Webmaster is a member of the ALAN Board of Directors and is an annual consultant for the ALAN Workshop. Compensation for consultants is free admission to the ALAN Workshop and \$100.

Information

To apply for the position, send a letter of the interest stating your qualifications for the position as an attachment using the header "ALAN Webmaster" to gilld@uncw.edu. Application letters will be accepted until May 1, 2008. The webmaster will be chosen by the ALAN Executive Committee and will take office after a transitional period at the annual ALAN Board meeting in November 2008.

For more information regarding the position, please contact ALAN President David Gill at gilld@uncw.edu.