“Strong Female Characters in Recent Children’s Literature”
Pat Heine and Christine Inkster

Reviewed by Victoria, Naomi, and Alissa

Summary
This article discusses the search for “girls and women who are feisty, daring, clever, creative, and insightful” in children’s literature by a specialized group of people. This group is made up of university professors, classroom teachers, and media specialists. They meet to explore aspects of gender issues and strive to find the positive image that girls portray in children’s literature. These people are devoted in finding the best female role models in children’s literature and they are on the lookout for books with “captivating plots, worthwhile themes, multidimensional characters, [and] skillfully developed language” (Heine and Inkster 427).

Girls are measured most of the time by superficial qualities such as outer beauty and the way their minds can be so easily influenced and molded to think a certain way. We can see that gender stereotypes have a negative effect on the self-esteem and self-worth of girls (Sadker and Sadker 427). As we know, books play an important role in the development and growth of ideas during childhood. For young girls, especially, a positive role model in the stories they read are of great significance for their development now and also in the future.

So what is the definition of a “positive role model?” When looking for a strong female presence in a child’s book, there are six characteristics that should be taken into consideration:

(Heine and Inkster)
1. Examine the personal traits of the character.

2. Examine the issues important to the character.

3. Examine how the character solves problems.

4. Examine the character’s relationships with others.

5. Examine how the character departs from traditional stereotypes.

6. Examine whether the character provides a voice for those who are often unheard in children’s literature.

**How to Use “Strong Female Characters in Recent Children’s Literature” in Major Essay #2**

Depending on which side is argued, there are several different ways in which this article can be used. If someone is arguing that teacher’s aren’t helping to bridge the gender gap but in contrast are widening it, then this article will provide many examples. For instance, all these books that are discussed throughout the article can serve as evidence for the claim. If teachers are not implementing these types of book, which help portray females as protagonists of stories, then these teachers are helping to widen the gap in the classroom. By not providing females with books that have heroines that don’t depend on males for support, teachers are reinforcing the stereotypes and are not helping to bridge the gap in their classroom. If someone decides to argue that teachers are helping to close the gender gap in their classroom, then this article can be used to support that idea also. That person can talk about the different books that are discussed in the article and present the notion that if teachers were to utilize these books in their classroom then they would help close the gender gap that exists in the classroom. By providing positive role models for girls in their classrooms, teacher will help break the stereotype of a male-centered protagonist that exists in most books.
This article can also be used to answer the second question of the prompt. If someone is going to argue that teachers should be responsible in identifying the gaps and help equip their students with tools to build bridges, then this article can provide many examples. This article shows that teachers should be responsible in finding books in which the main character is a female and thus by reading these books in the classroom, teachers will not only help bridge gender gaps, but also will give the females in the classroom the tools they need to help close the gender gap that exists. This article can also provide evidence for identifying the gap that exists in the classroom. It shows that the reason that there is a difference in male and female communication styles is because females are not provided with the same messages, as males are when they read stories. Therefore, if teachers present these types of books to their students it will equip them with tools they need to close the gender gap.

Quotes from “Strong Female Characters in Recent Children’s Literature” for ME #2

“Girls often have to ‘battle messages that tell them they are second best, or victims, or human beings measured by the beauty of their bodies and the pliability of their minds.’” (pg. 427)

- I thought this quote might be interesting to use in the exordium of Major Essay #2 because it gives some interesting information for the reader to catch their attention. This quote could also help in the exordium because it talks about gender stereotyping and could be a good transition into your narratio or divisio if you are arguing that teachers should bridge these “gaps.”

“Books play an important role in the development and growth of ideas.” (pg. 427)

And
“‘Our future is shaped by our childhood, and the books of our childhood are such an important part of our journey.’” (pg. 427)

- This means books can have a powerful impact on children and certain messages from children’s books can have a lasting impression. If you are arguing that teachers should help bridge the “gap” then these could be helpful quotes because you could discuss the importance of bringing books into the classroom that are not further widening any sort of gender or communication “gap” since these books can be very affective.

*It may help to refer to page 429, Figure 1. If your argument is for teachers bridging the “gap” there is a list of “Six Characteristics to Consider when Examining Children’s Books for Positive Gender Role Models.” This could be helpful because if you would like to give examples in your paper of how teachers may provide their students with tools to close certain “gaps” you could mention that teachers should look for these “characteristics” when choosing books for their students. Looking for these “characteristics” may help teachers to close the gap because it could help them weed out books that contain stereotypical characters or gender bias.

*This article also repeatedly refers to the book called Lucy Whipple – a story about a young girl who “rises above the typical female stereotypes” (pg. 431) by having “intelligence and humor” as well as having a mother who helps her become more “self-reliant and inventive in her problem solving.” (pg. 430) This article mentions how “it’s interesting how historical fiction seems to be a genre to feature strong girl characters. This kind of fiction often really appeals to kids in 4th, 5th, and 6th grades.” (pg. 431) This again gives an example of how teachers may start to close gender
“gaps” in the classroom by bringing in pieces of literature that show strong female protagonists along with the books with strong male protagonists.

*At the end of the article there are many different books recommended which have non-stereotypical female characters. Such as *Ten Queens: Portraits of Women of Power* which “features ten brief biographies about such well- and lesser-known figures as Queen Esther, Isabel of Spain, Catherine the Great, and the ‘Warrior Queen’ Boudicca.” (pg.431) As well as *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* in which you “learn more about Tubman’s childhood and her determination to be free.” (pg. 432)