



Alice's Academy

Waking up on the Other Side: Gender Shock in *Bill's New Frock*

Judith A. Marginson and E.J. Hyslop

Judith A. Marginson has a B.Sc in psychology from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and recently completed the teaching internship requirement for her B.Ed at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. She is beginning an M.A. in Educational Psychology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia in the fall of 1998.

E.J. Hyslop has a B.A. in English and philosophy from the University of New Brunswick in Saint John and an M.A. in philosophy from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He is currently completing an M.Ed in curriculum and instruction at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton and will commence doctoral studies in education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia this fall.

Have you ever had one of those days? This is what happens to Bill Simpson when he wakes up one morning to discover he is a girl! From the moment he recognizes his predicament, Bill Simpson¹ struggles to have his voice heard and presence felt, a condition painfully familiar in the lives of girls and women. In *Bill's New Frock*, Anne Fine's satirical look at gender socialization speaks to all females who see themselves reflected in Bill Simpson's "nightmare".

Bill's New Frock provides a wonderful didactic tool for educators struggling to eliminate sex-role stereotyping in children's literature. Debbie Abilock (1997) points out that recent research has "alerted both educators and the general public to the fact that schools are shortchanging girls" (17). To reverse this trend, it is imperative to introduce students to books that discuss gender socialization. As Karyn Wellhausen (1996) suggests, children's literature provides an ideal classroom resource for learning about gender roles.

Besides demonstrating how gender roles are constructed in the classroom and playground, Anne Fine introduces themes from other works of children's literature. Bill Simpson's struggle to have a voice is resonant of women writers struggling to have their voice heard within their stories. Just as Bill Simpson is inescapably 'trapped' within the female gender and its social consequences, characters in traditional women's literature were imprisoned by the social constraints of their time. Louisa May Alcott's² characters in *Little Women* (Jo in particular), regardless of their wishes, are forced to accept domestic life and define their place in society in relation to men. Similarly, Bill's predicament reveals the constraining impact that current gender socialization practices have on the lives of girls and women.

The distinguishing characteristic of *Bill's New Frock* is the male protagonist's journey through the socialization process as a girl. Just as female socialization begins very early in life with the total immersion in pink, Bill Simpson's day begins with his mother forcibly dressing him in a frilly pink frock. His astonishment quickly turns to anger when his father calls him "Poppet" instead of his name and compliments him on his physical appearance. Although Bill Simpson is amazed at this situation, he is compelled to continue on with his day. Just as females are pulled through life by imposed gender socialization, Bill Simpson is obligated to carry on. He comments that "he didn't seem to have any choice" (10).

Bill Simpson's situation is further complicated when he arrives at school and discovers that different sets of "rules" apply to girls than to boys. Several of these coded behaviors are revealed when Bill Simpson is given the role of Rapunzel (he is a girl after all) during a class reading. As he waits and waits to read his part, he reflects on how Rapunzel is depicted as being no trouble, and as someone needing to be



rescued. Lacking previous female gender socialization and exposure to the "fairy-tale formula", Bill Simpson doesn't understand why Rapunzel doesn't rescue herself rather than wasting fifteen years of her life waiting for the prince. As Pipher (1995) observes, women in fairy tales "wander away from home, encounter great dangers, are rescued by princes and are transformed into passive and docile creatures" (19-20). When Bill Simpson questions the story's theme, the teacher responds not to his thoughts and voice, but to his mood. Mrs. Collins (the teacher) comments, "You're in a funny mood today . . . Are you sure that you're feeling quite yourself?" (20-21). This is not Bill Simpson's only lesson in the subtle ways that females are typically judged. Later, Mrs Collins chastises his reluctance to model for the art class by murmuring in his ear, "Do try not to look quite so gloomy, dear . . . you're spoiling people's paintings" (43).

Bill Simpson's lesson on the social construction of gender continues on the playground. Thanks to the frilly pink frock, he is forced to forgo his usual participation in the boys' football game. Having never paid much attention to what the girls do at recess, Bill is surprised to see how they are forced to the margins of the playground. He never realized the various ways that boys dominate the playground milieu, and his exposure to this gender issue is an eye-opening experience. This male control of space is reinforced when girls are positioned on the sidelines as spectators while boys are players in the game.

Patriarchy is further affirmed in play when boys' activities continue uninterrupted, and thus are deemed more important than those of girls. In *Gender Play*, Barrie Thorne (1993) points out that real lessons in gender stereotyping are learned through promoting different playground games and allocating different playground spaces based on gender. In *Bill's New Frock*, this gender disparity is exposed when Bill Simpson attempts to interrupt the football game. He abruptly discovers the rule that "games always stopped for bets" (29) does not apply when girls attempt the interruption. When the boys charge right past him, knocking him to the ground, Bill Simpson comments, "If this was the sort of reception the girls had come to expect, no wonder they didn't stray far from the railings. No wonder they didn't ask to play" (30). For the first time Bill Simpson understands the forced invisibility of females: ". . . it was as if they weren't so much playing football around him as through him"(29).

The injustice of male power is reinforced when Bill Simpson learns that although girls are not allowed to interrupt boys at play, the reverse is not true. When boys casually interrupt girls' games, it establishes a pattern of entitlement that begins in childhood, and frequently extends into adulthood. This male privilege is revealed by Bill Simpson's sympathetic observation that "there were two girls trying to mark out a hopscotch frame; but each time the footballers ran over the lines they were drawing, the chalk was so badly scuffed that you couldn't see the squares anymore" (24). While the boys react with anger when their game is interrupted, the girls passively accept the intrusion.

All too frequently, traditional children's literature ignores gender commonalities, instead emphasizing the differences that exist between boys and girls. In *Bill's New Frock*, Anne Fine wonderfully satirizes this form of gender stereotyping in the 'wumpy-choo' scene. The girls are dared to kick a football through the cloakroom window and, if successful, are rewarded with 'a wumpy-choo'. Although unfamiliar with the term, Bill Simpson refuses to admit his ignorance, and constructs the subsequent discourse to fit male concepts. Convinced that the term refers to a young animal in danger, he reasons that action must be taken to rescue the wumpy-choo. When Bill Simpson is handed a 1p Chew for his efforts his embarrassment is acute. He realizes that he exaggerated the complexity of the girls' vernacular, and imposed his own male precepts on their language.

As Bill Simpson's school day continues, he encounters other troubling situations engendered by his pretty pink frock. Bill is learning the unfortunate lesson that young girls and women learn. Gender socialization practices are firmly in place and overcoming them is an arduous, sometimes impossible, task. When Bill is forced into modelling for a painting class in which only pink paint is available, although frustrated by his lack of control over the situation, he is now resigned to his fate. No longer possessing the fortitude to struggle against the socializing forces that act on him as a girl, he states that "he might as well give up struggling. Like poor Rapunzel trapped in her high stone tower, he'd just sit quietly, waiting to see what happened, hoping for rescue" (40).



Fine is aware of the traditional portrayal of women in literature and women authors' use of race scenes, i.e., the physically stronger woman allowing the man to win, to confirm the prescribed social order between men and women. In *Bill's New Frock*, a girl, Astrid, is stronger than any of the boys, and another girl, Kristey, is the fastest runner. In fact, the girls win all the heats in the school races. Although the girls are clearly the superior runners, they are willing to sacrifice personal victory to "make something right", in this case letting Paul, the disabled student, win the race. This female sensitivity to the feelings of others often comes at the expense of ignoring their own. As Pipher (1995) explains, "Women often know how everyone in their family thinks and feels except themselves. They are great at balancing the needs of their co-workers, husbands, children and friends, but they forget to put themselves into the equation."

Bill's New Frock potentially fuels the kind of classroom discussion that challenges gender stereotypes. By introducing clear examples, it provides an excellent literary device for enhancing student awareness of gender bias. According to Sadker & Sadker (1994), girls are underachieving academically, suffering from diminished self-esteem and self-worth because of gender bias. *Bill's New Frock* is likely to increase student sensitivity to the devastating effects of discriminatory gender practices by providing teachers with the opportunity to discuss the insidious social processes that act on females. Perhaps even more importantly, it helps males appreciate what it is like on the other side of the gender issue. *Bill's New Frock* allows a multi-faceted, didactic exploration into the damaging impact of gender socialization, and can help students develop healthy attitudes about gender roles.

Endnotes:

1. Anne Fine uses Bill Simpson's full name throughout most of the story. As Bill Simpson is subjected to more and more of the gender socialization process, he begins to lose his full identify, eventually becoming just "Bill". We have reflected this transition in our paper. He not only loses his name and sense of identity, but also the fortitude to resist the imposing social forces.
2. A note of interest: I used the Biographical Names section of my dictionary to confirm the spelling of Alcott's name and noted that she is described as "dau. of A.B. Am. author". Obviously Webster's does not feel that crafting a novel still read after 129 years is sufficient reason to stop defining Alcott in relation to her father.

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