The Portrayal of Protagonists and Their Aesthetic Relationships in Children's Adventure Novels

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Abstract

Traditional criticism of the adventure genre tends to focus only on stereotypical depictions of protagonists' static identities, their unequal relationships with other characters and the location as a static place the protagonists travel through on their journeys. This research does not discard previous criticism but further analyzes and underscores dynamic and positive nuances that explain these stereotypical depictions in the adventure genre. This research aims to investigate how protagonists develop their identities and their relationships with others in six realistic adventure novels for children published between 2000 through 2010, and which were awarded The Newbery Medal in the United States. It has emphasis on: 1) the portrayal of the protagonists, through the use of Bakhtinian "aesthetic" and undesirable relationships, which the protagonists develop with other characters, and 2) places which help construct or obstruct the dynamic identities of the protagonists in conjunction with their aesthetic relationships. Through the integration of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the Aesthetic Relationship and the interpretive framework of cultural geography, the findings reveal that protagonists socially and spatially construct dynamic identities and develop aesthetic relationships with others within a cultural context as long as a powerful and coercive social hegemony is lax or absent. However, they fail to do so in a cultural context within such rigid social systems.

Key Words: Adventure; Aesthetic; Bakhtin; Protagonists; Space

Introduction

Adventure fiction is one of the most notable literary genres, depicting countless colorful experiences of admirable literary figures that go on their journeys to complete interesting and significant missions. The adventure genre in children's literature is not only appealing on account of its prototypical fast-paced action and exotic or fantastic settings but also its familiar depictions of human life and social relations in local settings in which readers can identify with or relate to. Adventure mirrors and constructs multi-dimensional meanings, perceptions, examinations, and explorations of human experience, the self, others, and the world. It also gives insights into human relationships and interrelationships, challenging our potential to cope with an unforeseen event which can be arduous, exciting, dangerous, aspiring, insightful or even painful. Adventure fiction is not just an exciting narrative of physical acts or just about a heroic figure's escape from an ordinary tedious life: it can also be a fruitful reflection of human characteristics, interactions, and experiences. It provides a means to reflect on our understanding of ourselves, our roles in society, and the world. D'Ammassa (2009: vii) notes that nearly all fiction includes some kind of adventure, a chance to experience new events or knowledge, and alterations of fictional characters' lives. He states, "the physical journey is mirrored by an interior one; the protagonist learns something about the world at large, or about his or her own personality" (D'Ammassa, 2009: viii).

The depiction of protagonists and their relationships with other characters through their journey also offer significant appeal to the adventure genre in children's literature. In adventure narratives, protagonists are typically at the center of their own journeys, so their characteristics and how they develop their relationships with other characters are very important to explication. The construction of protagonists' identities and their interactions with others in certain cultural or social contexts reflect the essence of human characteristics, which help establish or sustain worthwhile relationships between the self and other—the two inseparable modes of human existence. The perceptions of the protagonists towards their identities, others, and the world, or how the protagonists are perceived by others or

the world, can help mirror significant meanings of their existence in social structures they are situated in.

However, it is noticeable that criticism of the adventure genre has focused on stereotypical portrayals of protagonists and their undesirable relationships with other characters only in constrained social contexts (Bereska, 2003; Cullingford, 1998; Grenby, 2008; Hourihan, 1997; Hunt, 2001; Knowles & Malmkjær, 1996; österlund, 2002; Smith, 2011; Wannamaker, 2008). For instance, Cullingford (1998: 120) points out that one of the appeals of popular books, like adventure narratives, is the representation of certain stereotypical images. "There are stereotypes of adventure as well as of people, stereotypical behaviours as well as attitudes," states Cullingford (1998: 120). He also observes that popular books are formulaic in that their male and female protagonists are always unchanged, and they have a happy ending through situations which happen to them instead of occurring from their own decisions (Cullingford, 1998: 23). Hourihan (1997: 3-4) also comments that female characters in hero stories are insignificant and subordinate to male heroes. They are merely dedicated helpers, trophy brides, or perilous enemies. They are often defined as outsiders who cannot take charge as the lead, since this superior role is only destined for the hero who controls all other beings in the narrative. The role of girls and women is predominantly restricted to domesticity as portrayed in innumerable children's stories published in the nineteenth century. Moreover, it is noticeable that previous research has disregarded important features of protagonists in establishing desirable relationships, including the protagonists' evaluation of their situations in relation to other characters under the existing or imposed social systems and their self-awareness of the need for human interactions. Therefore, this research will not only explore undesirable relationships, which protagonists establish with other characters but also underscore desirable ones. This research also presupposes that the intellectual characteristic of a protagonist can be discovered although his/her physical qualities tend to be the most predominant feature portrayed in the adventure genre. In order to establish a worthwhile relationship, individuals need to possess an evaluative

perspective or what Mikhail Bakhtin (1990: 22) describes as "the excess of seeing." This characteristic enables individuals to evaluate themselves, their interrelationships with other people, and the world, so as to reach a fulfilling existential relationship between the self and others. Thus, this research will explore whether protagonists in adventure novels possess this intellectual quality and other essential elements needed in developing worthwhile relationships.

In addition, several critics have also pointed out the static depictions of self-sufficient protagonists who are superior to other characters (Cullingford, 1998; Grenby, 2008; Hourihan, 1997; Hunt, 2001; österlund, 2002; Phillips, 1997; Smith, 2011; Wannamaker, 2008). For example, Grenby (2008: 188) notes that G. A. Henty's European characters are depicted as superior to those from the colonies. European children are presented as beings with potential, whereas the Africans are portrayed as individuals without capabilities. Throughout the adventures, the European child protagonists with their innate competence can be educated and become civilized adults, whereas similar situations are not represented in the African characters. In *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure*, Phillips (1997: 40) details the apparent racial discrimination against indigenous characters in *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (1858) by Robert Michael Ballantyne. He comments that the white boys in this novel regard themselves as superior to the natives who are ridiculed and labeled as savages (Phillips, 1997: 40). In this research, however, I contend that in a desirable relationship, individuals can never be consummate or self-sufficient without the existence of other individuals. Individuals are also never static but are always in the process of creating themselves and completing the meaning of their existence towards the future through a series of interrelationships with other individuals who also help co-create them. For Bakhtin (1990), this form of relationship is considered "aesthetic." A close examination of the essential qualities needed in establishing the "aesthetic" relationship in the adventure genre will therefore be taken.

Finally, the research also argues that the development of protagonists' identities and their relationships can be constructed through place and locale.

Places in the adventure genre do not merely serve as static geographical sites in hegemonic social contexts, which contribute to the stereotypical qualities of protagonists and their power relations with others as several critics comment (Grenby, 2008; Knowles & Malmkjær, 1996; Phillips, 1997; Wannamaker, 2008). For example, in *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture: Masculinity, Abjection, and the Fictional Child*, Wannamaker (2008) points to a popular cultural icon, Tarzan in *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) by Edgar Rice Burroughs, as a superior colonizer who completely masters Africa and African natives. The fictional Africa is portrayed as "a colonist's fantasy" offering a masculine space for Tarzan to construct his superiority, strength, and entitlement (Wannamaker, 2008: 43-44). In comparison to the civilization of the British colonizers, Africa in the novel becomes an alien, primitive, dark, and mysterious continent, representing a space of wilderness for colonization (Wannamaker, 2008: 50). On the other hand, this research argues that places can also be open or fluid sites with laxity or without strong social hegemony, which allow the protagonists to construct their dynamic identities and employ the "excess of seeing" which helps nurture an 'aesthetic' relationship. Through the integral application of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the aesthetic relationship and the theoretical framework of cultural geography adapted from various thinkers, such as Jon Anderson (2010), Mike Crang (1998), Victor W. Turner (1969), and Arnold van Gennep (1960), I will explore how places help construct or hinder the dynamic identities of the protagonists and their aesthetic relationships.

Objectives and Scope

This research aims to discover how protagonists establish their identities and their relationships with other characters in adventure novels. It focuses on two main aspects: 1) the portrayal of the protagonists, through the use of Bakhtinian "aesthetic" and undesirable relationships, which the protagonists develop with other characters, and 2) an examination of places which help construct or inhibit the dynamic identities of the protagonists in conjunction with their aesthetic relationships. The research hypothesis is that

protagonists socially and spatially construct dynamic identities and develop aesthetic relationships with other characters within a cultural context as long as a powerful and coercive social hegemony is lax or absent. However, they fail to do so in a cultural context within rigidly hegemonic social systems.

The analyzed texts comprise of six realistic children's adventure novels, which were published between 2000 through 2010 and were awarded The Newbery Medal in the United States. The texts are divided into two main subsets: the first one consists of three adventure novels whose protagonists are boys, and the second one consists of novels with girl protagonists. The following is a list of the novels with their publication years and awards.

The Adventure Novels with Boy Protagonists:

- *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* by Gary D. Schmidt, published in 2004, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2005
- *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis, published in 2007, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2008
- *Heart of a Samurai* by Margi Preus, published in 2010, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2011

The Adventure Novels with Girl Protagonists:

- *The Wanderer* by Sharon Creech, published in 2000, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2001
- *Turtle in Paradise* by Jennifer L. Holm, published in 2010, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2011.
- *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia, published in 2010, awarded as a Newbery Honor Book in 2011

The research proposes to discover substantial depictions of heroes and heroines in the adventure genre, who possess both desirable and undesirable qualities in their relationships, and to underscore the qualities needed to enrich worthwhile relationships and to avoid conflicts, which occur among child-child and child-adult interactions. The construction of the protagonists' identities and their relationships through places can also become manifest through the concrete significance of geographical sites the protagonists inhabit and experience through the vehicles of their physical and psychological journeys.

Research Methodology

Mikhail Bakhtin's Theoretical Framework of the Aesthetic Relationship

To fully comprehend how one relates to oneself and how one relates to others is crucial in achieving an aesthetic relationship. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin (1990: 22) shows how human relationships unfold two intrinsic modes of existence: the self and other. They form a symbiotic framework of human consciousnesses which are correlative and in need of each other in an aesthetic relationship. The self or I is incomplete or can never be self-sufficient since it is dependent on the other to complete its value or wholeness. The self needs the other's "recognition and his form-giving activity" to complete itself (Bakhtin, 1990: 51). In addition, the self is always in process of becoming and striving towards the future to give meaning to its existence. If the self regards itself as a self-sufficient being, it is likely to die spiritually (Bakhtin, 1990: 123-124). Hence, the self needs to continuously construct its essence of being or to become dynamic and also needs the other to acknowledge it so that the meaning of its existence is reassured.

The self and other exist in their unique sites, phenomenologically acknowledging each other, and the "event" of the world from different aspects of time and space (Bahktin, 1990: 23). Due to this condition, individuals need each other for acknowledgement and confirmation of their entities and value (Çaliskan, 2006: 6). For instance, the self can never know its own birth except from the other's perception about its birth. In a similar manner, as long as the self is alive, it can neither know of nor see its death because only the other can see its death (Bakhtin, 1990: 104). Therefore, the consciousness of the self has no beginning and no ending; its time is always open and uncompleted (Holoquist, 1990: 35). A situation in which individuals can only perceive from their own perspectives, but others cannot is called by Bakhtin, "the excess of seeing,"— a condition required for an aesthetic act (Bakhtin, 1990: 24). The excess of seeing enables the self to perceive everything which embodies the other from within its life (Bakhtin, 1990: 25). It is a form-giving activity through which the self and the other

simultaneously co-experience and co-create each other's life (Çaliskan, 2006: 6).

However, in order to fully achieve an aesthetic relationship, the self, with excess of seeing, must co-experience not only from within the life of the other but also from an aesthetic distance. That is, the self has to return to the outside position in order to form a holistic conceptualization of the other's life (Bahktin, 1990: 26). In the case of the self's co-experiencing the other's suffering, the self must evaluate the other's suffering from an outside perspective so as not to identify its emotion with the other's and not to let the other's suffering inflict on it. The self must be aware that the suffering of the other and the self's perspective of that suffering are different (Bakhtin, 1990: 102). From this outward evaluative perspective, the self as an unbiased percipient can comfort or aid the other instead of simply moaning in agony (Bakhtin, 1990: 26). Brandist (2002: 46) comments that outsideness allows the other to sustain his/her freedom to act and simultaneously creates an equal relation between the two consciousnesses. Besides, Coates (2004:44) notes that a key to successful relationships is to acknowledge the condition of interdependency between the self and other. She states that "to accept our situation of need is the healthiest way to exist" (Coates, 2004: 44).

To co-experience within one's life and to be able to evaluate his/her life from the position of outsideness can be an arduous task. Bakhtin (1990: 190-191) points out that the self must not only be active *within* "practical, social, political, moral, religious life" but must also be in a position *outside* the life structures, which is an aesthetic position where it is free to act. For Bakhtin, individuals' unique and unrepeatable characteristics are salient, so being subjugated under systems imposed by society is an undesirable condition (Pollard, 2011: 8). Pollard (2011: 9) indicates that individuals are responsible for their own choices, so it can be considered an existential escape from responsibility if they follow "external authority" and disregard their unique experience. This does not mean that Bakhtin lessens the significance of "ethical codes, laws and moral values"; what Bakhtin emphasizes is an individual's responsible and active role to take part in them instead of passively allowing them to have power over him (Pollard, 2011: 23).

Therefore, it is essential to discover a balanced positioning between inward and outward perspectives in human interactions (Pollard, 2011: 23).

The Theoretical Framework of Cultural Geography: The Construction of Human Identities and Relationships through Places

Places are an integral part of human existence. Inevitably human experiences, identities and relationships are spatially constructed and defined through them. Through a culturally geographical viewpoint, Anderson (2010: 5) indicates that places are divided into two categories: material and non-material. Material refers to objects, such as architecture, monuments, signs, and all physical structures, whereas non-material refers to our actions or emotions connected to our physical surroundings. Because material elements are ever present and have an impact on individuals, they leave continuous and permanent marks on people's memory or mind. The interpretation of places and people's identities are united by these two forms which include or manifest cultural ideas or specific value systems. Since people's actions and ideas can be changed over a period of time, the meanings and identities of places are dynamic (Anderson, 2010: 8).

A sense of place or a sense of belonging to a particular place is very important in connecting people to their environments. Its function is not only to indicate where we are situated but is also to define who we are in a geographical site. People may have a sense of belonging or detachment to certain places, and this can affect their identities. Crang (1998: 112) points out the priority of the bordering of places in human relationships as 'I', 'We' and 'Other'. An individual's identity or 'I' is created through his or her personal sense of belonging to a particular place, while 'We' is a shared identity between an individual and other people who share their relationships to places. Lastly, the term 'Other' refers to a situation when people feel as outsiders in particular places, leading to the loss of their identities (Crang, 1998: 112).

However, a dynamic or fluid place without a fixed boundary allows individuals to create a sense of belonging and to formulate more dynamic identities. In a fluid space, individuals are free from the realm of social

constraints and stereotypical perceptions, so they feel comfortable enough to create their own personal space and actively form their own identities. This kind of space is called "liminality" or "liminal space", which was originally explored in Arnold van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* (1908). According to Victor W. Turner (1969: 167) who later extended and further developed van Gennep's conception of liminal space, liminality is a state of transition in time and space where individuals withdraw themselves from ordinary ways of conducting social activities. Turner (1969: 95) states that in this space, liminal people "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." He redefines van Gennep's three phases of this transition which include separation, margin and incorporation. In the first phase of separation, people detach themselves from a set of social conditions or a social structure. In the margin or liminal phase, they cross a threshold into a new transitional state which has few or no characteristics of the past or the future, making their identities socially and structurally equivocal. Their spatial and social boundaries also become blurred since they experience the moment of being both in and out of time and in and out of a regular structure of society. A sense of community or equality is also established during this second phase. In the last phase or incorporation, they construct their new identities and re-incorporate themselves into society (Turner, 1969: 94-96).

Results

   The Portrayal of Boy Protagonists and Their Aesthetic Relationships

   In this section, the findings reveal how boy protagonists construct their identities and their relationships with other characters in three novels: *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (2004) by Gary D. Schmidt; *Elijah of Buxton* (2007) by Christopher Paul Curtis; and *Heart of a Samurai* (2010) by Margi Preus. Two aspects are underscored: 1) the portrayal of the boy protagonists and 2) the portrayal of undesirable and also aesthetic relationships the protagonists develop with other characters. Through the application of the Bakhtinian conception of the aesthetic relationship,

the findings reveal that the construction of the boy protagonists' dynamic identities and their aesthetic relationships becomes successful in a cultural context in which social hegemony is slack or not present. Nevertheless, under a stringent social system, the construction fails or becomes incomplete.

The boy protagonists' identities are constructed through the relationships with others in particular social contexts. Their identities are defined through the perceptions of others, themselves and the society they live in. In the unequal relationships constrained by strict social practices, the identities of the boy protagonists become static. Their senses of being are predominantly acknowledged through the stereotypical perceptions of the others and rigid social norms; as a result, the protagonists lose a sense of their own agency and feel alienated with others and society. In the three novels, all boy protagonists initially perceive themselves as inferior to others. In *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy,* Turner's apparent static quality is his weakness in athletes, which is stereotypically regarded as a lack in his masculinity. This static quality is constructed through the perceptions of the adult and other boy characters (Schmidt, 2004: 4-5, 7-11). In *Elijah of Buxton*, fragility is a dominant static quality of Elijah, signifying his mental weakness and lack of maturity. It is defined through the power relations with adult characters, especially his parents (Curtis, 2007: 4-10). In *Heart of a Samurai*, Manjiro's inferiority is defined through his low rank in the hierarchical social scale as perceived by the Japanese and Americans (Preus, 2010: 2, 5, 13, 137, 181). Concerning the protagonists' perceptions of themselves, to some extent all the protagonists perceive themselves as self-contained and superior to others. Turner believes in his superior masculine strength over other boys (Schmidt, 2004: 3, 7). Manjiro regards himself as better than westerners in terms of his intellect, physical appearance and cultural background (Preus, 2010: 26-27, 61). Elijah is depicted as being superior to adults regarding his ability to decode and adopt the adults' stereotypical behavior (Curtis, 2007: 13-14, 48, 329-334). Having static qualities obstructs the protagonists' ability to freely and continuously construct the meanings of their own existence and a true sense of selfhood. It also inhibits the development of aesthetic relationships, which

require individuals to have dynamic identities and their own free will to act, being independent of external social forces. Although the acknowledgement of others is essential in the establishment of an aesthetic relationship, it is important for both participants or the self and others to recognize their interdependent and equal roles in co-constructing the meanings of their identities and existence.

In loose social structures, the boy protagonists have a relatively high degree of freedom to construct their dynamic identities and aesthetic relationships with others. Through the transgressions or disregard of rigid societal norms or rules, the protagonists are depicted as having their free will to employ the intellectual quality of the excess of seeing. This quality allows them to acknowledge other people's lives and evaluate the social system from both inward and outward perspectives. Consequently, their aesthetic relationships can fully develop in the social contexts where both they and other characters can acknowledge each other's value and recognize their interdependency in formulating a meaningful existence. All three protagonists are portrayed as having dynamic identities in that they acknowledge their incomplete identities and the need of the other characters' confirmation to help consummate their fuller senses of being. Therefore, the construction of their identities is always oriented towards the future, leading to the ongoing growth of their personal development. When empathizing with other people's lives, they are portrayed with humane qualities, such as benevolence, compassion, and empathy. In their acknowledgement of the others' life experiences from an outward perspective, the boy protagonists are depicted with mental strength or conscience to cope with the stringent social forces so as to relieve the others' sufferings or to acknowledge the others' intrinsic values. In turn, their identities are reassured by the others' recognition of their inner virtues. Towards the end of each novel, Turner and Manjiro are apparently depicted with their potential to spiritually and intellectually progress and to successfully establish aesthetic relationships with other people in the future (Preus, 2010: 271; Schmidt, 2004: 210-217). This potential is represented through their insights into human relationships and their active evaluations of the prevailing social systems. However, by

the end of *Elijah of Buxton*, the protagonist's construction of his dynamic identity and his aesthetic relationships with others appear incomplete due to his lack of autonomous agency, which in turn hinders his full evaluative capacity to transcend stereotypical expectations (Curtis, 2007: 325-326, 329-334).

The Portrayal of Girl Protagonists and Their Aesthetic Relationships

This section reveals how the identities of girl protagonists and their relationships with other characters are constructed in three novels: *The Wanderer* (2000) by Sharon Creech; *Turtle in Paradise* (2010) by Jennifer L. Holm; and *One Crazy Summer* (2010) by Rita Williams-Garcia. The findings focus on two main aspects: 1) the depiction of the girl protagonists and 2) the depiction of undesirable and aesthetic relationships they establish with others. Through the employment of Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical framework of the aesthetic relationship, the findings reveal once again that all girl protagonists can successfully develop their dynamic identities and aesthetic relationships in less stringent social contexts, whereas they fail to do so under a rigid social system.

According to the findings, the development of the girl protagonists' identities is shaped through their relationships with others in different social contexts. The meanings of the protagonists' identities are enriched by their self-perceptions as well as the perceptions from other people and society. In their conflicting relationships with others constructed in strict cultural contexts, the protagonists' identities become static; they are perceived by other people as inferior. In *The Wanderer*, the progress of Sophie's identity is constrained in a strictly gendered structure where she is merely defined through her girlhood, which connotes only her physical and mental weakness. Her static quality is constructed through her relationships with adult characters, especially her mother and makes her perceive herself as inferior to men (Creech, 2000: 4-5, 72-73). Similarly, in *Turtle in Paradise*, Turtle's identity is constructed through her gender role in a sexist cultural context. She is perceived by boys as inferior due to their stereotypical

assumption that as a girl she lacks potential to do certain things (Holm, 2010: 27, 34, 47). In *One Crazy Summer*, Delphine's static identity is constructed in a racist cultural context. Her static quality is socially defined through the physical appearance or her black skin, which makes her perceive herself as inferior to Caucasians (Williams-Garcia, 2010: 11). At the beginning of each story, all three protagonists to an extent perceive their identities as something unchangeable and adhere to their static self-perceptions. For instance, Sophie firmly considers herself as a capable person with physical and mental strength, overlooking any assistance from others, especially men (Creech, 2000: 4, 129). Delphine solidifies her identity as an African American who is abandoned by her mother (Williams-Garcia, 2010: 4, 11, 14). Turtle, through her innate shrewdness, pessimistically believes in only the negative side of human identities—including her own (Holm, 2010: 3). The fixation of the protagonists' inner being is reinforced by themselves or others from within a hegemonic social context where they feel devalued or socially excluded. Since equality among individuals is not highly regarded in hegemonically rigid sexist and racial structures, the protagonists' personal growth cannot be fully achieved. Their perceived static identities inhibit them from fully acknowledging their identities and others' as an open-ended and dynamic construction. Hence, the meanings of their identities and relationships with others cease to be constructed continually or enriched. This unfortunately sustains their unequal relationships with other people and leads to the failure of their aesthetic relationships with them.

The attainment of the girl protagonists' dynamic identities and the construction of their aesthetic relationships with other people can become successful when strict social norms or rules are disregarded. This enables the protagonists to acknowledge the value of their identities and that of others and to employ their excess of seeing. In *The Wanderer* and *Turtle in Paradise*, the construction of Sophie's and Turtle's dynamic identity is reconfirmed by other people who treat them as equal individuals or who overlook male-dominated rules (Creech, 2000: 6, 17-18; Holm, 2010: 60-61, 65, 176-177). Through the acknowledgement of others as well as the two protagonists' free will to act, the protagonists can realize their full potential

to progress or even their possible limitations. In *One Crazy Summer*, Delphine can perceive the uniqueness or diversity of individuals' identities by overcoming her own prejudice or the one imposed by others or racist norms (Willians-Garcia, 2010: 67, 185-186, 214-215). In addition, in loose social structures, the three protagonists can perform their evaluative perspective or the excess of seeing which helps them to evaluate the meanings of their existence as co-constructed with other people (Creech, 2000: 208, 213-214; Holm, 2010: 151-153, 175-177; Williams-Garcia, 2010: 209). The protagonists' personal growth is depicted when they acknowledge other people's sufferings, regardless of imposed stereotypical norms. They express their empathy and compassion towards others. Among the three protagonists, Sophie is depicted with self-control and appears most practical in relieving others' sufferings during a crisis. The protagonists' co-experiencing other people's lives also enables them to develop closer and more meaningful bonds with others. The sufferings the protagonists share with others allow the protagonists to recognize the interdependency between the self and others in aiding each other or co-constructing their harmonious existence. Other people's affirmation of the protagonists' value helps the protagonists to perceive their dynamic identities and their potential to teleologically orient their inner selves towards the future.

The Portrayal of Protagonists and Their Aesthetic Relationships as Reflected through Places

In this section, the findings illustrate how static and fluid places contribute to the construction of the protagonists' identities and their relationships with others as reflected through the six analyzed texts. Through the integration of interdisciplinary frameworks of cultural geography and Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical conception of the aesthetic relationship, the findings indicate that in static places, the development of the protagonists' dynamic identities is inhibited, and the protagonists also develop undesirable relationships with other people, whereas in fluid places, the protagonists' dynamic identities and aesthetic relationships are formed.

According to the research results, static places are presented as the

'Other' space where the protagonists are depicted as outsiders or outcasts who spatially lack autonomy, freedom or a sense of safety. They feel inferior or alienated to other people. Their relationships with others become unequal as the value of their inner being is not highly acknowledged. Identical material traces in static places reinforce strong spatial constraints which limit the protagonists' sense of selfhood or freedom. For instance, the town of Phippsburg in *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* and the town of Buxton in *Elijah of Buxton* offer their townspeople only certain restricted and similar styles of houses (Curtis, 2007: 68; Schmidt, 2004: 12). The protagonists in both novels express their desires to be situated outside this rigid environment. Similarly, in *The Wanderer,* Sophie perceives the town she lives in as a lifeless place and yearns to travel to another place, which offers her a more natural or adventurous zone (Creech, 2000: 9). Having no sense of belonging to the places, all three protagonists feel disconnected to the people. Elijah and Sophie relate the restricted or similar physical appearances of their towns metonymically to the uninteresting townspeople or a monotonous way of life (Creech, 2000: 9; Curtis, 2007: 68). The two protagonists perceive that their creativity, freedom or their sense of adventure cannot be achieved in this static spatial zone. As for Turner, his town represents the powerful authority of others, especially adults, that imposes on him and constrains the development of his selfhood (Schmidt, 2004: 12-13, 22-23, 69).

Domestic, institutional and public places also form a static zone obstructing the development of the protagonists' personal growth. At home, the protagonists in *Elijah of Buxton* and *One Crazy Summer* lose their spatial autonomy and their sense of belonging (Curtis, 2007: 20-21; Williams-Garcia, 2010: 24-25, 43-48). Most of the material traces or objects inside home are represented as the property of the protagonists' parents, especially their mothers (Curtis, 2007: 17-18; Williams-Garcia, 2010: 107). Both Elijah and Delphine feel insignificant or threatened at home since their parents have absolute control over their spatial boundary (Curtis, 2007: 21; Williams-Garcia, 2010: 43-48). The static space of home intensifies Elijah's fragility and Delphine's sense of doubt about the

value of her own identity. In *Turtle in Paradise*, at the beginning, home forms a space of the 'Other', embodying the power of other people who own the space and exercise their authority over Turtle (Holm, 2010: 8-9). Turtle's strong prejudice against human identities and her anger against others are reinforced in this static zone. Concerning institutional places, certain non-material traces or actions of people in a place reinforce the protagonists' conflicts with others. For instance, at school, the protagonists in *Elijah of Buxton* and *Heart of a Samurai* are depicted as humiliated individuals who are abused by others. Elijah lacks spatial autonomy to protect his rights from an abusive teacher (Curtis, 2007: 92), whereas Manjiro is racially discriminated against by his bullying peers as a traitor to the American boundary (Preus, 2010: 148-149). In addition, the church forms a forbidden zone where Elijah and Manjiro are not allowed to enter and are treated by others as complete outsiders. In *Elijah of Buxton*, the church becomes a private zone for only adults (Curtis, 2007: 254), whereas in *Heart of a Samurai*, the church is preserved for merely the Caucasians, not a Japanese boy like Manjiro (Preus, 2010: 139). Losing their right to share the space of the church with others, both protagonists feel oppressed and excluded. Static places also create a dangerous zone. For instance, in institutional places like prisons, Manjiro becomes a social outcast and has to endure physical and mental torment from the unjust Japanese authorities (Preus, 2010: 256, 263). This dangerous space intensifies Manjiro's humiliation and his fear as well as his distrust of others. In *One Crazy Summer*, certain public places, such as streets, and public parks become a harmful zone where Delphine perceives that people's sense of security can be diminished. Delphine questions the existence of her mother in this zone and as a consequence her own identity in relation to her mother (Williams-Garcia, 2010: 23-24).

In the static places depicted in the six novels, aesthetic relationships between the protagonists and others cannot be established since the protagonists' free will to act and the acknowledgement of their own value and that of others are not promoted. These static places cannot provide a creative or fluid zone where the protagonists can freely perform

their excess of seeing to actively evaluate their identities and their relationships with others. Rigid spatial perceptions of the protagonists and other people shape the protagonists' static identities and their unequal relationships with others. The spatial solidification creates a static zone, where only the negative feelings of the protagonists are constructed: displeasure, resentment, fear, doubt, shame, inferiority or alienation. As a result, the protagonists' personal progress and their aesthetic relationships with others cannot be enhanced.

Nevertheless, encounters in locales of spatial fluidity enable the protagonists to develop their dynamic identities and aesthetic relationships with others. A domestic or familial space of home is not always spatially restricted. Among the six novels, four novels depict home as a fluid site where the protagonists can gain a sense of belonging, freely establish their sense of selfhood and perceive the value of others. In *Heart of a Samurai*, the farmhouse that Manjiro lives in with Captain Whitfield and his family offers a cozy loving space where Manjiro can have freedom as well as physical and mental comfort (Preus, 2010: 129). The fluid zone in the farmhouse allows Manjiro to perceive the equality of all human beings regardless of their racial differences (Preus, 2010:174-175). In *The Wanderer*, Sophie's inner being and the meaning of her existence are enhanced in the Walnut Cottage where she feels connected to the family members who affectionately accept her as their real family although she is not related to them by blood (Creech, 2000: 278-279, 284-285). In *Turtle in Paradise*, Aunt Minnie's wrecked house becomes Turtle's refuge from her suffering, offering an intuitive space where Turtle can evaluate that a true home is constructed through worthwhile human relations—not through its luxury (Holm, 2010: 176-177). Finally, in *One Crazy Summer*, as the story further develops, the kitchen in Cecile's house gradually forms a familial space where Delphine's value is reassured, and the bond between her and her mother can finally become united (Williams-Garcia, 2010: 171-172, 208-210). The familial zone depicted in these four novels reinforces how the self and others mutually need each other in order to fulfill the meanings of each other's

existence and identity.

In fluid places, all six protagonists can achieve their spatial autonomy to construct themselves and acknowledge the significance of others in co-constructing their own identities. They can also register their evaluative perspective and acknowledge the value of their co-existence with other people. Furthermore, another notable instance of a fluid zone includes the natural places that the protagonists of each story travel to. The ocean or islands form a free autonomous zone where stringent social rules are disregarded, allowing Turner, Manjiro, Sophie and Turtle to gain a meaningful discovery of themselves and others. Natural traces depicted in the oceanic boundary, such as sea breeze, waves, panoramic vistas, and the sounds of nature or animals offer a sense of belonging and freedom for Turner, Manjiro and Sophie (Creech, 2000: 1, 92; Preus, 2010: 70; Schmidt, 2004: 40-43). In addition, through the vehicle of the symbolic image of the whales swimming in the ocean, Turner realizes about the interdependency among individuals (Schmidt, 2004: 215-216). Similarly, Sophie can gain the same insight and also perceives the importance of the dynamism inherent in human identity through the image of the two swimming dolphins (Creech, 2000: 139, 152-153). Manjiro can also decode a natural trace or the sunrise reflecting on the ocean as an important sign of his dynamic potential to discover a new world or a promising life (Preus, 2010: 95-97). As for Turtle, unpleasant natural traces, such as a dark sky, violent storms, and the big waves that she experiences on the Treasure Island enable her to realize the value of her domestic existence and human relationships over material wealth (Holm, 2010: 152). In addition, the discovery and acceptance of Sophie's dynamic identity become concretized when she experiences the foreboding image of big black waves coming to attack her (Creech, 2000: 141-142). Her past identity as a little girl who lost her parents is revived and reconfirmed in the oceanic space. In *Elijah of Buxton*, the natural space in the woods creates a free space where Elijah can recognize his potential for helping his community. The fluid zone of the lake in the woods also enables him to relate the symbolic image of the swimming fish to human interrelationships (Curtis, 2007: 44-45). Finally, in *One Crazy Summer*,

the natural traces, such as the open sky, and flying sea gulls create a fluid zone around the Golden Gate Bridge, helping Delphine to envision the free and continuous construction of her identity and to perceive the romantic connection of all beings (Williams-Garcia, 2010: 163-164).

Discussion

According to the research findings on the said books, in strict social or cultural contexts all protagonists develop static identities and fail to establish aesthetic relationships with others. The formation of the protagonists' static identities is reinforced through their own self-perceptions and those from others and society. In regard to the protagonists' perceptions of themselves, at the beginning, all six protagonists consider themselves as self-contained individuals with either positive or negative static qualities. Among the six protagonists, five protagonists perceive themselves as superior to others in terms of their physical or mental strength, or racial, intellectual and cultural backgrounds. Only one girl protagonist perceives herself with static inferior qualities, which are related to her racial background and influenced by her pessimistic belief in the negative side of people's inner beings. Concerning the perceptions of other people about the protagonists, all six protagonists are perceived by others as inferior in respect to their mental or physical weaknesses, racial or class backgrounds or their lack of potential to accomplish certain tasks. The protagonists' identities are also stereotypically defined through the social constraints of sexist, racist or classist contexts. The static qualities of the protagonists are either constructed by themselves or others to signify the termination of the protagonists' dynamic identity construction. Without the free will to continuously progress, to employ their evaluative perspective or the excess of seeing and to acknowledge the value of other people, the protagonists fail to initiate their aesthetic relationships with others.

The literature review found that the protagonists in children's adventure fiction are critiqued with having only superior qualities to other

individuals who are regarded as the protagonists' inferior or underdogs (Grenby 2008; Hourihan 1997; Hunt 2001; österlund 2002; Phillips 1997; Smith 2011; Wannamaker 2008). However, in this research, the significant findings reveal that among the six analyzed texts, in stringent cultural contexts, most protagonists perceive themselves as superior to others, whereas other people perceive all of the protagonists as inferior. The fact that other characters perceive the protagonists as their inferior implies how the protagonists in the analyzed texts are not completely presented as archetypal victors as those protagonists who are critiqued in the literature review and are often defined through their physical or mental strength. This research reveals that in the analyzed novels, the rigid perceptions of the protagonists and others upon each other reinforce or perpetuate their power relations and obstruct the protagonists to actively evaluate the true essence of their selfhood as well as their existence in relation to other individuals. The findings imply that the construction of the protagonists' identities is grounded in the relationships between the protagonists and others in the social contexts that they live in. The protagonists' dynamic identities can only be constructed in a society without strong social hegemony. In a less hegemonic social context, the protagonists can have their free will to act and simultaneously acknowledge the value of others in co-constructing their inner beings. They can also construct their desirable inner qualities and excel towards intellectual or spiritual discoveries which enrich the meanings of their identities and their interrelationships with others.

The research has also discovered that aesthetic relationships, which value the construction of an individual's dynamic identity and the interdependency between the self and others, do exist in the analyzed texts. The aesthetic relationships between the protagonists and other individuals can, however, only be initiated or developed in loose social systems where the protagonists and others can mutually acknowledge each other's value and mutually establish the meaning of their co-existence. The findings imply that the adventure genre should not be regarded merely as an entertaining fictional form which depicts a power struggle between a protagonist and his/her antagonists to intensify the protagonist's supremacy or

adventurous quests. Consequently, in the adventure genre, the worthwhile qualities of the protagonists and their equal relationships with others are also depicted, offering significant messages to intended readers about the meaningful construction of human identities and interrelations.

The findings disclose significant qualities of the protagonists in establishing aesthetic relationships in less hegemonic social contexts. In order to attain a dynamic identity, all six protagonists acknowledge that their inner beings are incomplete; this encourages the development of their ongoing personal growth which depends on their interrelations with others. The success of the aesthetic relationships is also grounded in the fact that other people acknowledge the protagonists as their equals or perceive the protagonists' inner value. Through both participants' realization of their interdependent and interrelated roles, the protagonists can achieve their free will to actively evaluate their selfhood, their co-existence with other people and the social systems in which they live. All six protagonists become more liberal-minded and positively perceive the uniqueness or the diversity of human identities and also become aware of the possibility of human flaws. The protagonists' intellectual qualities are depicted especially when they employ their excess of seeing to co-experience other people's sufferings. One of the most notable qualities is their moral bravery to aid others or to minimize another's sufferings. Their moral conscience is depicted through their transgression: to rebel against or demonstrate resistance to unjust social systems. It is also portrayed through the protagonists' realization of their own stereotypical perceptions in which they are willing to change and also in their strong will to help others. The protagonists' humane qualities, such as empathy, benevolence, and compassion also allow them to complete their excess of seeing and establish their mental connection with others. When acknowledging other people's sufferings, all protagonists encounter different degrees of emotional outbursts but finally manage to form an aesthetic distance so as to assist others. While acknowledging others' sufferings, boy protagonists appear to have more degrees of sadness or distress than girl protagonists. This signifies how

the boy protagonists exist in tighter social systems that in several ways lead them to encounter a moral dilemma of sacrificing their lives or their benefits for themselves or for others. Additionally, the fact that all six protagonists are affected emotionally when perceiving others' suffering heightens the protagonists' regard of other people's existence in relation to theirs. The six analyzed adventure novels depict that other people acknowledge or reassure the protagonists' inner beings and create a heightened sense of value after they are helped by the protagonists. These findings imply a significant message conveyed in the adventure novels to the phenomenologically intended readers, which is that all individuals symbiotically need one another to co-construct their worthwhile co-existence. It is also possible, important and honorable for individuals to change or transgress stringently unfair social norms or rules, which inhibit mutual understandings among individuals. Finally, people's intellectual growth can be enhanced when they value the existence of other individuals in relation to their own and can freely achieve their autonomous inner-self regardless of the extrinsic social forces.

Not only are the protagonists' identities and their relationships with others socially constructed but are also spatially constructed as well. This project discovered that static places obstruct the protagonists in developing their dynamic identities and their aesthetic relations with others, whereas fluid places promote this development. Instances of static places found in the analyzed texts are mostly local or domestic. Notable examples of these places include the towns in which the protagonists live, their homes, schools, churches, streets, and public parks. Through these perceived static places, the protagonists have no sense of belonging or security and fail to perceive their self-value or the value of others. Material traces and non-material traces represent rigid social rules or norms, intensifying the spatial authority of other individuals imposed on the protagonists. All six protagonists fail to employ their excess of seeing to actively evaluate the essence of their inner beings in relation to that of others. Their intellectual growth or their moral conscience is completely inhibited due to the spatial solidity, which suppresses their spatial autonomy, freedom or even imagination. The findings significantly imply that the enriched meanings of places in

the adventure genre are not merely configured in exotic places or wild settings where protagonists partake in their adventure in order to complete their quests. However, local or domestic places also play a crucial role in constructing the meanings of the protagonists' identities and their relationships with others. Although these static places appear to function in the stories as a minor geographical background for plot development, they are actually significant and should be read as such in an extensive literary analysis.

Spatial fluidity allows the protagonists to construct their dynamic identities and their aesthetic relationships with others. In fluid places, with their spatial autonomy, all six protagonists can achieve intellectual progress. This is depicted through their reflective evaluative perspectives about their own identities, other individuals' identities or the social structures they are situated in. One of the most apparent fluid spaces is depicted through natural sites, such as oceans, and woods. As found in my literature review, critics point out that rough or wild settings are a predominant space in the adventure genre and their important role is to reinforce the construction of protagonists' masculinity or supremacy (Grenby, 2008; Knowles & Malmkjær, 1996; Phillips, 1997; Wannamaker, 2008). Nevertheless, it has also been found in this research that a natural space offers most protagonists a spatial freedom which contributes towards their insightful self-discovery, their acknowledgement of other people's value or a more meaningful review of their past, present or future existence interrelated to that of others. Natural traces allow them to have a sense of belonging to a fluid space, reconfirming the significant value of their co-existence with others. A safe zone is also formed in natural places which the protagonists perceive as a refuge from static places restricted by social rules or norms. The findings imply individuals' yearning for situatedness in a liberal space where they can freely establish their own identities and can realize the significant role of others or society in co-constructing their identities. The findings confirm that space in the adventure genre should not be critiqued merely as a power-struggling site between the protagonists and minor characters.

A shared space between the protagonists and others does exist, strengthening their aesthetic relationships, which esteem equality and interdependency among individuals.

The integration of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the aesthetic relationship and the theoretical framework of cultural geography in this research reinforces the research hypothesis that the protagonists' identities and their relationships with others are socially as well as spatially constructed. The findings imply that human relationships and places are significantly interrelated. This correlation becomes intrinsic in the identity construction of people and places. It is also noteworthy that according to the findings, the protagonists' intellectual or spiritual attainment and their acknowledgement of others are usually depicted in liminal spaces where they can shift their own identities or abandon stringent rules or stereotypical perceptions. It is therefore suggested that further research should be conducted on the social and spatial connection in human relationships, which lead towards the achievement of individuals' intellect, insight or spirituality. A good example would be the conducting of an analytical research project on another form of popular literature: detective stories, which apparently depict protagonists' intellectual qualities, their connection with places and their relationships with supporting characters who are also important in helping the protagonists to accomplish their unresolved mysteries.

Conclusion

The attainment of the protagonists' social and spatial dynamic identities and the establishment of their aesthetic relationships with others become successful in a cultural context where strong social hegemony is slack or absent. On a larger scale, the findings of this research can contribute to the development of intermediate or advanced courses in children's literature and students' textbooks—especially in the area of the adventure genre. This research has also offered an evaluative perspective on the adventure genre as a quality choice for intended readers since it allows them to explore the manifold perceptions of human identities, spatial identities and interrelationships among individuals. The findings reinforce

the existing body of knowledge by critics confirming that an archetypal journey whether it is short or long, local or exotic, physical or psychological is an integral part of human existence. In addition, this research also proposes another perspective: that a worthwhile journey is a mutual journey between the self and others who are on their significant quest to achieve their harmonious co-existence and comprehend the truth about themselves, others and the world they live in. It is suggested that various interpretations of human journeys should be explored or analyzed. Future research can focus on an analysis of exposition and denouement in an adventure narrative, which can function as symbolic starting and ending points of a journey. Both social and spatial aspects can be integrated in the research to discover important elements, which contribute to the symbolic construction or completion of the journey and its quest. Future literary research should also be conducted beyond adventure narratives to other genres, such as fantasy fiction, historical fiction, and folklore, so as to discover a new body of knowledge for literary studies.

Acknowledgements

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