“No Son of Mine is a Quitter”–

Learning and Performing Gender in Jeff Kinney’s

Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series

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This thesis examines representations of gender norms and hegemonic masculinity in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. These immensely successful easy-to-read books have gained almost no literary attention when it comes to gender issues although the portrayal of masculinity in children's literature has been a growing concern during the past few decades. Greg, the protagonist of the series, is depicted as being pressured into fitting the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which is, in this thesis, defined as the normative and traditional masculinity against which one's "manliness" is often measured in the society. The ideals of this hegemonic masculinity include attributes such as physical fitness, toughness and independence.

In this thesis, the portrayal of gender in the series is explored through the themes of learned gender norms, popularity and appearance, bullying, and emotions in masculine relationships. It is argued that the portrayal of masculinity in the series is limited, and gender norms are exaggerated for a humorous effect. Although the protagonist's mother offers some alternative ways of performing gender, both parents are depicted as attempting to raise their versions of a "perfect son" and Greg learns to adhere to the norms of hegemonic masculinity at home as well as at school. The thesis discusses how Greg learns to perform his masculinity correctly to avoid negative attention and bullying as well as maintain his status particularly

among his peers. The portrayal of gender in the series indicates the continued dominance of the traditional gender binary in children's books, reflecting the views in our society. The thesis offers an overview of how current popular children's literature portrays gender and offers possibilities for further exploration of the recent diary cartoon trend among books targeted for preteens.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, preteens around the world have opened the first book in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and then the next one, and the next one. Targeted for reluctant readers, particularly preteen boys (Rickard Rebellino 78), the 17 books in the series have become an effective tool for parents and educators to encourage children to read. The 275 million copies sold as of 2022 ("The Wimpy Kid Series") tell of the success. The protagonist of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is a male middle school student, but while the books are often seen as targeting boys, girls seem to enjoy their humor and themes as well (Fingon 71). Given its widespread appeal, *the Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series has the potential to change not only how and what children read, but also their attitudes towards the world around them.

As Mem Fox argues, all reading affects how readers construct themselves within their gender and children's literature presents expectations for what it means to be a boy or a girl. To combat gender stereotypes, writers must expand views to the full range of human potential and not close opportunities from any gender, as Fox emphasizes (84). Despite this thirty-year-old call to action, two recent examinations of 100 recent children's illustrated books by the *Guardian* revealed, that children are still exposed to a primarily white male dominated world in their reading (Ferguson 2018 and 2019). Not only are there significantly fewer female than male characters but the popular books seem to be conforming to traditional gender stereotypes as well: female characters are more likely to appear in a caring role, mothers are more common than fathers and especially a father as the only parent in the book was extremely rare. Furthermore, wild and powerful beasts such as dragons are significantly more likely to be males, whereas girls will usually be weaker, more vulnerable animals such as insects (Ferguson

2018). As a result, Fox's concern about the effect of what children read and how it portrays gender remain relevant.

Gender in children's literature has been widely explored over the past few decades in feminist criticism. However, especially some of the older works have been recently criticized of solely focusing on the portrayal of girls and women. Moreover, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is one of the first and most popular examples of a new trend in children's literature known as diary cartoons (Taber and Woloshyn), which have had an immense commercial success but have not received much attention in the literary field. The portrayal of gender in this or other similar series, often intended to make reading easier and more fun for preteens, has only been briefly mentioned in an educational context or discussed in a general overview of themes in multiple series. This recent criticism has shown that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* reinforces traditional gender stereotypes (Taber & Woloshyn and Hayik). As Kerry Mallan points out, gender is often a topic of humor in literature (156) and the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* seems to be no exception. Thus, critical attention to the ways these books portray gender and reinforce traditional gender roles is long overdue.

The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series portrays the protagonist Greg Heffley's life and struggles as a preteen, such as his wish to be more popular, avoiding bullying, problems with his best friend and the conflicts with family, through his journals. These themes are likely relatable to many preteen readers around the world, as evidenced by the popularity of the series. This universally appealing aspect of the series makes the gender stereotypes connected to the humorous events and entertaining encounters between Greg and other characters all the more intriguing. It seems that not only does the series offer a relatable and easy read for preteens to enjoy, but it also gives them a very stereotypical view of how male and female characters behave and perform their gender.

Three books from the series were chosen for analysis: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (WK, 2007), *Last Straw* (LS, 2009), and *Hard Luck* (HL, 2013). I believe these books are useful examples of some the most prominent themes in the series and thus offer an overview of how the books portray gender and gender attitudes. The overarching themes present in all the books are aggression and bullying, present in both family and peer relationships of the protagonist. The first book focuses on Greg's school life and in addition to bullying, it explores themes such as gender attitudes and male friendship. The second analyzed book gives a more comprehensive view of Greg's family and how gender attitudes and roles are present and taught in the family, particularly in Greg's relationship with Dad. The last book chosen is more balanced between life with friends and with family, but the most prominent themes in the book are emotions and male friendship.

In my thesis, I will examine the gender stereotypes and attitudes in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. Using a feminist approach, I will discuss the gendered themes that emerge from the protagonist's encounters and relationships with his family and peers. I will argue that the portrayal of gender in the series adheres to traditional gender stereotypes and maintains ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which is illustrated by how the protagonist is taught and pressured to perform his gender according to the stereotypes of an independent, tough, emotionally distant and athletic man. Furthermore, I will discuss how Greg's diary writing conflicts with these traditional views and show how the protagonist's choices sometimes reach beyond the gender binary, but how the stable gender categories and attitudes in the text finally overshadow any attempt to escape the binary and its traditional gender roles. I will also show how the protagonist performs the learned ideals of hegemonic masculinity and categorizes others according to gender at school and how bullying is depicted as a way of correcting "incorrect" gendered behavior. In addition, I will argue that while the series has clearly succeeded in being appealing and captivating for a wide audience of preteens around the world, the traditional

gender roles and stereotypical characteristics of males and females make the series yet another example of how the dominant norms of our patriarchal society are often still accepted as the "universal" objective truth.

I will begin the thesis with a discussion of how gender attitudes and roles are taught and examine Greg's family life in terms of what he has and has not learned about gender from his parents. Next, I will examine how these learned stereotypes and attitudes turn into a performance of gender at school and how they are seen in how Greg views his male and female peers. Furthermore, I will show how one of the most prominent themes in the book, bullying, is seen as a masculine norm and discuss the different types of bullying as well as the gender attitudes behind the aggression. Lastly, I will focus on how hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes affect the protagonist's emotional life and closest relationships and describe how masculine ideals are portrayed as concrete relationships with a lack of or resistance of offered emotional support. Taken together, the themes discussed in this thesis show how the portrayal of masculinity in the series is rather limiting and often comically exaggerated as an integral part of the humor. Moreover, they offer us a glimpse of how exaggerated maleness, which comes with its stereotypes such as increased aggression in the form of bullying, seems to be considered funny in the US or perhaps Western societies in general, given the immense popularity of the series.

2. Gender in Children's Literature

The focus on gender in the context of children's literature is nothing new. As Beverly Clark notes, at the dawn of the 21st century, much of the work on children's literature was addressing gender issues (2). The development of feminist criticism of children's literature was in part connected to how the category "has been a venue receptive to women writers, especially during the twentieth century" (Clark 2). While children's literature written by women, often undervalued and lost behind the "classics" for children usually written by men, including authors such as Mark Twain, Jules Verne or Lewis Carroll (Clark 3), has been one focus of feminist criticism, Perry Nodelman argues that children's literature written by both men and women can be seen as "a form of women's writing" ("Hidden Adult" 175). He draws this conclusion from Wilkie-Stibb's argument that in the patriarchal discourse, both children's and women's literature has been seen as the Other (Wilkie-Stibbs 43; Nodelman "Hidden Adult" 175). Furthermore, he wonders if the concern for boys who are not reading is connected to a denial of conventional masculinity inherent to children's literature, if it is characterized as "women's writing" no matter the gender of the author (Nodelman, "Hidden Adult" 175). However, this connection between women's and children's literature does not necessarily result in literature rebelling against the dominant norms of patriarchy. In fact, Nodelman suspects that gender conservatism wins, noting that "it is the conservatism of children's literature that marks it as feminine, not its resistance to patriarchy" referring to how many works tend to still view the feminine as a repressive force and not a reason to celebrate ("Hidden Adult" 176). The implication of his arguments is that despite changes in attitudes towards gender roles in Western societies in the last few decades, the strong pull of patriarchy is still present in contemporary children's literature.

Nodelman's concerns gain support from authors who have recently examined gender representations in children's literature. Already in 1993, Mem Fox asked if children's literature could be at least partly blamed for denying girls the "excitement and power so readily available to boys and grown-up boys" and on the other hand "for trapping males in a frightful emotional prison and demanding intolerable social expectations of them" (Fox 85). Although she calls for a change in how children's literature views gender, she notes that subtlety in rewriting gender roles is the best approach for countering the years of subtle conditioning in patriarchal society (85) and ends her discussion demanding that while sexism is still present in recent children's literature "*none* of us should allow *any* of us to get away with it any longer" (88, original emphasis). Unfortunately, the change seems to have been so subtle that it is sometimes barely or not at all noticeable. Two recent studies examining the impact of these stereotypes on young readers point out how even contemporary literature still reinforces gender stereotypes familiar from fairy tales, where males are the active heroes going on adventures and female characters have "less exciting roles" (Kneeskern and Reeder 1472), being portrayed as caregivers or "submissive, attractive characters" (Hayik 409). Thus, the concern about children's books offering traditional gender roles for children seems to be as current as it was decades ago.

The continuing existence of gender stereotypes in children's literature has been met with worries about how these stereotypes affect or are internalized by the young readers and as a result, researchers have explored how dominant gender roles could be challenged. Rawia Hayik conducted an optional English course focusing on gender issues for advanced-level 14–15-year-old, mostly female Israeli Arab students who had not previously studied literature critically. The students read a Disney-fied version of Cinderella as well as two picture books and were encouraged to question the ways in which the characters were portrayed in the stories. Towards the end of the course, especially two female students described how the course caused them to view every text they read critically. Additionally, the two girls, who had considered

Disney princesses as role models, started questioning the message the characterization of the princesses sends to young children (Hayik 416-417), showing how merely bringing attention to the stereotypical portrayal of genders in these stories caused some students to critically reflect the texts around them. In another study with a similar focus, 8-12-year-old children were read a version of the same multi-chapter story altered to have either a stereotypical or counter-stereotypical male or female protagonist (Kneeskern and Reeder 1475-1476). They found that continued exposure to the whole book with counter-stereotypical characters had the power to alter beliefs about gender stereotypes especially in males who were exposed to a counter-stereotypical male protagonist (Kneeskern and Reeder, 1481), suggesting that a wide variety of gender representation in children's literature has the potential to change how children view gender roles.

Although the studies mentioned above suggest that questioning or challenging stereotypical characteristics would lead to a change in children's internalized gender views, Elizabeth Marshall has criticized the idea that there would be a direct causal relationship between reading gendered stories and children's beliefs about gender roles, arguing that the idea of children changing their identities and developing lifelong perspectives or attitudes while reading literature "builds on humanistic discourses that assume a blank slate, a reader who can be molded by the text" (260). While I agree that it would be an underestimation of children's capability for independent thought to assume that any book they read would directly mold their beliefs about what it means to be male or female, I still argue that books conforming to the traditional gender stereotypes that have been and often still are dominant in the society at the very least give yet another model for behaving according to how society believes your gender should behave. This is what John Stephens also proposes in his book *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature*:

> Texts for young audiences are not mere narratives, but have an orientation toward models and ideologies already present in culture and, by giving these narrative form, may reinforce them and refract them back to the culture or may propose some modification of them. (40)

However, the possible reinforcement of ideologies in children's fiction does not necessarily mean that these texts would only reconfirm already learned behaviors and attitudes but as Stephens notes "many fictions produced for readers in the early reading years recognize that represented behavior may not only reflect actual behavior but also modify it", suggesting that both the character and reader would have some choice in how they choose to construct their gender (40). This possibility of modification is what Stephens calls "subjective agency" (40) and I will adopt the term in the discussion of how the main character acknowledges and acts upon the gendered models presented and taught to him. Related to the idea of subjective agency, Stephens proposes three types of males, Old Age Boy, New Age Boy and Mommy's Boy, that he argues are often the three schemata inside and between which junior fiction negotiates the masculinity of its characters (Stephens, "Masculinity Schemata" 44). The Old Age Boy represents the ideals of traditional hegemonic masculinity and according to Stephens, he is either aggressive or "a rascal" and self-centered. In contrast to him, the Mommy's boy is "the pampered and privileged child who is to an excessive degree fashioned by his parents, especially his mother, and who is implicitly still marked as "unmanly, unmasculine". The New Age Boy is a third category that is contrasted against both of these other categories as the boy who is more open to his feelings and being vulnerable, reads for pleasure, thinks of others in his peer relationships and often lacks physical prowess but acts courageously because of his unselfishness and moral courage (Stephens "Masculinity Schemata" 44). These three categories will be discussed in the context of the main character's learning and performance of

gender roles and stereotypes in the analyzed books.

When considering the ways in which gender is portrayed in children's literature and their possible influence in children's attitudes towards gender roles, it becomes essential to define what exactly is meant by gender and what is meant by what I call "gendered models of behavior". Marshall accuses the liberal feminists of favoring a strong, active female character and points out that "liberal feminist interventions often take the form of replacing or supplementing representations of weak girls with assertive ones" and argues this strategy only "sustains a male/female duality", since traits such as being strong and active are privileged in the discussion (Marshall 260). Butler also warns that:

> Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption. (43)

While this is true and important to acknowledge in the context of studying gender, it is necessary to maintain the gender binary in this discussion of the very norms that this binary entails. After all, the gender binary is still strongly present in the society and to show how current children's literature still reproduces norms of masculinity and femininity, I will assume that the books I am analyzing are a reflection of the hegemonic gender views in the society. However, maintaining the binary does not mean that I will view masculinity and femininity as two opposite stable categories. Instead of the traditional liberal feminism's focus on sex-role theory "a paradigm in which social roles are allocated to men and to women on the basis of biological sex" (Marshall 256), Marshall calls for a poststructural lens, through which "the girl" (and it can be assumed, also "the boy") is not only a stable category but a character whose full analysis requires an understanding of the competing discourses about childhood, gender

and sexuality (Marshall 268). She is also concerned about how the ideal of girlhood still tends to favor Western, white, heterosexual femininity from a stable socioeconomic status (Marshall 268). What Marshall seems to be suggesting is that it is not enough to assume that children's beliefs about gender would be profoundly changed by just flipping the roles of male and female characters, since it still results in a gender dichotomy with rather narrow roles into which every child from anywhere in the world should fit into.

Although I maintain the terms of gender binary, such as the classification into males/females or boys/girls in my analysis, since the diary cartoons analyzed rely heavily on a traditional gender binary categorization allocating different, often opposing, roles for males and females, I will adopt Marshall's view of poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, which "posit identity as fluid" (Marshall 260). Adding onto Weedon's description about how subjectivity results from a combination of connected and conflicting political, economic and social discourses, Marshall notes that any time period or location will produce its own form of dominant girlhood (and assumedly boyhood as well), which will require a performance of femininity (or masculinity) (Marshall 260). Judith Butler similarly defines gender as "doing", at least partly unconscious and unwilling and "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (1). Furthermore, she reminds us that gender is never "done" alone, but it is always a performance for others, even if only an imaginary other (Butler 1). Thus, gender can be viewed as a performed role that can change based on to whom and where this "doing of gender" is happening, or in other words, based on what the surrounding society demands is the "right way" of being male or female, which is what I want to call "gendered models of behavior". I argue viewing gender as a performance, produced within a cultural and social context fits its portrayal in the series I am analyzing.

As can be seen from the discussion of the scholars above, the literature on gender issues in children's books has often focused on issues of girlhood or womanhood, which is

understandable considering that in a male-dominant patriarchal society women's issues have needed the space and attention they have so long been denied. However, this might have sometimes led to an incorrect assumption that males and their representations in literature would be unaffected by the patriarchy. In the preface of his book, Stephens notes how the application of gender studies into children's literature has primarily focused on female representation and the influence of patriarchy on regulation of femininity and continues: "The question of how the same patriarchal ideology structured representations of male bodies and behaviors seemed less urgent and has only very recently emerged as an issue (Stephens x). In the same book, Nodelman also points out the disparity between how much attention each gender was paid in the critical discussion at the beginning of this century:

> Even those of us who are committed to noticing and undermining stereotypes of femininity tend to be unaware of the degree to which our ideas about male behavior are equally stereotypical and, I suspect, equally dangerous for boys and men. ("Making Boys appear" 2)

Although this book is two decades old, it was only five years later that the first *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book was published and thus these concerns represent the atmosphere around gender issues in children's literature into which Kinney published his new kind of children's book, attracting young boys reluctant to read. Thus, like Nodelman argues, the ways in which books help children "both consciously and unconsciously, to develop a dangerously repressive sense of what it means to be desirably masculine" also require attention ("Making Boys Appear" 2).

The focus on masculinity calls for a definition of what kind of expectations and guidelines our society has in place for young boys. Hegemonic masculinity, introduced into

general academic use by R.W. Connell (Stephens, ix) is one of the most central terms related to this. Stephens points out how, despite Connell's original intention for the term to generally describe the current understanding of gender practices that guarantee the male dominance in the patriarchal society, hegemonic masculinity has often been used as a more specific term referring to "versions of traditional, macho masculinity characterized by toughness, courage, and muscularity, but also by aggressivity, violence, misogyny, homophobia, and other qualities marked as negative in the discourses of other masculinities and feminisms" (ix). This normative hegemonic masculinity is often presented as the model for what society thinks being male means and thus it is commonly used in studies of children's films and fiction as the model against which characters develop and compare their subjective experiences of gender (Stephens ix). This definition of hegemonic masculinity will be used in the thesis, as I believe it accurately describes the expectations and norms of masculinity characters in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* experience and perform.

3. Background on the Series

In this section, I will introduce the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and discuss its genre. In addition, some previous critics of the series will be presented and briefly discussed.

3.1 *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* Series

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series is written by Jeff Kinney, an American author who originally aspired to be a cartoonist ("Get to know Jeff"). The first book in the series *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* was published in 2007 and the latest book in the series came out in October 2022. Altogether, the series consists of 17 books published in 67 languages and a part of the series has been made into both live action and animated movies ("The Wimpy Kid Series"). Each book is in the form of a diary written by Gregory "Greg" Heffley, an American middle school student, who wishes to be popular and writes about his life as a preteen boy. In the first book, Greg is in sixth grade and although he slowly ages throughout the series, he never graduates middle school.

Greg's family consists of his younger brother Manny, older brother Rodrick, mother and father. Notably, there is a significant lack of active female characters and the only constant female figure throughout the series seems to be Greg's Mom who is characterized as a stereotypically overprotective mother always seeking new ways to connect with her preteen son and make the whole family spend time together. In contrast, the father is portrayed as a rather distant character, whose way of connecting with his son appears to be pressuring him to try more masculine activities. Greg's best friend Rowley is not interested in popularity and while Greg often feels Rowley embarrasses him, he benefits from the friendship and keeps Rowley around.

3.2 *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* Series as a New Type of Children's Book

The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books are one of the "most prominent examples" of the diary book trend for children in the last decade (Rickard Rebellino 77). As Rickard Rebellino points out diary books are not new, but this particular style of combining writing and illustrations has become a central genre in literature targeted at middle school aged children (77). This category of books does not seem to have an established name yet. Taber and Woloshyn call these books "diary cartoons" and describe them as "a mix of prose and images", which are "not as reliant on images as graphic novels but do rely on images more than illustrated books" (229). On the cover of the first book, Kinney calls it "a novel in cartoons" and while he has stated that he did not invent the "concept of an illustrated journal" he admits that he has created "a very particular format, where the interaction of text and comics creates a rhythm, a call-and-response that's essential to the humor", calling the books "long-from comics" (Cavna). Fingon adopts the term "nontraditional text" introduced by Frey, defining them as texts that "tend to borrow features from graphic novels and comic books, integrating various sizes and font styles" (Fingon 70).

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid thus seems to have created a whole new category of children's books, which are not graphic novels, but are not merely illustrated books either, since the pictures not only support the text, but add meaning and new layers of humor into it. Rickard Rebellino also recognizes this mixture of elements from different genres or categories calling the books "some new, hybrid form", which have been "largely ignored" in the critical discussion so far. She calls for critical attention to these series because their "overwhelming popularity" is significant from both literary and pedagogical perspectives (78). Although the first *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book will be 16 years old this year and has started a trend of similar light and funny diary-style books for preteens, their exact genre or category and their influence in the field of children's literature remain open questions.

3.3 *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* in Previous Literature

While children around the world have welcomed the series with open arms, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* has gained surprisingly little attention among scholars. There seems to be no studies that solely focus on this series from a literary perspective. As mentioned in the introduction, the series has often been described as a good choice for reluctant readers and therefore many studies related to the Diary of a Wimpy Kid analyze it from an educational perspective.

The success and possibilities of *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series have been discussed in studies that examine literature in the context pedagogy, since understanding how and why children become interested in certain books is essential for choosing what they should read in school. Voinea and Norel, who examine pedagogical reading in the digital/post-modern age, argue that "Greg can be any child, in any country, with dreams and fears specific to his age" (320) and later describe Greg as an "authentic child" which they explain to mean "a child with such concrete problems … that almost every child can relate to or would like to find himself in" (320). While the success of the series can surely be in part attributed to these notions about how relatable and authentic Greg's character is, including the humorous way of describing his preteen struggles that fascinates children and adults alike, the authors talk about "a child", but then use "himself" as the pronoun, implying the argument that Greg could be any child really means that he could be any boy. Another scholar had similarly noticed the potential of the series in a classroom context after noticing how ELL students who struggled with understanding vocabulary and reading in English enjoyed the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, discussing it while reading and recommending it to each other (Fingon 70-71). Fingon also notes that while the series is sometimes seen as meant for boys "girls seem to relate to the universal themes, humor, and vernacular tone as well" (71). Thus, while the author acknowledges that the series could be seen as targeted towards boys, she feels the universality of the themes in the series makes it appealing for all her students.

Indeed, both Voinea and Norel and Fingon found that both girls and boys, native speakers and language learners and even usually reluctant readers, were enthusiastic about the *Wimpy Kid* series and readily shared their opinions, which often mentioned how funny or relatable the series is (Voinea and Norel, Fingon). The "universal child" Greg represents is seen as "a promoter of certain values, especially if these are pedagogically processed" (Voinea and Norel 323) and the "deeprooted and underlying themes" the series introduces such as the relationship between father and son or peer pressure are also mentioned as a potential teaching tool with students on different levels (Fingon 73). It seems that Kinney has managed to reach a completely new group of reluctant readers with his fun easy-to-read books, not only making children laugh out loud but also giving them ideas and prompts for discussion that are relevant to their own lives. However, while the authors discuss the potential of the series in offering more than just humor, the ways in which the series discusses or presents these values or themes are left largely unmentioned. Voinea and Norel argue that the series offer "one side (an ideal one) of the postmodern society: the image of the happy child (having one harmonious family, going to school, having friends and age-specific activities, not caring about material issues)" (320). Although Greg's middle-class family with parents still together living in a nice house is in many ways ideal, this argument fails to mention the constant bullying Greg endures from his brother, the threat of physical discipline from the dad and the rigid gender roles enforced by family and peers alike that often change the meaning of "age-specific activities" into "gender-specific activities".

The issue of gender stereotypes in the Wimpy Kid series has only been explored by a few previous critics. In their article, Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn examined gendered themes in diary cartoon novels and used the first book from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series as one of the primary materials. The analyzed gendered themes were mean girls/bullying, self-concept and -esteem, friendship, and adult naivete (Taber and Woloshyn 230), which closely

resemble the themes that arise in my discussion of gender. The authors continue that the themes are gendered, since "they represent the lives of boys and girls, and their interactions with others, as categorically different" (Taber and Woloshyn 230). Furthermore, Taber and Woloshyn argue that all the analyzed books "promote heteronormative gender roles" and offer representations of hegemonic femininities and masculinities for their readers (227). Although this study focuses on comparing books targeted for boys to books targeted for girls, Greg's relationships and the issues he faces seem to be based on similarly gendered themes, and gender stereotypes influence Greg's relationships, as well as the ways in which he views himself and the people around him. For example, related to Greg's pressure to be popular among his peers, the authors mention Greg's wish to be muscular so that he would not be embarrassed to be picked in "skins" in their physical education class as a masculine way of being conscious of one's body image (Taber and Woloshyn 231).

The themes in Taber and Woloshyn's study mostly focus on Greg's school life and relationships with those similar in age and the adults in his life are left in a secondary role. One of the themes explored is adult naivete, which is explained as follows: "Parents are presented as caring but naive throughout the cartoon journals reviewed here" (Taber and Woloshyn 238), though Greg's mom is only mentioned in passing and Dad is never mentioned. There is a stark contrast between how caring Greg's Dad and Mom are portrayed already in the first book, which seems to be a result of portraying the parents in traditionally gendered roles for a mother and father and thus the authors' notion about how parents are caring albeit naive seems to be too generalizing. However, the authors offer an intriguing overview of how *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* conforms to gender stereotypes and reveal how compared to the other Diary format children's books, the series seems to be targeted more for boys. In the next chapter, I am going to discuss how Greg's parents teach these gender stereotypes to him and how he learns to perform his gender according to his parents' gendered models of behavior.

4. Learning and (Un)doing Gender Stereotypes

Parents are a significant source of attitudes and opinions. When the child sees how parents behave and learns from their example and instructions, gendered models of behavior are passed on to them. In their study of representations of parents in popular children's books, Anderson et al. conclude that:

> The gender socialization of children and parents via children's books contributes to the notion that mothers and fathers cannot perform as equals in homes or workplaces. Representations of mothers and fathers differ substantially, with fathers playing a secondary role in parenting if they appear at all. (Abstract)

These findings seem to apply to the analyzed books as well. Comparing Greg's relationships with each of his parents, Mom spends more time on parenting and is usually the one who has a talk with Greg or carefully considers what would be a suitable punishment and is thus an example of a traditionally feminine caring mother, whose actions are meant to be nurturing and what is best for the child, whereas Dad conforms to masculine stereotypes of aggressive anger and emotionally distant parenting. However, there are moments when Mom tells Greg to wait until his Dad is home (LS 70), which suggests that the father still is "the man in the house" and has the final say when it comes to more serious issues, implying that the parents conform to traditional gender roles where the father is the highest authority and the mother is assigned the everyday discipline of the children.

In addition to the differing parental roles, Mom and Dad also have different roles when it comes to Greg's socialization and education, which are also connected to how Greg is taught to perform his gender. One of the most important goals for Dad seems to be to make sure that

his son becomes a “manly” man, the definition of Stephen’s “Old Age Boy” (“Masculinity Schemata” 44) and he tries to force Greg to have masculine hobbies, such as soccer. Dad compares Greg to other boys and seems to only be truly interested in his son, when he meets the masculine standards he has set for him. In contrast, Mom is more concerned about Greg becoming a well-educated and well-behaved boy and she makes sure Greg succeeds in school and tries educational activities. Although in many ways, Mom also teaches traditionally masculine ideals to Greg, she is also responsible for pushing Greg towards the “New Age Boy” schemata of masculinity by, for example, introducing diary writing and other “feminine” hobbies. Greg’s upbringing thus seems to teach him the behavioral schemata of both the Old Age and New Age Boy, which then tend to conflict with each other and cause constant negotiation between what Greg wants to do and what is expected of him. These differing ways of parenting offer Greg models for performing gender and in the next subsections, I am going to discuss Dad’s and Mom’s parenting and how they pass on ideals of hegemonic masculinity and gender attitudes.

4.1 Bringing Up a Man

Dad’s role in Greg’s life resembles the findings of Anderson et al. who found that fathers often had a secondary role in parenting and if they were present at all, they were more disengaged from the family, doing fewer activities with the children and being less nurturing (1354). Although Greg’s father is not completely absent, his role in parenting is depicted as rather limited compared to Mom and he has a quite distant relationship with Greg, as his son rarely tells him what is going on in his life. Furthermore, Dad is not enthusiastic about spending time with his children and Greg’s and Dad’s activities together often start by Mom making Dad spend time with him, such as when Mom wants Greg and Rowley to take Manny trick or treating. After Greg reveals they would be going to a dangerous part of the neighborhood, Mom

also forces Dad to go with them: “Dad tried to squirm out of it, but once Mom makes up her mind, there’s no way you can change it” (WK 66). The quote is accompanied by a picture where both Dad and Greg look disappointed, revealing that this is not an ideal situation for either of them. Altogether, Dad is portrayed as a traditionally masculine man, who does not usually show his emotions excluding anger and is very adamant about raising Greg into a proper man by making sure his interests and hobbies fit traditional masculine ideals. This idea of a “manly man” seems to be based on standards that Dad himself does not even reach. He is not portrayed as very physically strong or athletic but wants Greg to play sports and grow muscle. Dad also threatens to use physical punishments in several cases, where Greg has done something inappropriate or wrong.

Although Mom is usually the one seen doing the day-to-day parenting, Dad seems to have more say when it comes to teaching gender roles to their children. Dad’s attitude towards Greg’s ideas or interests reveals that he has strong views about what his son should and should not do according to masculine norms. For example, when Greg talks about how he wants to become more muscular after being put in the lightweight group during wrestling at school, Dad immediately becomes enthusiastic. Greg thinks it is because he has had “a change of heart”, since apparently Dad used to lecture him about working out and growing muscles when he was “a kid” (WK 88), but he was not interested. This implies that Dad’s mission of making Greg engage in masculine activities started from a young age. While Mom protests the whole idea of Greg getting a weight set, Dad tells Greg to wish for one for Christmas (WK 89). In contrast, when Greg was little, he wanted a doll house for Christmas, because it would have been a good fort for his toy soldiers, but Dad talked Mom out of buying it for Greg, because a doll house is not appropriate for boys (WK 116-117). After Greg’s uncle understands his wish wrong and buys a Barbie for him, Dad tells Greg to throw it away. However, Greg secretly keeps the doll and finally ends up in the hospital with a pink Barbie’s shoe in his nose (WK 118-119). These

examples show that Dad has strong opinions about raising a boy the "appropriate" way based on traditionally masculine ideals, such as being physically strong and avoiding toys that are "for girls". While these examples are full of self-deprecating humor and Greg seems to not be ashamed of his secret playing with a Barbie, the fact that gender roles are at the center of the humorous events shows how the relationship between Dad and Greg is very much based on exaggerated gender stereotypes. Thus, the young readers of the series seem to be offered the message that while it is funny if a boy sometimes behaves in a feminine way, since it is in contrast with the expectations arising from the traditional gender binary, Dad's role is to stop that and offer more appropriate ways to spend one's time.

Dad's attempts to mold Greg into a masculine man are a prominent theme in the series and Greg's attempts to please his father often lead to Dad being disappointed, which stems from Greg failing to reach his standards of hegemonic masculinity, or in other words, failing to perform masculinity according to Dad's preferred model of gendered behavior, which seems to closely resemble Stephen's idea of the physically assertive "Old Age Boy". Greg's unwillingness to try the activities Dad forces him to seems to suggest that if given more subjective agency to modify his understanding of masculinity, Greg's masculine schemata would sway more towards the "New Age Boy", which is, for example, implied by his secret diary writing. Nodelman cites the old phrase "I'm going to make a man out of you" and argues that "traditional manhood is something that does or does not happen to males. It consists of choices and always, I think, it represents an ideal and impossible-to-achieve state of being that all males must inevitably fail to achieve" (Nodelman, "Making Boys Appear" 10). This idea of "making a man" seems to fit Dad's behavior with Greg quite well. There appears to be a certain sense of impossible standards. Greg should be athletic, tough and successful, but Dad himself is not depicted as fulfilling his own ideals of what a man should look like, since he is not seen playing sports or lifting weights nor is he portrayed as being particularly successful in

his career. One reason for these impossible ideals could be that Dad seems to measure his own masculinity and success as a father based on how successful in performing masculinity his sons are, since he compares them to his new boss's sons, who are more athletic and seem traditionally masculine. When Greg has started soccer after Dad insisted, he does not really enjoy it and is not very good at, and he suggests he should just quit. Dad gets mad and says, "no son of mine is a quitter" (LS 122). Greg argues this is not true, since he and his brothers are huge quitters. Later, Greg fails to concentrate on goalkeeping and focuses on blowing dandelions on the side of the field, which results in his team losing. Dad's boss notices this from an article in a local newspaper and makes fun of him, which results in Dad being disappointed and angry once again (LS 152-153). This comedic incident portrays the struggle between Dad's expectations and Greg's actual interests. Apparently, Dad has a certain kind of a picture of "a good son" who he could be proud of and that ideally masculine picture is more important to him than what his son actually wants to do.

As a result of this struggle between what Greg wants and what Dad expects in terms of Greg performing masculinity correctly, Greg quickly notices that he makes his Dad satisfied if he at least pretends to enjoy masculine activities. This connects to Butler's idea of performing gender for an audience (1), since Greg's attempts to please his dad are quite literally a performance of "a manly man" meant for Dad. After Dad has threatened to send Greg to a military academy summer camp, Greg decides it is time to "to convince Dad that I was tough" (LS 164). He joins boy scouts and although he does not actually whittle, but only molds soap (he does not reveal this to Dad), he earns the "whittling badge", and Dad is very impressed. Thus, Greg decides to invite Dad to the Boy scouts' father-son camping trip and explains that:

> I was pretty surprised with how easy it was to impress Dad with that one little merit badge, so I figured a whole WEEKEND of him seeing me do macho stuff would totally blow him away. (LS 170)

Greg enjoys the boy scouts, but not because he would be actually interested in all the activities, but because he is able to make his Dad proud without too much effort.

Greg also seems to acknowledge the gender norms that Dad is comparing him to. While he appears to have developed a certain sense of subjective agency in that he can sometimes act against Dad's wishes and the norms of hegemonic masculinity such as when he borrows Mom's bathrobe in the cold mornings although Dad looks disappointed (LS 7), he usually still gives in to the pressure to perform according to the masculine norms. Stephens points out that in the context of hegemonic masculinity, male children are simultaneously offered agency within the society and denied the agency, since as children, they are still subordinated (ix-x). The ways in which Greg acts to earn his Dad's approval seem to confirm this view. Greg's acknowledgment of the gender norms that he is subjected to suggests he has a sense of agency, but the freedom to choose seems to be only illusory. In The Last Straw, Dad's disappointment in Greg, his military academy-threat and Greg's attempts to avoid being sent there are central to the plot of the book and Greg's unfortunate setbacks and failures to impress his Dad are tragicomic in their exaggeratedness. At the same time, the examples presented in this subsection portray a father-son relationship, where a son has to "earn" his dad's respect and pride by performing masculinity correctly and becoming the ideal man his father wants to see.

4.2 Mother and the Ideal Son

The mother's role in raising Greg and especially in bringing up a boy is depicted as substantially different from Dad's masculine authoritative role. While Dad is usually portrayed as a distant father, whose role in raising Greg seems to be mostly about discipline and authority,

Greg's Mom is portrayed as a traditionally nurturing mother. She seems to take her role as a parent quite seriously and is thus an example of the traditional norm that the mother is the one in charge of caring for her children. She has a hidden stash of parenting books in her closet, and it is indicated that it is specifically Mom who has read them and uses their tips in her parenting (HL 149). However, most of the nurturing behavior seems to be targeted towards the youngest son and while Greg does receive his share of his mother's care, he is often also expected to be independent and solve his own problems. In the following paragraphs, I am going to describe how Greg's mother raises Greg according to her understanding of an "ideal son" and how she both teaches and unteaches gender roles in the process.

Mom's ideal son is apparently not a manly man in the same way as Dad's but an independent and successful achiever, which seems to be a model of masculine behavior that is only forced on to the older sons and not the youngest one, who appears to be too young to be subjected to norms of masculinity in the same way as Greg. Victor Seidler suggests that "emotions and feelings tend to be identified with the mother and so with the feminine" and argues one learns masculinity by separating himself from these qualities. He further claims that learning to be a man means learning to be independent and self-sufficient and thus being able to live without relationships (20). Greg seems to have learned this masculine independence both from how his parents except him to behave and from the parents' attitudes to his problems. Mom has encouraged and even forced Greg to solve his own problems already from a young age. This is illustrated by Greg's explanation of how Mom solved the constant battles between younger Greg and Rodrick with a "Tattle Turtle" to which the boys could tell on each other instead of talking to Mom, which according to Greg worked well for Rodrick, but not for him. The picture shows Greg telling the tattle turtle that Rodrick stole all his money (LS 104). This example shows how Mom's beliefs about independent problem-solving resulted in Greg being left alone in a situation, in which he would probably have needed Mom's help and comforting.

Furthermore, Mom takes Greg's younger brother's Manny's problems more seriously and pays attention to his feelings, which further shows how masculine toughness and independence are expected from the older boys, but not from the youngest one. For example, when Greg teases Manny with a small ball of thread pretending it is a spider, Manny accidentally swallows it. Manny tells Mom that Greg made him swallow a spider and when Mom asks him what size it was, giving Manny realistic options, he takes an orange out of the fridge. Defending himself gets Greg nowhere so he is punished based on Manny's exaggerated story even if he apparently meant no harm (WK 133-135). Furthermore, when Manny calls Greg "a ploopy" and Greg tries to tell on him, Mom gets frustrated and Manny is allowed to keep calling Greg that (LS 102-103), but when Greg calls Manny "a ploopy" he throws a fit during church and Mom bans the word from everybody (LS 112-114). Although it is understandable to expect more from an older son in terms of good behavior and empathy, Greg insists that Mom and Dad have totally different rules for Manny compared to when he was the same age, not to mention now that Greg is older. While Greg's feelings are often dismissed by the parents and he is expected to be a rational and independent man who does not need parents to solve his problems, Manny's hurt feelings are listened to, and he has the attention of both parents if he needs it, which suggests that the parents push a certain gendered model of behavior only on the older children. This is further confirmed by some of Greg's own childhood memories, where it seems that Dad and Mom used to be more concerned about his feelings, such as when it is revealed that Mom has a secret collection of Greg's stuffed animals in case one was broken or lost, just like she had for Manny until he found the stash (HL 158). Thus, some of Greg's comparisons between how the parents treat Manny versus him when he was the same age might stem from a lack of connection and understanding from the parents now that he is older.

Mom's ideal of an independent son often conflicts with how she acts with Greg, since she forces Greg to try different activities similarly to Dad, although she apparently differs in her motives. This seems to further confirm Stephen's idea that while male children are offered agency in patriarchy because of their maleness, they are simultaneously denied that agency, since they are just children. Greg is expected to be independent but is simultaneously not allowed to choose his own activities. Mom appears to usually have an educational approach and she makes Greg try different activities, because that would make him "well-rounded" (WK 96) meaning she wants to have a son, who is educated and well-adjusted to the society. For example, Greg only joins the school play try-outs, because Mom makes him. There, he notices "a bunch of other boys whose moms made them come too" (WK 97), which implies that Greg generally assumes Moms oversee education and force their boys into extracurricular activities that Greg sees as not targeted for boys, such as the school theater. Indeed, Mom is the one who usually keeps better track of Greg's school performance, and when it comes to succeeding in school, Mom does not believe in allowing Greg to make independent choices. When Greg and Rowley are escaping a group of teenagers, who tried to bully them, and end up hiding in Grandma's house, Greg calls to ask Mom, if they could stay for the night. Mom gets angry and refuses saying it is school night and they should get home right away (WK 72). Greg does not even try to explain why they are in Grandma's house or ask for help, which indicates that he has learned to keep his problems to himself. However, Greg can sometimes trust in Mom's help. When his school performance has gotten worse one year, and he is in danger of having to do summer school, he misreads the instructions of a science project and does not have a typed report the night before the deadline. Mom steps up and spends the night typing the report up. Greg tries to thank her, but she is still asleep (HL 210-211). This scene shows how important Greg's education is to Mom. While Mom usually pushes Greg to solve his own problems by himself, she is also willing to help his son, who has really tried to finish his project.

While Mom's main motive in making Greg join activities or behave in a certain way does not seem to be exposing his son to "feminine" activities or behaviors in the same way that Dad supports "manly" activities, there are multiple situations in which Mom's suggestions are in line with feminine stereotypes and this seems to create one of the few real challenges to the gender stereotypes present in the books and offer Greg some ways of taking on the role of "the New Age boy", who is more connected to his feelings as well as enjoys writing and reading (Stephens, "Masculinity Schemata", 44). For example, she asks the guests to only bring books for Greg's birthday, an idea which the other Moms then copy (HL 31) making the boys invited to the birthday party angry. This suggests that being literate and culturally experienced are seen as feminine traits, which is what Nodelman also notes: "in contemporary North American culture being bookish is understood to be a girly kind of thing" ("Making Boys Appear" 12). He also suggests that children's literature written by both males and females tend to admire boys who read and write (Nodelman, "Making Boys Appear" 11). Although Greg is reluctant in the beginning of the first book, when Mom has bought him a diary (WK 1), he becomes an active writer. This creates an interesting conflict between the way these books are written in the form of Greg's diaries and the events that Greg describes in them. If we agree with Nodelman's notion that being "bookish" is traditionally seen as feminine, then Greg's diary writing seems to challenge the gender stereotypes he observes and adopts in the diaries. Mom is also one of the only prominent female characters in the series and thus Greg's and Mom's relationship can be seen as a possible channel for challenging and modifying the gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Mom's suggestion to write a diary can be seen as a way of giving Greg the subjective agency, he seems to lack in his relationships otherwise. However, Greg wishes to keep his diary writing a secret at school and is sure to stress that he will not write his feelings down in the diary (WK 1), suggesting that in this case as well, Greg's subjective agency is at least partly illusory, since Greg still feels the pressure to perform his masculinity

even if the audience of his diary is only imaginary. This real or imaginary audience is often Greg's peers at school and Greg seems to have strong views about how one should perform their gender at school, the topic I turn to next.

5. Performing Gender with Peers

While gender stereotypes are passed on from parents, an important source of gender attitudes for Greg is his peers. At school and with his friends, Greg learns to categorize girls and boys in different ways, internalize gender stereotypes and behave like a boy should, or in other words, perform his gender in an appropriate way that does not evoke negative attention. At school, Greg is usually depicted as attempting to perform his gender according to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity presenting as tough, independent and interested in masculine activities like the "Old Age Boy", which often leads to him having to hide or trying to suppress any behavior or trait that could be considered less masculine. Greg is very aware of his status among his peers, and he has ranked the people at his school according to his own rules that seem to be based on gender: girls are ranked based on their looks and the ranking for boys seems to be related to how popular the boy is among the girls. In the following sections, I am going to analyze Greg's gender attitudes and gendered behavior around his friends and schoolmates.

5.1 Popularity and Looks

The middle school life of Greg requires constant awareness of one's status and how one appears to others. One of the most important aspects of that appearance is conforming to gender roles. As Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn argue, popularity issues are mostly based on one's social status, which is a "primary concern" for Greg (230). He has a popularity ranking for himself and all the other "kids", apparently referring to only boys with the word choice, at his school and ranks himself as "somewhere around 52nd or 53rd most popular this year" (WK 7). The criteria for popularity are rather vague but seem to be based on how much girls like you and Greg lists his ideas of the criteria as "it's about the kind of clothes you wear or how rich you are or if you have a cute butt or whatever" (WK 6). Although Greg mentions that the most

popular boy at their school is Bryce Anderson and is disappointed that while he liked girls already in elementary school, Bryce has only recently gotten interested, he does not appear to represent a specific popularity "role model" for Greg as he is seldom mentioned in the analyzed books. Rather, Greg's strategy for maintaining or enhancing his social status appears to be mostly about avoiding negative attention from bullies, seeking positive attention from peers, especially girls and, what is especially important, performing masculinity correctly.

Greg appears to be very aware of the rules of how one should perform their gender at his school to be popular and he is also conscious of the fact that his interests or behavior often do not meet these criteria. Judith Butler's description of "doing" one's gender, performing for others even when the audience is only imaginary (Butler 1), seems to be at the heart of the peer relationships Greg has and especially one's status among boys seems to be largely dependent on how well one manages to perform their masculinity. In addition, Marshall's idea of any social context forming its own dominant form of girlhood (260) (and presumedly boyhood as well) describes the constant negotiation of which choices are appropriate for a male and awareness of how his behavior fits his peer group's ideals of hegemonic masculinity that Greg shows in his diary. For example, Greg does not want to take another class of home economics even though he was good at it, because other boys have teased him about his "book bag", which they called a purse (WK 145*).* Also, he hides that he is writing diary entries, because that would also cause trouble at school. Greg's drawing of what he thinks would happen if someone saw the diary includes a larger boy pushing him and calling him "a sissy" (WK 1) so Greg's behavior at school is clearly depicted as a performance of what he and his classmates perceive as acceptable for males.

Although homosexuality is never mentioned in the books, it becomes apparent to the reader that masculinity also contains a heteronormative aspect, where a lot of what is perceived to be correct and acceptable masculine behavior is also the behavior that gains the most positive

attention from girls. According to Nodelman masculinity is often widely defined as "not feminine" and he adds that in United States, where at the time the book was published (2002) homosexuality had recently entered the public discussions on a wider scale, masculinity also "increasingly means *not* gay" ("Making Boys Appear" 8). While society has changed after this statement was made, regarding how gender and sexual orientation are viewed and discussed, the analyzed books published between 2007 and 2013 contain at least traces of the view Nodelman presents. He describes the significance of perceived sexual orientation in childhood as follows:

> The possibility of a male child having gay tendencies in early childhood is of less significance than the possibility that others, children and adults, might perceive the child as having gay tendencies-the appearance of unmanliness.
> In terms of having success and making friends in the culture of childhood at large, nothing could be less desirable. ("Making Boys Appear" 8)

This possibility of appearing unmanly is illustrated for example, when the boys have a wrestling unit in physical education. Greg is disappointed to notice the wrestling at school is "COMPLETELY different from the kind they do on TV", which apparently includes hitting people with chairs (WK 80). The accompanied illustration shows frowning boys in wrestling "singlets" and the picture focuses on the boys' bodies revealing how this attire highlights one's body shape and clearly displays the lack of muscles. When Greg and Rowley try to hide in the back of the gym to avoid being called out for showing the moves with the teacher, girls peek at them from behind a curtain and the drawing shows them giggling at the boys (WK 81). Thus, what Greg imagines to be a manly sport full of violence, becomes an embarrassing situation in "unmanly" tight outfits. Furthermore, girls' romantic attention towards boys and vice versa

seems to be an unquestioned norm, starting already from elementary school as Greg describes how girls used to like the fastest runner in elementary school, but it has recently become more complicated, although Greg notes how some boys have only "come around in the last couple of years" when it comes to their interest in girls (WK 6). Both heteronormative and traditionally masculine norms thus seem to be central in how Greg's behaves around his peers, how he views his relationships to them and how the popularity hierarchies are constructed. In addition, toughness and strongness seem to be an important part of the behavioral models of masculinity, as will be seen in the next section.

Greg's concerns about status and popularity are also seen in the only close friendship he has in the books. While Greg and Rowley seem to spend quite a lot of time together, Greg often voices his concerns about Rowley's behavior and how it could affect his status. The main reason for this appears to be that Rowley does not care about Greg's concerns and is not performing masculinity "correctly" in Greg's eyes. He fits Stephen's masculine schemata of a "Mommy's Boy", who is pampered and privileged and is marked as "unmasculine" ("Masculinity Schemata", 44). In the beginning of the series, Greg ranks Rowley at about 150th most popular in his "popularity hierarchy", but when he tries to explain this to Rowley he thinks "it just goes in one ear and out the other with him" (WK 8). While Greg is concerned with how he appears to others, Rowley seems to be oblivious to the new social rules of middle school, which is illustrated when he asks Greg to come to his house to play. The term "play" should be changed to "hang out" according to Greg, who explains: "I've been trying to be a lot more careful about my image ever since I got to middle school. But having Rowley around is not helping" (WK 18).

Greg seems to view Rowley as too naive and innocent as well as too careless about appearing masculine to be manly enough. These traits are portrayed through his interests and behavior, which are usually described as being more childish and less masculine than Greg's,

such as having a sleepover and playing with his six-year-old friends while Greg is only interested in spying on his crush at her sleepover in the same neighborhood (LS 125). This contrast between Greg's and Rowley's expectations from a sleepover suggest that Rowley does not care about performing masculinity "correctly" even if others see him being "childish". Rowley is also seen breaking masculine stereotypes with his appearance and interests when he shows up to go skating with Greg dressed as his favorite singer, and Greg wonders if he is even wearing lip gloss (LS 194). This deviation from gender norms is not welcomed by Greg, who gives Rowley instructions on how to behave around his crush, since "knowing him – he could seriously hurt my chances with her" (LS 196). These descriptions illustrate how different Rowley is from Greg, who seems to think his interests in popularity and getting attention from girls are more age-appropriate and what is especially important, they make him more manly, which gives him the role of the more dominant figure in their friendship.

5.2 Gender Attitudes

At Greg's school, the division between boys and girls seems to be quite clear and according to Greg's observations, these groups mostly spend their time in separate groups and choose activities according to a stereotypical gender binary. However, Greg's choice of group goes against the gender stereotypes, and it illustrates how the norms and rules around him often dictate how he performs his gender. Greg describes how different groups spend their time during recess in *Hard Luck (38-41).* Greg is not spending his recess with Rowley, who has a girlfriend and struggles to find his place during recess. The main division between the groups is boys and girls and the two genders have their own subgroups. Greg divides the boys to book readers, fantasy card game players, a group playing in the field with someone's shoe after the school banned all ball games as too dangerous, and the "sketchy" group of boys hanging out

behind the school so that the teachers cannot see them. The girls have a hopscotch and a jumping rope group who do not get along for an unknown reason and then there is a gossip group, which Greg really would like to join, but "it's pretty clear outsiders aren't welcome" (HL, 39). It is surprising that Greg, who is often quite self-conscious about his status at school, would like to join the gossiping, since it is usually considered a feminine activity. However, many of Greg's actual "secret" interests such as the diary writing or reading "chick-lit" would not be considered masculine and it seems that were it not for the gender roles taught particularly by Dad or the pressure to perform according to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, he would act more freely against the dominant gender norms.

Greg's description of the only activity the boys and girls do together once again shows that they are expected to be interested in each other and the level of interest is based on one's status at school. He explains that "the only place where girls and boys hang TOGETHER is the playground" (HL 40). They play "Girls Chase Boys" or sometimes "Boys Chase Girls" and when Greg has tried to join many times over the years, it has become apparent that the girls usually only want to chase the popular guys, Bryce Anderson is mentioned as an example. The hierarchy Greg mentions at the start of the first book is brought up again and it seems that Greg has not had much luck with his plans to get more popular. The only activity the girls and boys do together is quite clearly based on attraction towards the opposite gender and the recess groups Greg introduces thus represent a very heteronormative atmosphere with girls and boys divided into groups based on stereotypically female or male interests. These stereotypical assumptions can also be seen in the ways in which Greg talks about the girls at his school.

In addition to these observations about how girls and boys spend their time, Greg seems to learn some of his gender attitudes from popular culture. When Mom tries to offer dating advice to Greg, he is unsure if Mom is "qualified" for that, since he knows by reading "the Slumber Party Pals" that "guy friendships are TOTALLY different from girl friendships" (HL

20). There is an interesting level of metafiction, since Greg forms stereotypes about girls based on a fictional series in a fictional series containing similar gender stereotypes. Greg explains that in the series, “two friends are always getting into fights with each other about little stuff” (HL 21). The example illustration Greg provides here is a fight about lip gloss and jealousy over a guy. Greg continues that after some time, the girls make up and “learn the true meaning of friendship”. Greg thinks it is a lot less complicated with boys. He wonders if the different fighting styles mean that “guys are less sophisticated than girls or whatever” but claims the way boys fight “saves a lot of time and energy” (HL 21). Greg appears to apply these stereotypes learned from books into his life, since there is a clear juxtaposition between the girls and boys in Greg’s mind and he seems to categorize them into simple categories with quite stereotypical attributes.

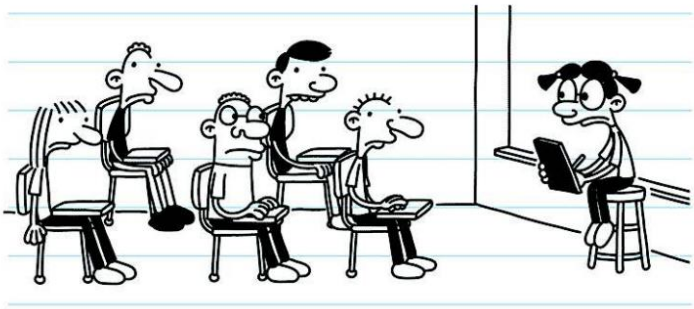
There are not many active girl characters in the analyzed books and usually Greg’s female classmates only get portrayed based on Greg’s rather stereotypical views, which portray feminine activities and behavior as not as serious or somehow less meaningful than masculine behavior and also assume that all the girls would have traditionally feminine interests. In general, this lack of active girl characters can be seen in the pictures, where most of the students usually appear to be boys, and girls are in the majority only if the passage related to the drawing is specifically about them. Words such as “kids”, “guys” or “morons” that Greg uses to talk about his classmates in general usually seem to refer to boys and Greg specifically mentions “girls” if he includes them in his discussion. Furthermore, most of the girls in the books appear to fit a very narrow and stereotypical “girly girl” category, which is illustrated well when Greg joins an independent study module where they need to build a robot. Greg presents a robot that could, for example, do one’s homework and make breakfast. Everybody appears to like Greg’s ideas, but when a few girls present their ideas, the situation changes: “they erased my list and drew up their own plan. They wanted to invent a robot that would give you dating advice and

have ten types of lip gloss on its fingertips" (WK 147-148). After all the girls choose the dating advice robot, Greg says "now that we had all the serious workers in one place, we got to work" (WK 148). There are two important conclusions to be drawn from this scene. First, all the girls choose a robot that caters to very traditionally feminine interests or at least they need to pretend to like the idea to belong and second, the girls' idea is not "serious" in Greg's opinion, which reinforces the commonly held stereotype of feminine activities being somehow less important and not to be taken seriously compared to more masculine activities.

Furthermore, Greg's distance from girls and his stereotypical attitudes towards them result in their status and "girliness" being determined based on superficial qualities, which also shows how being attracted to pretty girls is a core part of performing masculinity correctly. The "prettiness ranking" he has made is the best example of this. In *The Last Straw*, Greg is interested in Holly Hills, who he describes as "the fourth-prettiest girls in the class" (LS 42). According to him, almost every boy in the class has a crush on Holly, since the three prettier ones all have boyfriends. This implies that the boys in Greg's class mostly choose their crush based on appearance and there seem to be certain "objective" levels of attractiveness if almost every boy is falling for the same girl. There also appear to be different standards for boys and girls when it comes to attractiveness. Although Greg mentions in the beginning of the first book that he is about to go up in popularity once Charlie Davies is getting braces (WK 7), good looks do not seem the defining measure of popularity for the boys, since Greg is almost never focused on how he looks (an exception being his concerns about muscularity, which appears to be a clear marker of masculinity for both him and his father). A further example of the overgeneralization of girls into "girly girls" is the school's Valentine's Day dance. When the teachers force everybody to dance, Greg invents a very simple choreography to avoid getting called out for not dancing and a group of boys immediately copy this dance (LS 97). But when Greg sees the girls dancing, he describes how all of them dance together "like professionals,

probably because they spend all their free time watching MTV" (LS 98). The fact that he generalizes this view to all girls reveals his lack of a close relationship with any of the girls at school. Rather than discussing the hobbies or interests of specific girls, he makes assumptions about all of them based on stereotypical and superficial views of feminine interests.

Not all students are depicted as fitting into Greg's stereotypical gender categories. Two characters, Alex Aruda and Patty Farrell, are described as enthusiastic students, who are usually liked by the teachers and take their studies seriously. It appears that Patty represents a "wrong way" to be a girl as a strong character who is not afraid to speak out while Alex Aruda seems to be generally liked or at least tolerated and his intelligence is respected and put to use by the other boys. They are the "nerds" and seem to be first and foremost characterized by this attribute rather than their gender. This can be seen from the illustrations of their characters as well. Both Alex and Patty wear glasses and more formal clothes, which for Patty mean pigtails with small bows and a skirt and for Alex a bowtie and a button-up shirt.



Picture 1: Patty Farrell monitoring the class (LS 54)

Picture 2: Alex Aruda monitoring the class (LS 55)

While both characters appear to be gifted students who have a good reputation among the teachers, it seems that while this behavior is tolerated from Alex, Patty is either disliked or feared by the other students. When Patty is asked to monitor the class after a dictionary has disappeared from the teacher's desk and she leaves the room to give an opportunity for the thief to return the book, Greg describes how Patty takes her job very seriously and students fear her (LS 54). The next day, Alex Aruda is made the class monitor and the class is in chaos as nobody is afraid of him, as can be seen above. When Alex reveals he was reading the book the whole time after tricking the other boys into hiring him as a "detective" to find it, nobody seems to be angry at him, but rather impressed with this turn of events (LS 55). However, Greg becomes angry at Patty when she tells the teacher there is a map of the states on the wall, when Greg had planned to rely on that map on the quiz (WK 94). Although Patty probably did not mean to personally target Greg with her reveal, he vows to make her pay, which is a very different reaction compared to when Alex deceives the boys and even receives some money from them. In *Hard Luck* Alex is invited to divide up some leftover French fries during lunch after the other boys fight about them (27), illustrating the other students' respect for his intelligence although he does not appear to have as much authority as Patty when it comes to controlling his classmates. The consequences of Patty performing gender "wrong" will be further discussed in the next section, in which I will show how normalized bullying is especially if the target does not conform to gender stereotypes.

6. Bullying and Aggression as Masculine Norms

Bullying is one of the most prominent themes in the series and it is a common element to almost every social context in Greg's life. Dad's way of disciplining Greg resembles bullying as he often threatens Greg with violence. Dad's ways are passed on to the children and Greg's big brother Rodrick subjects him to constant "pranks" that would be more accurately defined as quite severe bullying. Greg pays this forward by pulling the same pranks on Rowley who he views as belonging below him in the social hierarchy. In addition to the bullying occurring in Greg's close relationships, he also witnesses multiple bullying incidents at school and even participates in bullying. These incidents seem to not have many consequences and the best strategy to not become a victim seems to be to avoid negative attention at all costs, usually meaning that one should perform their gender according to the norms and not stand out by going against the stereotypes. In this section, I am going to first describe how Dad's discipline resembles bullying and then discuss how Rodrick and Greg have learned both physical and emotional harassment to be a normal part of male relationships. Lastly, I will discuss how normalized bullying is at Greg's school and how this affects the lives of the students.

6.1 Threat of Physical Discipline

Angry parents and being punished in one way or another are probably experiences familiar to most of the readers of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which might be why it is such a common source of humor in the series. Especially Dad's way of discipline is often commented on by Greg and it seems to closely follow the stereotypical views of men being aggressive, impulsive and even physically violent. Greg describes his Dad's way of showing anger in the first book of the series: "The good thing about Dad is that when he gets mad, he cools off real quick, and then it's over. Usually, if you mess up in front of Dad, he just throws whatever he's got in his

hands at you" (WK 38-39). The quote is accompanied by a picture illustrating Dad's style of discipline:

Picture 3: Greg describing Dad's way of showing anger (WK 39)

The stark contrast between the two scenarios implies that Greg is exaggerating to make the situation funny, and Dad has not necessarily actually thrown a brick at him. Still, his nonchalant way of describing physical violence as a "good thing", because the anger does not last long, reveals the underlying gender stereotype about males being physically aggressive, especially because Greg contrasts this with Mom's way of disciplining, which he describes as "a TOTALLY different style when it comes to punishment" (WK 39). According to Greg, Mom takes a few days to come up with an appropriate punishment resulting in Greg trying to conciliate by acting nice and then when he has already forgotten he is in trouble, she finally decides what the consequence should be (WK 39-40). Although Greg tries to please Mom to avoid a harsher punishment, Dad seems to be the one who has the most authority when it comes to larger issues with the children. For example, when Greg has received a bad report card, Mom

tells him to wait until Dad is home (LS 70), which implies that his authority is more threatening and his anger more effective.

Although there are no examples of actual physical discipline, Greg seems to think it could occur whenever Dad is angry, and this threat seems to be enough to make Greg scared of his father, which in itself is a worrying feeling to have in the presence of one's parent. This fear implies that Dad's discipline can actually be seen as bullying, since his goal does not seem to be teaching Greg better behavior but paying back the bad behavior or making him scared to get caught. For example, when Greg sees Manny building a small snowman out of the little snow there is left, he says he could not help himself and kicks the snowman down. Greg becomes scared when he notices Dad has been watching them, since he is already mad at Greg (WK 160). When Dad comes outside with a snow shovel, Greg has drawn a picture where he looks panicked, and in the text, he contemplates if he should run implying that he thinks Dad is going to whack him with the shovel. Dad actually just breaks Greg's and Rowley's big snowball (WK 161), which does not set a great example if the goal is to stop his children from breaking each other's creations. Dad seems to react to bullying by bullying back and thus teaches his children that it is better to avoid being caught or be ready to retaliate any bullying they might experience.

6.2 "Pranking" the Weaker Boy

The three boys in the Heffley family do not share warm sibling relationships and bullying appears to be a normal part of communication between them, which seems to be learned behavior from Dad that Greg also extends to his friendship with Rowley. Greg's and his brother Rodrick's relationship is mostly about Rodrick bullying Greg, and he rarely faces consequences for his actions, which implies that the parents see bullying as an inevitable part of brotherhood. Rodrick is Greg's older brother, a high-school student with his own band named Löded Diper. Greg and Rodrick are not usually seen spending time together, unless they have to and are even

more unwilling to share any secrets with each other. On the contrary, Greg usually tries to hide or avoid anything Rodrick could use against him, such as calling his crush on the family phone (LS 187). As I discussed in Chapter Four, Greg describes how the parents are much more careful and vigilant with Manny and thus Greg cannot bully him in the same way as Rodrick bullies him, although he tries. Therefore, he pulls the same "pranks" Rodrick pulls on him on Rowley and does not usually seem to face any consequences for this behavior. In the next paragraphs, I am going to examine how bullying is an integral part of Greg's relationships with Rodrick and Rowley and how it brings forward the masculine stereotypes associated with their relationships.

Most of the encounters between Greg and Rodrick are about Rodrick pulling "pranks" on Greg, which portrays the relationship between brothers as one of constant conflict and sibling rivalry. This seems to be normalized as an inevitable part of a masculine sibling relationship. Usually Rodrick's "pranks" are not harmless funny tricks but actual bullying, just like Greg himself points out on April Fools: "Someone seriously needs to explain the concept of a practical joke to Rodrick, because all his 'jokes' involve me getting injured." This year Rodrick's first trick was to wake Greg up by punching him (LS 136). Rodrick's behavior towards Greg seems to rarely have any consequences for him and the parents seem to believe in the "boys will be boys" stereotype. For example, when Rodrick tricks Greg to bend over, by betting him fifty cents he could not tie his shoelaces standing up, he shoots him in the butt with a paintball gun. Although Greg tells on Rodrick, Dad "didn't feel like getting in the middle of a fight" and just makes Rodrick pay the fifty cents, which just gives him an opportunity to shoot Greg again, when he picks them up from the ground (LS 137). This example illustrates how the parents see Rodrick's bullying as just two brothers fighting and do not bother finding out who is actually to blame. In another instance, Greg makes Rodrick a "Three strikes and you're out" system, since he is the only one without a new year's resolution and Greg feels like

he should improve his behavior. After Greg has explained the system, Rodrick immediately gets his three strikes by punching Greg three times (LS 4). It should be considered that the books are written from Greg's point of view and thus, he could be an unreliable narrator, since he can make himself look better in these situations, which is given support by his new year resolution being "to help OTHER people improve", since he feels he is "already pretty much one of the best people I know" (LS 1). Still, the portrayal of Greg's and Rodrick's relationship and the parents' attitude towards it give the impression that Rodrick really benefits from the stereotypical idea Mom and Dad have of a relationship between two brothers. The message from the parents seems to be that it is completely normal for two boys to have fights and Greg should be stronger and just solve the situation by himself, since telling on Rodrick does not apparently result in any support from Mom or Dad.

In addition to his "pranks" that include hurting Greg or stealing from him, Rodrick's role in Greg's life appears to be to humiliate him in every situation possible. Dad and Rodrick apparently share similar attitudes about what is appropriate for boys, and if Greg tries to go at least a little against the traditional masculine norms, he is sure to hear about it from Rodrick. For example, when he explains how he wanted a Barbie house for Christmas when he was seven (see section 4.1 Dad), he is quick to point out that it was not because he enjoys girls' toys "like Rodrick said" (WK 116). Greg continues that when he received a Barbie from his uncle and ended up in the hospital with a shoe stuck in his nose, Rodrick "has never let me hear the end of THAT" (WK 118). Also, when Greg takes part in the school play, Rodrick shows up with a video camera to capture Greg's humiliation (WK 106). Greg has made it quite clear that taking part in the play is not an activity that the boys enjoy, since he assumes others have been forced there by their moms just like him. Thus, it can be interpreted that Greg's embarrassment is at least partly due to him feeling that his masculinity is in danger especially because his older brother wants to record every second. Greg stays silent for the whole song,

so that Rodrick cannot use the tape to humiliate him for his whole life (WK 110). Not only does Rodrick make sure Greg never forgets his embarrassing moments, but he also makes it clear to Greg when he is failing in performing his masculinity. When Dad makes Greg play soccer, he is made a "fetcher" and proudly announces this to Rodrick, who reveals the role only involves running after the ball if it goes out of the field (LS 126). Although Dad has forced Rodrick to take on new activities as well, to make his sons better in the eyes of his new boss, whose sons seem to perfectly fit the masculine ideals, Rodrick does not have empathy for Greg and rather than supporting him, he points out how Greg is failing in this new hobby and thus not performing his masculinity correctly.

Furthermore, Greg's relationship with his brother seems to consist of almost nothing else than the teasing on Rodrick's part, which further illustrates how normalized aggression and bullying between brothers is in the family. The only rare moments without bullying are those during which the brothers bond over stereotypically masculine interests. When Greg tries to be nice and gives a thoughtful gift to his brother, Rodrick gives him a "Lil' Cutie"-comic that he knows Greg hates (WK 122). Usually, the two brothers only spend time together when Mom forces them, and the only instance in the three books, where they seem to have found an activity that they both enjoy, is when they make fake fart sounds at Grandma's dog, because he reacts by sniffing his own rear end and both think it is hilarious (HL 111). The boys also share a hatred towards shopping, since Greg has drawn them waiting in a "Dude Zone" (HL 58) at the shopping mall where Mom has forgotten them and gone home. These examples are clearly meant to be funny for the target readers, but at the same time show how the similarities between the brothers are narrowed down to common stereotypes often seen in comedy about men hating shopping and liking fart humor. However, while one could say being interested in girls is a sign of masculinity, that is not something either of the brothers are willing to share with each other. When Rodrick has found out that Greg is interested in Holly Hills, he lies that

they are staying in the opposite room at a motel they are staying at with Dad. Greg goes to see, and Rodrick pushes him in the hallway (LS 182). Wearing only his underwear, Greg hides behind the vending machine, from where disappointed-looking Dad finds him (LS 184). Greg apparently does not even try to explain why he is there, and Dad does not ask, although it seems quite clear that no-one would stay in a motel hallway in their underwear willingly. While the incident is comical, Rodrick's behavior seems to be out of control, since Greg does not even bother explaining what happened. It leaves one wondering if the portrayal of the relationship between brothers in the series is healthy for preteens or a good example of what should be understood as humor, since most of the relationship consists of the older brother bullying the younger one.

While Greg is bullied at home by Rodrick and sometimes even his father, he has learned to behave similarly with Rowley, who he ranks below him in the social hierarchy and thus as a target for Greg's masculine dominance that he does not have at home. Rowley is usually the one with the worse role in Greg's games or ideas such as rolling down the hill with a tricycle and Greg trying to knock him down with a ball (WK 136). Although Greg sometimes faces consequences for his actions, bullying seems to be a normalized part of Greg's and Rowley's friendship similarly to Greg and Rodrick, since even if Rowley sometimes becomes angry at Greg's behavior, they always end up being friends again, usually without an apology from Greg. The bullying is disguised in the form of pranks and Greg even points out how great it is to have Rowley as a friend, since he can try all the pranks Rodrick tries on him on Rowley (WK 19). Rowley indeed seems to mostly be on the receiving end when it comes to pranks or unfair behavior. While the pranks are one of the main sources of humor in the series and can be seen as a form of affection in place of showing emotions, it raises the question of whether Greg's and Rowley's relationship represents a healthy friendship, where both parties are on board with the pranks, to young readers.

Furthermore, Greg rarely looks at conflict situations from Rowley's point of view, which leads to him saving face and blaming Rowley and shows how masculinity affects the way in which conflicts are resolved or how readily unfair treatment is accepted. In her exploration of male friendships in contemporary young adult fiction, Michele Gill argues that the "regulatory nature of privileged masculinity" creates an atmosphere of competition and suspicion where disclosure is hard (5), suggesting that in a conflict situation, it might be more important to "win" than to keep an intimate relationship with the friend. The clearest example of this is when Rowley is wrongly accused of "terrorizing" the kindergartners they are supposed to walk home from school as a part of their duties in safety patrol. Because Greg had borrowed Rowley's hat and then scared the little students with a worm, a friend of Rowley's mom mistakes him for Rowley resulting in him being punished instead of Greg (WK 179-181). Greg does not want to lose his hot chocolate privileges and thus thinks he should keep quiet. Even after Mom notices something is bothering him and advises Greg to "try to do the right thing", he decides the right thing to do would be "just let Rowley take one for the team this time around" (WK 183). When he tells Rowley it was actually him who should have been punished, he says "I guess this has been a learning experience for both of us!", which Rowley does not seem to appreciate, since he cancels his plans with Greg (WK 184). While the two friends end up fighting and have their friendship on a break on several occasions, Rowley standing up for himself like this is a rare occasion, considering how often Greg bullies him. Later Rowley tells on Greg, and he loses his place in safety patrol while Rowley gets promoted. Greg still does not feel remorse but is disappointed at Rowley: "I can't believe Rowley went and backstabbed me like that" (WK 187). Although in this case Rowley forgets about Greg for a while and gets a new best friend (WK 190), he never leaves the friendship completely and often quickly comes around. Thus, Greg remains oblivious to how Rowley feels about his

actions and Rowley is willing to let go of the unfair situations and continue being the underdog in their friendship, which portrays bullying as an acceptable part of male relationships.

6.3 Attitudes Towards Bullying

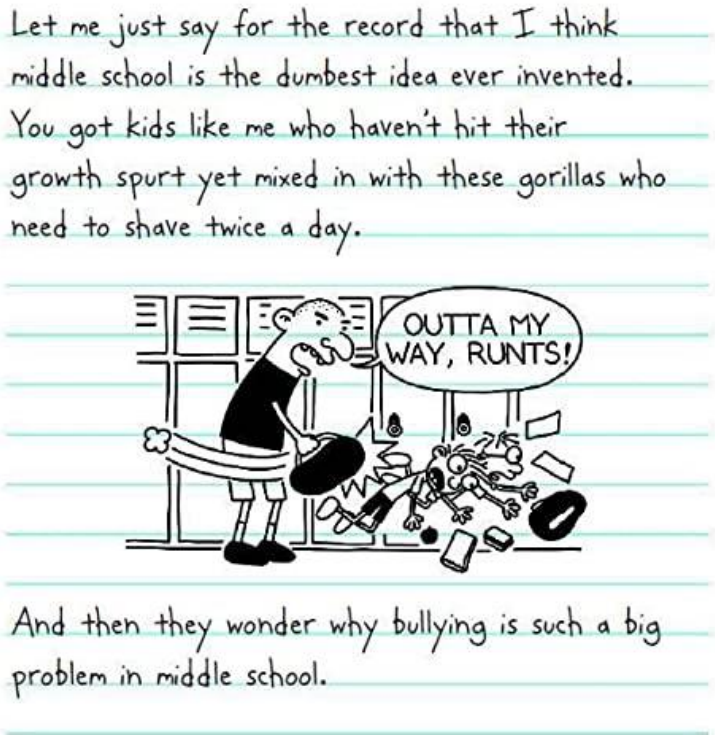
As I have discussed, Greg is bullied by his big brother and often also his father. He continues the cycle by bullying Rowley and sometimes trying to bully Manny. Bullying is normalized to the extent that consequences for it are rarely seen and usually Greg treats both his bullying others as well as others bullying him or other children as a natural part of (male) relationships. One example of this is when Greg writes about how he wants to become good at wrestling, but not too good, since when a boy named Preston Mudd was named "The Athlete of the Month" his name on a picture was shortened into P. Mudd. Others immediately noticed how the name is pronounced "pee mud" and Greg says, "it was all over for Preston" (WK 79). Greg does not admit to taking part in the name calling but does not really condemn the behavior either. Rather, he treats the incident as a necessary evil, kind of like a cautionary tale about what happens if one is not constantly aware of possible threats to one's status.

The general message Greg's behavior seems to usually send is to avoid the negative attention in all possible ways rather than trying to stop or reduce the bullying, which reveals how he has learned to be independent and solve his own problems, as discussed in chapter four. The impact of learned masculine norms in the fictional portrayal of young male relationships has been noted by Gill, who argues that in one young adult fiction novel the characters "fear ridicule and rejection from their peer group, and this does sway their actions" (11) suggesting that boys weigh their choices against what is considered appropriate in terms of masculinity. Thus, it is not important to be yourself, but to be the version that leads to least negative attention from peers. When the school shows the students a movie, which tells about how everyone should be happy with who they are and "not change anything about yourself" (WK 150) Greg thinks the message of the movie "It's Great to Be Me" is "a really dumb message to be telling

kids especially the ones at my school." The picture, again, shows two boys pushing a smaller boy with glasses saying, "it's great to be me" (WK 151) implying that the encouragement to be yourself does not work for the boys at Greg's school. Greg decides to save himself by joining the safety patrol after witnessing this incident, because picking on a safety patrol student results in a harsher punishment (WK 151). The message these incidents seem to be sending is that bullying is an inevitable part of masculinity, and that boys are expected to behave this way in order to keep their status among the peer group so one should just learn to avoid being the target and conform to masculine norms.

Physical bullying seems to happen only between males in the books, with only a few exceptions, further illustrating how aggressive behavior is seen as a masculine norm. Greg's popularity ranking is his subjective view of the social hierarchy at the school, but a different social hierarchy appears to exist between the bullies and the bullied. This hierarchy seems to be entirely based on size and level of physical aggression, which suggests that the physical and aggressive "Old Age Boys" are the ones that bully the weaker and often "incorrectly" masculine "Mommy's Boys" or "New Age Boys". Greg does not usually mention that the teachers would notice or interfere with physical bullying. There are some campaigns attempting to reduce bullying and make students be nice towards each other, but, for example, the "hero point" campaign only results in the situation becoming worse than before, since the students start counterfeiting the points and the campaign is stopped, which leads to no one wanting to help each other (HL 51-52 and 56). Thus, bullying and especially the stronger students physically bullying the weaker ones is portrayed as a kind of "a natural law" that cannot be stopped by the adults. Nodelman raises the at least previously common reaction to male antisocial or aggressive behavior "boys will be boys" as an obvious example of a masculine gender norm ("Making Boys Appear" 2). This saying seems to describe the attitude the characters in the *Wimpy Kid* books have towards boys bullying others all too well. One of the

most repeated illustrations Greg has drawn might be a picture of a larger boy pushing him or some other smaller boy, often one with glasses or books, the tell-tale signs of a nerd. Already in the beginning of the first book, Greg says how dumb middle school is, since "You've got kids like me who haven't hit their growth spurt yet mixed in with these gorillas, who need to shave twice a day. And then they wonder why bullying is such a big problem in middle school" (WK 3). Also this scene is paired with a drawing of a two times larger angry boy pushing two skinny children with glasses with his bag as can be seen below.



Picture 4: Bullying the smaller boys (WK 3)

Thus, Greg's attitude towards physical bullying as a natural result from mixing smaller and larger boys together as well as the ineffectiveness of any campaigns the teachers come up with suggest that bullying is natural behavior so deeply engrained into the social hierarchy of preteens that stopping it would require that the bullied students would not be in the same school with the large bullies.

The only exception to physical bullying happening between males is Patty Farrell, who, as previously discussed, does not represent the "correct" way of being a girl and thus seems to be excluded from the common social rule that girls should not be hit. Greg's growing hate towards Patty peaks when Greg tries out for the Wizard of Oz school play, and the situation further confirms the observation that Patty represents an unacceptable way of being a girl and is thus also treated differently than the other girls. Patty is once again portrayed as an enthusiastic student trying out for the lead role first. Greg plans on trying out for a role, in which he would get to be mean to Patty and finally decides to be a tree since they do not have to sing and in the book the trees throw apples at the protagonist: "getting to peg Patty Farrell with apples in front of a live audience would be my dream come true" (WK 99). However, when the teacher writes the trees a song, Greg refuses to sing during the performance resulting in the other boys stopping singing as well and Patty shoots them angry looks from the side of the stage. After that, Greg starts throwing apples at her and the two other trees join although it was not a part of the script. Patty's glasses break and the play has to be stopped, because she cannot see anymore (WK 110-113). Greg does not mention any punishments or even a talk from the teacher after this quite serious physical bullying incident, which further reveals the normalization of bullying at Greg's school, and it seems that Greg does not feel at all bad after breaking Patty's glasses. This is also one of the few times a girl is angry in the analyzed books illustrating how Greg's stereotypical views of girls and their emotions do not apply to her. Greg's behavior towards Patty also reveals a lack of empathy, which, considering the normalization of bullying depicted in the series, seems to be part of the gender stereotypes applied to males and is also connected to a more limited emotional life in close relationships in general, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

7. Emotional Support and Showing Feelings in Masculine Relationships

Most of Greg's close relationships are with other males and the norms and practices of these relationships reconfirm the masculine stereotypes of men not talking about how they feel and being hands-on problem solvers rather than offering emotional support. Greg's relationship with Mom offers him a glimpse beyond the gender binary and its traditional stereotypes, but he still often ends up ashamed of Mom showing too much emotion or caring. In this section, I am going to discuss how these masculine norms are visible in Greg's relationships with his parents and best friend Rowley. I am also going to compare how Mom and Dad differ in their parenting when it comes to emotional support to highlight how Greg's relationships with his parents conform to ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

7.1 The Distant Dad and Family-Oriented Mom

As discussed in Chapter Four, Dad's fondness of Greg seems to be conditional depending on how well Greg fulfills his image of an ideal, masculine son, "The Old Age Boy". Altogether, Greg's and Dad's relationship is not portrayed as a very warm and close father-son relationship, but there are some moments where they appear to be genuinely bonding and not just spending time to make Greg a man. Even then, Dad is usually more a man of action than a man of words, which fits the common male stereotype about how men solve problems rather than talk about emotions. Some of these moments are Greg's memories from childhood and it seems that while Greg was little, he received more empathy and understanding from his Dad. For example, Greg recalls a time when he lost his stuffed animal at a family vacation and Dad played a carnival game to win Greg a new one (HL 156). In this instance, Dad finds a very concrete solution to try and comfort Greg instead of talking about loss or hugging his son. While Greg does not usually open up about his problems to Dad, sometimes Dad offers his help in more concrete

issues such as when Greg decides to run for student council and tells Dad, who gets excited, because it turns out that he ran for student council when he was young and won. When Dad finds his old campaign poster, Greg gets excited about the poster idea, and they drive to the store together to buy supplies (WK 46). Here, Dad seems to be genuinely happy about Greg's plans and Greg seems to respect Dad's experience and help, which is, again, very concrete hands-on-help rather than verbal or emotional support for campaigning. However, moments like this are quite rare in the three analyzed books and often Dad and Greg end up spending time together just because Mom forces them to be together as family.

In addition to Mom's more significant role in education and parenting in general, she seems to be the family leader when it comes to spending time together and building strong familial ties, which contrasted with Dad's distant parenting shows how women are expected to be in charge of the domestic life and more involved with their children and how it is accepted for fathers to be distant and not emotionally available for children. Anderson et al. found emotionally limited fathers to be a common element in children's books of the past decades without much improvement in the newer books. The books they analyzed showed "mothers…expressing emotion significantly more than their male counterparts" (1355). Family does seem to be an important value to Mom, since in the beginning of *Hard Luck* Greg writes: "Mom is always saying friends will come and go, but family is forever" (1). However, Greg questions Mom's motives for trying to push the message, since she apparently does not get along with her sisters. This leads Greg to wonder if Mom is hoping for a different outcome when it comes to Greg and his brothers, but Greg points out that she should not hold her breath (HL 2). Mom's mission to bring the family together indeed seems to be a quite lonely one and she often has to force Dad to spend time with her sons or join family gatherings. For example, when Dad tries to suggest reserving a hotel room if Greg's aunt and her sons, who have tended to misbehave at Heffley's house, will be staying with them again, Mom refuses saying, "we're

family and family should be TOGETHER" (HL 97). While Greg seems to not share all these family values with Mom, since he keeps complaining about family gatherings, some of her teachings seem to have had an effect. When he accidentally finds his grandmother's long lost diamond ring, he hides it again saying it is not worth "breaking up the family over it", since even talking about the ring and who should have it has previously resulted in a serious conflict and everyone leaving angry from a family gathering (HL 215). Thus, although Greg seems to have learned the masculine norms of staying emotionally distant from one's family from Dad and does not eagerly spend time with his brothers or father, Mom's teachings about the importance of family seem to offer kind of resistance to these masculine norms and Greg still cares about keeping Mom's family together.

Although Greg at least partly understands Mom's desire to be close and nurturing with family, the caring side of her often also annoys Greg as he feels Mom humiliates him. It seems that especially when it comes to his relationship with Mom, Greg is constantly negotiating with the pressure to perform the role of the traditionally masculine "Old Age Boy" and the desire to let himself be the more openly emotional "New Age Boy". While it is typical for a preteen seeking independence from his parents to be ashamed of his parents, it also further sheds light on the traditional gender roles in the household, since Greg does not appear to be ashamed of his Dad, which tells less about Greg's opinion about him and more about how he is almost never around in situations where Greg could be ashamed of him. Also, it implies that Greg is specifically ashamed of Mom "caring too much" or trying to be too involved in his son's life, which Dad does not do and thus it also shows how Greg has learned and internalized the masculine stereotype of not being emotional or nurturing. When Mom joins the boys for a visit in a haunted house, she wants to quickly get over with the haunted house, which implies she is not really a fan of it, but she is willing to be there so that her son can enjoy it. Later a guy with a chainsaw scares Greg and Rowley, but Mom steps up and scolds him. Greg says it was

embarrassing, but he is “willing to let it go this one time” (WK 51-53). It is interesting to note that relying on Mom’s help is embarrassing for Greg, although he does imply that he was thankful for the interruption. In another instance, Greg asks for a ride to school, but wants Mom to drive behind the school, because she has embarrassing bumper stickers with texts such as “My child is a graduate of TenderCuddles Pre-school” (LS 40). However, Greg forgets his backpack and Mom shows up to his class in full gym attire, which makes Greg ashamed of her (LS 42). She is also the substitute teacher in one of Greg’s classes for a day, bringing Greg his lunch that he had forgot at home. Greg is glad there is no category in the yearbook for the “Biggest Mama’s Boy, because after today, I’d win that one in a landslide” (WK 203). While Greg still needs Mom and her help in several situations, he is scared of Mom being too involved and too nurturing, which seems to never be a problem with Dad and thus these examples illustrate how Greg’s relationships with both of his parents reconfirm the masculine norm of being emotionally distant.

When Greg does go to Mom for advice or help, there is still often a sense of learned independence, since Greg does not always believe Mom’s advice would work and seems to think that he knows better and should thus act like he sees best. It seems that Greg learns the meaning of emotional support and warmth only from his mother and does not necessarily know how to react to or show emotions in male relationships, since he has not had the same behavioral model from his Dad. These masculine norms also affect how Greg receives the advice from Mom. For example, Greg regrets opening up to Mom about his poor social life when Rowley is only spending time with her girlfriend (HL 48). When Mom tries to tell Greg to just be nice and he would become popular, Greg notes “I think her heart is in the right place, but the advice she gives me would NEVER work with kids my age” (HL 49). Greg continues that he has tried to explain that popularity is based on what kind of clothes one wears and which cell phone they own, but he comes to the conclusion that Mom does not want to hear it.

However, Mom later takes Greg to shop for new clothes and Greg has to admit that Mom did listen after all. In this example, it can be seen that while Mom tries to offer Greg tips on how a more positive attitude could help with finding friends, Greg's ideal solutions are much more concrete, and he thinks new clothes are the answer. Thus, Mom shows that she cares in the concrete, and arguably more masculine way, that seems easier for Greg to understand or accept than more emotional approaches and goes to buy the new clothes.

7.2 Concrete and Transactional – The Portrayal of Masculine Friendship

In addition to Greg's best friend Rowley Hefferson being subjected to Greg's pranks as the "weaker boy" in their friendship, he is usually forced to accept Greg' plans and ideas, which often involve Rowley having the tougher or more unpleasant role. Although I have discussed that Greg sometimes negotiates between the roles of the "New" and "Old" age boy, he still mostly ends up performing his gender according to hegemonic masculine ideals such as dominance and assertiveness. Rowley can be seen as having the characteristics of Stephen's schemata for a pampered "Mommy's boy" since both his parents (over)protect their only child by, for example, modifying his Halloween costume to be safer (WK 65) or closely scrutinizing any games he wants to play, and Greg views him as being significantly lower in the social hierarchy and less masculine. As a result, Greg is the dominant man in their relationship and makes most of the decisions.

Greg's dominance is present in the very foundations of their friendship as Greg suggests that while Rowley is his best friend, it is "definitely subject to change" (WK 17). He also says that when he first met Rowley, when he showed up to his door with a book called "How to Make Friends in New Places" a few years back (WK 19), he decided to take Rowley "under his wing" because he felt bad, implying that Rowley needs a protector and could not thrive by himself. Greg often pressures or tricks Rowley into agreeing with questionable plans, such as

digging a large hole in Rowley's backyard instead of his own after Greg's Mom has stopped them. Although Rowley is worried about his parents' reaction and wants to get permission first, Greg convinces him they can just cover the hole up and they would not notice (LS 30). Rowley is easy to convince, and Greg uses this quality for his benefit every chance he gets. For example, he makes Rowley put his valuable video games into the time capsule Greg wants to put into the hole while only contributing three dollar of cash himself (LS 34-35). Although Rowley sometimes gets frustrated with Greg ordering him around and goes home, he always ends up agreeing to another project, which shows how hierarchical their relationship is and how Rowley's character, who is portrayed as less masculine and protected by parents, lacks any meaningful decision-making power in their friendship.

Furthermore, Greg seems to view his friendship with Rowley as a one-sided transactional relationship and he keeps track of how beneficial Rowley is for him. On several occasions, he describes all the favors Rowley does for him but almost none that he has done for Rowley, which further portrays their friendship as hierarchical between the more dominant "Old Age Boy" Greg and the "Mommy's boy" Rowley. For example, when their bus route is changed and the boys have to walk to school, Greg makes Rowley give him a piggyback ride by reminding him it is "the kind of thing best friends do for each other" (LS 45). Rowley finally accepts when Greg offers to carry his backpack for him. However, Greg's and Rowley's friendship dynamics change, when Rowley gets a girlfriend in *Hard Luck*, which surprises Greg, since he always thought he would be the one with a family, implying that he has assumed that "the dominant male" would be the one to find a girlfriend.

Even when it seems Greg has lost his friend who only spends time with his girlfriend, he focuses on all the benefits he loses rather than being sad about not being able to spend time with his best friend. This focus on the benefits he has lost seems like a strategy to avoid revealing the jealousy he feels as he has not learned to show or talk about his emotions. Greg

would like to tell Rowley how he feels about Rowley only spending time with his girlfriend Abigail, but says he cannot do it, since Rowley has been writing all his assignments in cursive with a peanut butter cracker salary (HL 8). Later, Greg is disappointed Rowley now walks to school with Rowley, since he has been scouting ahead for dog poop for Greg as well as carrying his books, which is explained by Greg as follows: "My body's not built to carry that kind of weight, but Rowley is practically like a pack animal, so it's no problem for HIM" (HL 12). Now that Rowley carries Abigail's books, Greg questions if she is only with him to use him and says, "as Rowley's good friend, I find that a little hard to take" (HL 13). This example reveals that Greg tends to estimate the quality of a friendship based on what he gets out of the relationship and does not seem to be capable of reflecting on his own behavior, since he accuses Abigail of using Rowley for the exact same favors Rowley has previously done for him. At the same time, Greg's observations imply he is jealous of how Rowley's attention has switched from him to the new girlfriend, but he does not admit his jealousy out loud. It would probably be a sign of weakness for Greg to admit he is jealous of Rowley, who he sees as less popular and less masculine and thus he hides behind the sudden concern for his friend.

While Greg and Rowley call each other best friends, their friendship is depicted as being more about spending time together than discussing how they feel or what they think. In her discussion of the portrayals of male friendship in fiction, Gill argues that presenting male friendship as not based on disclosure and intimacy does not necessarily mean that it should be viewed as problematic, but rather just another way to be friends (7). However, Greg's and Rowley's relationship is the only example of close friendship in the books, and it thus offers a one-sided view of how male friendship is based on (forbidden) activities and negotiation of power rather than disclosure of intimate feelings. The support Greg offers his friend is usually depicted as very concrete. For example, Greg attempts to cheer his friend up by describing him the events of the TV show over the phone after his plan to have a haunted house in Rowley's

basement has caused Rowley to be grounded (WK 60). In another instance, Greg tries to use humor to make Rowley feel better after he has broken his arm because of a dangerous game Greg came up with (WK 140-141). Furthermore, Greg and Rowley appear to not confide in each other, since when Greg talks about Dad forcing him to go to a military academy, Rowley does not know what he is talking about although it has been one of the most pressing issues in Greg's life lately (LS 214), revealing how these two friends do not dedicate much time for deeper discussions.

Although Greg rarely reveals how important Rowley is to him, his actions speak for themselves, which further reinforces the stereotype of men not talking about their emotions. In the end of the first book, Rowley and Greg are about to have a fight in the school basketball court, because Greg blames Rowley for taking all the credit for a comic they came up with together (WK 206). However, a group of teenagers who Greg and Rowley ran from during Halloween catch them on the basketball court and make Rowley eat the mouldy cheese that has been lying on the ground from the last school year (WK 210). Although Greg admits "it took all my self-control to keep my mouth shut" (WK 214), he does not tell others at school what happened to Rowley and even lies that he moved the cheese. He immediately realizes that he now has the "cheese touch" which has been an ongoing tradition where whoever touches the cheese can pass it on and is thus avoided at all costs.

The aftermath of the cheese incident once again shows how Greg's and Rowley's friendship is not based on sharing emotions and how they feel about their friendship can only be inferred from how they act around each other. Greg describes the situation as follows: "if Rowley appreciated what I did for him last week, he hasn't said it. But we've started hanging out after school again, so I guess that means me and him are back to normal" (WK 216). Another example of the concrete nature of their friendship is when Rowley's girlfriend breaks up with Rowley and it turns out she was only with Rowley because she wanted to make her ex-

boyfriend jealous (HL 206). Apparently, Greg does feel bad for Rowley, but says he can't "spend a lot of time feeling sorry for Rowley" because he has his own problems (HL 207). However, after some hesitation, Greg goes to ask Rowley if he wants to sit together and "five seconds later it was just like old times" (HL 216). In either situation, the boys do not spend time apologizing or analyzing what went wrong or how they feel. They just start spending time together again and quickly go back to their old habits as friends. Still, Greg ends up throwing his yearbook in the trash after he finds out Rowley is the class clown of the year, because of the comic he "stole" from Greg. He ends the book by saying "But if he ever gets too big for his britches, I'll just remind him that he was the guy who ate the _ _ _ _ _ _. " (WK 217). Thus, although Greg cares for his friend and ultimately has his back even if neither of them knows how to voice their affection, he still views Rowley as competition and sees his secret as a weapon that he could use for his benefit if Rowley got too confident. Altogether, Greg's friendship with Rowley and his closest relationships in general reveal how the ideals of hegemonic masculinity are present in how boys are expected to become independent problem-solvers, who are not supposed to need relationships for emotional support or comfort, but rather for the concrete benefits, such as favors or good company, the relationship might offer.

8. Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series portrays gender and hegemonic masculinity through themes of learned gender norms, popularity and appearance, bullying and emotions in masculine relationships. The protagonist of the books is depicted as being pressured to fit the limited role of a traditionally masculine man, and the schemata of a physically assertive, often aggressive "Old Age Boy" particularly by his father. Despite this, Greg's relationship with his mother challenges the traditional gender binary and offers an alternative way to perform gender according to the schemata of the more emotional and literature appreciating "New Age Boy". However, Mom's way of teaching Greg to be an "ideal" son still adheres to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity such as independence in both problem solving and emotional life, which pushes Greg's towards traditionally masculine behavior. Ultimately, both Mom and Dad both attempt to mould Greg into their versions of a "perfect" son, which for Dad means a masculine, muscular and athletic man and for Mom, a successful and independent, "well-adjusted" member of the society.

Furthermore, I have shown how Greg has learned to perform his gender according to the norms of hegemonic masculinity with his peers to avoid negative attention and seek popularity at his school. As I have discussed, the rules for popularity seem to be largely based on one's appearance and Greg is very aware of his status especially when it comes to attention from girls. He also has a ranking based on looks for the girls and altogether, Greg's descriptions of what popularity is all about reveal that the books conform to not only a traditional gender binary but also offer heteronormative expectations for girls and boys about how they should be attracted to the opposite gender already as preteens. Considering these findings against the discussions of previous critics introduced in the background section of this paper reveals how these gender norms are still so dominant in our society that the themes explored in the *Diary*

of a Wimpy Kid are called “universal” and Greg’s character is seen as “any kid”. Thus, with my discussion of the gender norms present in the series, I hope to have shown that the success of a series does not necessarily mean that the message it sends to its young readers would be universal or unproblematic in its nature. This is not to say that one series should be able to change the society but when looking at the scarcity of scholars who have paid attention to these norms in a series as successful as the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, the portrayal of gender in contemporary popular children’s fiction still desperately needs academic attention. The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is an ongoing series and a possible focus in the future could be the newer books published in the last few years, to see whether a change in their depictions of gender has occurred in response to the increasing media and particularly social media attention paid to the problems the gender binary entails.

In some moments, Greg’s performance of gender offers the reader a glimpse of going beyond the binary, since it seems that Greg would like to act against the norms of hegemonic masculinity if it was not for the pressure and expectations from others to appear as a traditionally masculine man. One of the most important aspects of this side of the books is the very form in which the series is written, since diary writing is usually seen as a feminine hobby and Greg appears to be very aware of this fact. However, Greg’s subjective agency in going against the gender norms is presented as very limited and he is ridiculed by Dad, his brother and peers when he tries to explore different ways of being a man. Also, the activities Greg would like to try or tries in secret, such as playing with barbies or joining a gossip group are still quite clearly marked as “girly” and contrasted against the “masculine” activities. This illustrates how often the only option in literature for both boys and girls to break the gender norms is to just conform to the traits of the other side of the binary, which results in the binary still being reinforced and “feminine” and “masculine” being presented as the only possible categories of gender.

The descriptions of the events during which Greg tries to survive and keep his status amid the pressure from parents, brother and peers to perform according to the norms of hegemonic masculinity are often filled with tragicomic turns and humorous details appealing for young readers, as can be seen from the enormous success of the series. However, this also raises some ethical concerns about what the reader is expected to laugh at. As I have discussed, bullying is one of the most prominent themes in the analyzed books and it seems that bullying is normalized in Greg's family and school to the extent that these incidents are supposed to make the reader laugh at the victim. The recurring appearance of bullying in the books raises the question about what should be considered as humor in children's books and how far can a humorous book go until it starts to be problematic. There are no easy answers for these questions, but the normalization of bullying in the books is certainly a possible topic for further exploration especially considering the wide audience of this series.

Finally, the exploration of gender and its representations in three books from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series offer an overview of what is happening in the field of contemporary popular children's literature when it comes to gender issues as the series is one of the most prominent examples of the new "diary cartoon" trend. As I discussed in the beginning of this thesis, these books have been especially liked among normally reluctant readers and thus they have interested critics in the educational context. This is no small accomplishment, since the decline of reading has been a growing concern in the age of digital natives. However, using books in education should also come with an understanding of how the book portrays issues such as gender in order to discuss the emerging themes and the messages the books are sending. Thus, my work on the norms of hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes in a part of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series can be applied as a tool for educators and readers around the world to better understand the continuing existence of the gender binary in contemporary children's fiction.

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