

PLEASANT COMPANY'S AMERICAN GIRLS COLLECTION:
THE CORPORATE CONSTRUCTION OF GIRLHOOD

by

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(Under the direction of JOEL TAXEL)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the modes of femininity constructed by the texts of Pleasant Company's The American Girls Collection in an effort to disclose their discursive power to perpetuate ideological messages about what it means to be a girl in America. A feminist, post structural approach, informed by neo-Marxist insights, is employed to analyze the interplay of gender, class, and race, as well as the complex dynamics of the creation, marketing, publication and distribution of the multiple texts of Pleasant Company, with particular emphasis given to the historical fiction books that accompany the doll-characters. The study finds that the selected texts of the The American Girls Collection position subjects in ways that may serve to reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender behaviors and privilege certain social values and social groups. The complex network of texts positions girls as consumers whose consumption practices may shape identity. The dangerous implications of educational books, written, at least in part, as advertisements for products, is noted along with recommendations that parents and teachers assist girl-readers in engaging in critical inquiry with regard to popular culture texts.

INDEX WORDS: Pleasant Company, American Girls Collection, feminism, post-structuralism, gender, consumption, popular culture

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DEDICATION

For my father, Charles H. Duffey,
who instilled in me a love of books and an inquiring mind.

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An African proverb, used recently by Hillary Clinton in the title of her book, states that it takes a village to raise a child. As I think about the people who have made this study possible, I realize that it has also taken a village to write this dissertation. The metaphor of the village suits my purposes well here because truly it is people from many walks of life who have, over the years of this study, stepped into my life and offered love, support, encouragement, and assistance.

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PREFACE

Pleasant Company's The American Girls Collection, introduced in 1986 by former elementary school teacher Pleasant Rowland, is a series of historical fiction books accompanied by dolls, their accessories, and a host of other spin-offs, including, among others, a magazine, craft and activity books, period doll furniture, a clothing line, a curriculum designed for use in elementary schools, a web site, and even a theme park. The core of the collection is, however, the doll-characters and their stories. Each doll represents a different era in American history, beginning with a Native American girl of 1764 and moving into the present with the American Girl of Today series. The dolls and their stories have not been issued in chronological order. The last three dolls to be introduced, for example, have been Josefina, whose story takes place in 1824, Kit, a girl of the 1930s depression era, and most recently Kaya, a Nez Perce girl growing up in 1764.

Pleasant Company's products are all beautifully marketed and sold through an exclusive mail order catalogue (now, also online) with the exception of one retail store, American Girl Place, in Chicago. A select group of print media, including the American Girls historical fiction books, are available for purchase in retail stores. The target audience is girls seven years of age and older, whose parents are affluent enough to afford the dolls and their products. The dolls themselves sell for \$84, a price that includes the introductory paperback book about the doll. One can easily spend well over \$1000 on the wardrobes, accessories, and furniture that accompany any one of the dolls. Eight dolls comprise the The American Girls Collection, and a ninth doll, called the American Girl of Today is a contemporary doll who can be selected in a girl's choice of

skin tones and hair color. This doll comes with “blank books” and guidelines for the girl-owner to write her story. In September, 2001, Pleasant Company introduced an American Girl of Today doll named Lindsey, who comes with a paperback book that tells her story. Lindsey and her accessories are only available until December of 2002, when the company says it will introduce another “Girl of Today.” In October, 2002, Pleasant Company added the eighth doll to its American Girls Collection. This newest doll, Kaya, is a Native American girl from the Nez Perce tribe whose story is set in 1764. She is the first doll in the series whose stories do not include celebrations of birthdays and Christmas. Because of her very recent debut, Kaya will not be a part of my analysis.

Finally, in addition to the historical dolls and the Girl of Today dolls, Bitty Baby and more recently, the Bitty Twins are marketed to the American girls’ little sisters who are too young to appreciate and care for the historical dolls. Pleasant Company has also purchased the publishing and merchandising rights to Angelina Ballerina, the mouse heroine of Katherine Holabird’s books, and this stuffed mouse now has outfits to match her stories and a stage collection, bedroom collection, kitchen collection, parlor collection, and a story book cottage. Most recently, the company has developed a new line of dolls designed to attract an international market. The Girls of Many Lands feature five dolls who debuted in October, 2002. These nine inch dolls, from England, France, China, Alaska, and India represent different historical eras and are accompanied by book sets, with an array of costumes and accessories to complete the line.

Founder and former president of the company Pleasant Rowland has said that Pleasant Company’s mission is two-fold: to provide pleasure for girls and to educate them about their history. The success of the company can be measured in part from its 1998 buyout by toy giant Mattel for \$715 million (Roepert, 1999; George, 1999). Indeed, Roepert reports that prior to the buyout, Pleasant Company was earning \$300 million dollars annually through its catalogue orders. Pleasant Company clearly is a marketing empire, and there are no indicators that its expansion and popularity are abating. Sloane

(2002) reports that the company has sold 82 million books and seven million dolls, making the American Girl line second only to Barbie as the most popular doll in the United States. In 2001, according to Sloane, the company had sales of \$350 million.

One way for the uninitiated to conceptualize Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection is to compare it to Disney's empire. Though perhaps not *as* ubiquitous, Rowland's American Girls have affinities with Disney's characters. As is the case with Disney characters, the doll-characters—Kaya, Felicity, Josefina, Kirsten, Addy, Samantha, Kit, and Molly--are merely the beginning of a seemingly endless number of products and merchandise. Both Disney and Pleasant Company are cultural phenomena that have not only provided an ever-expanding array of commodities, but also participate in what each considers to be “wholesome” images from which America can construct itself. In the case of The American Girls Collection, these images, in the form of multiple texts position girls to believe that “doing gender” involves a maze of specific activities, most of which are intricately involved in the purchase of commodities that will enable them to “look the part” and “act” accordingly. That the American Girls Collection has already found its place in the history of girlhood in America is evident from its inclusion as one of one-hundred twenty entries in the 2001 two volume encyclopedia *Girlhood in America*, a project written by nearly one hundred established scholars spanning over four hundred years of America's past.

The focus of this study is an examination of selected texts that comprise The American Girls Collection. The analysis uses a feminist perspective, incorporating poststructuralist and neo-Marxist insights, in order to disclose the discursive power of the texts to perpetuate ideological messages about what it means to be a female in America. It also analyzes the dynamics of the political economy of publishing texts and marketing products that influences who the readers/consumers of these products are, whose stories are told, whose stories are omitted, and what values are legitimized. Finally, it looks at how these multiple texts relate to each other and attempts to evaluate the ideological

impact of this complex packaging, one that clearly participates in what may be called the corporate construction of girlhood.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

And I have known them all already, known them all-
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

lines 55-61

T.S. Eliot, "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Introduction to the Study

Most young girls in America have not yet become acquainted with Prufrock, the rather pathetic character of Eliot's (1917/1993) famous poem, but like him, they all too often find themselves the object of eyes that fix them in formulated phrases, and they, too, must proceed with caution in an uncertain world riddled with contradictory messages. Readers familiar with Eliot's poem will recall that Prufrock, ever mindful of his appearance, (but even moreso as he makes his way toward a drawing room party), has taken great care to select a necktie that he reassures himself is both "rich and modest, but asserted with a simple pin" (line 43). The image of the pin in this line appears ostensibly as a decoration, an ornament intended to give Prufrock the confidence he needs. In actuality, the pin that secures his necktie serves as a metaphorical noose as Prufrock feels increasingly choked by his surroundings. In the subsequent reference to the pin, (lines 57-58 quoted above), it is presented as an instrument of torment and entrapment, leaving its victim no clear notion of his past or his future.

The Prufrock passage came to me precisely at the moment I was faced, to use still more words from Eliot's poem, with an "overwhelming question" regarding the present

study: “And how should I begin?” (line 69). Having decided to conduct an analysis of Pleasant Company’s American Girls Collection, I had become increasingly aware of the complexity of the project. My initial plan to focus exclusively on the historical fiction books that accompany each of the dolls in the collection gave way to a less naive and far broader approach. I realized that these books could not be studied in isolation from the seemingly unending cavalcade of products and artifacts that comprise the package Pleasant Company offers to parents for purchase for their daughters. The package includes an astonishing array of items—doll furniture, wardrobes for dolls, matching wardrobes for girls, craft, activity, and advice books, a bimonthly magazine, birthday party kits, sleeping bags, and grin pins—to list but a few.

Feeling rather lost in the enormity of the collection and sprawled on the floor amidst numerous American Girls items from my daughters’ collections, I found myself plowing through a bag filled with American Girls grin pins. As I picked them up one by one and read their messages and images, the text that interrupted my reading was the line that has always haunted me in Eliot’s poem: “when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (line 58). Today’s American girls, as well as girls of the past, are often pinioned between two conflicting voices that urge them to be both independent and dependent, competitive and nurturing. Learning how to be a girl in our society involves a considerable amount of wriggling against cultural walls that are, at best, ambivalent. The American Girls grin pins may be viewed, then, as icons that dramatically illustrate the mixed bag of being an American girl. They may be used, for the purposes of this introduction, to outline the major themes of the present study.

The most pervasive and obvious theme that strikes one approaching the assortment of texts Pleasant Company has developed is their unrelenting image of pleasantness, exemplified by the grin pins both in their label and on specific pins, one featuring stars arranged as a smiling face against a sky blue background. Named for its founder, Pleasant Rowland, Pleasant Company sells most of its products exclusively

through a catalogue that radiates images of warmth, happiness, innocence, and nostalgia. Life is abundantly happy for American Girls. Unbounded energy is, in fact, accentuated by a plethora of exclamation points interspersed throughout the catalogues, urging girls to “Dress like your American Girl!” “Experience history in a new way!,” or have “Slumber Party Fun!”

This emphasis on girls’ putting on a sunny face appears also in the historical fiction books written in a set of six books that tell the stories of each doll in the collection. Brady (1997) writes of a controversy that arose within Pleasant Company over the illustrations of Addy, an African-American slave girl who lived during the Civil War. According to Brady, Melodye Rosales, the illustrator of the first three formula texts written about Addy, “resigned over a conflict of artistic license with the corporate hierarchy, who deemed her illustrations too graphic and depressing for children—slaves should have smiling faces” (p. 223). The grin pins reinforce, certainly on a lighter note, this emphasis on looking happy as the pins feature face after face of girls who grin from ear to ear.

Actually, the small round metal grin pins are the least expensive of the wide range of commodities displayed in the company’s prize winning and highly touted catalogue. The pins can be purchased in packets of ten for \$2 (AG Holiday Catalogue, 1998, p. 86).¹ More typical of the company’s pricing is Victorian Samantha’s lemonade set for \$60, or Addy’s tartan dress (the one she wore Christmas day) priced at \$20. Also sized for real girls, Addy’s dress “whispers when you walk” (p. 67) and can be purchased for \$95.

But the real intrigue of grin pins, like so many other items in the catalogue, is that they are intended to be collected and showcased. For an additional \$12 girls can proudly

¹ I have not used APA standards to cite the catalogues and historical fiction books of The American Girls Collection in order for the textual evidence to be presented as clearly and smoothly as possible. Instead, I use the following conventions: For catalogues: Season, year, page, number e.g. (Holiday 2001, p. 51) and for books: Title, page number e.g. (Meet Molly, p. 7).

display their AG grin pins on a cloth wall banner, a great way, the catalogue insists, “to keep track of which Grin pins you’ve got, and which ones you’ve got to get!” (American Girl Holiday Catalogue, 1995, p. 70). This message, for girls to become collectors, is amplified as they are invited to purchase the more expensive items in the catalogue—heirlooms that they can pass on to their own daughters someday. Part of the brilliance of this particular marketing strategy is that girls are given permission, even encouragement, to add to their collection well past the seven to eleven doll-playing age group the company targets. Indeed, collecting, showcasing, and establishing comradeship with other girls is an important part of Pleasant Company’s mission. The catalogue suggests that girls “collect, trade, or give away” grin pins to their “pin pals” (AG Holiday Catalogue, 1995, p. 70). Promoting sisterhood among girls and defining activities that bond them is one of the ways the company has of encouraging girls to embrace its concept of what it means to be an “American Girl.”

Dressing for the part is definitely one message Pleasant Company promotes. The catalogue recommends still another use of the grin pin: Girls can use them to “trim all [their] gear” (p. 70) and by doing so be recognized by their friends as being “American Girls.” “American Girl Gear” is a term Pleasant Company has created to describe the extensive line of apparel and other accessories available through the catalogue, including hats, jackets, sleeping bags, pants, tights, book bags, beachwear, casual attire, and so on. The apparel line has become so extensive, in fact, that the company now regularly mails catalogues devoted exclusively to American Girl Gear.

The word *gear*, originally a term used to indicate the clothing of a soldier or knight, is suggestive of power and might, but it is also the company’s way of gearing girls toward a desire for clothing and accessories that can, as the ads promise, help them create a smart style that will, in turn, make their lives “something to celebrate!” (AG Gear, Fall 1998, p. 1). Armed with the right clothing, one example being “true blue denims that are friendly and familiar” (AG Gear, Fall 1998, p. 3), a girl can make friends

at school and “gear up” for a great year. The 1997 AG catalogue features a double spread with two girls wearing brightly colored coats and berets from AG Gear facing each other, with the American Girl Library book, “The Care and Keeping of Friends” between them. The text offers some sample start-up conversation starters for initiating friendships, then offers this advice: “Favorite outfits can be like old friends, too. Spice them up with a bright new sweater or a snappy new vest and you’d see how much more fun they are to wear. Variety, in friends and fashion, really is the spice of life!” (p. 17).

Grin pins represent a variety of messages that can add spice to AG Gear. Some of the pins reinforce values presumably important to girls. Written on one pin are the words “Kindness counts” against a white background featuring two grinning girls (one white, the other black) embracing. Another showcases a girl in curls with a bright bow in her hair, arms spread, and the word “Hugs.” A number of pins feature the smiling face of a girl whose hair is styled in some fashion—ponytails are popular—but regardless of the particular style, her hair is always adorned with some accessory. A thumbprint, suggesting that each girl is unique, is printed on one pin with a smiling face drawn on it. The script reads “Thumbs up!” The pins urge girls to “Be Bold,” “Follow Your Heart,” and “Dream!.” An entire series of pins is developed around the icon of the bumble bee, under whose fluttering wings appear such words as “Yourself!,” “Caring,” “Trustworthy!,” “Cheery!,” and “Good.”

Individual states in the United States are honored with pins, and several pins have a patriotic theme in assortments of red, white, and blue. A number of foods supposedly popular with girls (the company has a separate publication entitled *Great Girl Food*) are featured: an orange, a taco, a carrot, an ice cream cone, and so on. Activities girls engage in are also highlighted. On one pin, a star is personified, wearing a tu-tu and a bright bow, holding a star wand. The label reads “Performer.” A girl’s feet in pink shoes against white legs are positioned over a crossed rope with the words “Double Dutch” across the top. A series of “I love” pins, with heart icons substituted for the word “love,”

display images of a horse, a tennis racket, or ballet shoes. One pin is made in the image of a softball; another is a piano keyboard.

Some pins have an academic focus: “School is Cool,” or “A+” with the word “Smart” written on the left slant of the A. On another pin, math symbols are used to form a smiling face. A bold red pin features the word “Ask!” written in white, and another reads “Why Not” against a background of multi-colored question marks. The company has even sponsored Grin Pin contests asking American girls to design their own pins and submit them to the company’s judges for possible inclusion in the collection. According to the Fall 1998 AG catalogue, over 200 designs are available. Never missing an opportunity to expand its product line, Pleasant Company also offers mini stick-on grin pins that are available for a girl’s doll’s vest.

The foregoing discussion of grin pins is by no means exhaustive, but it does preview a number of ideological and commercial concerns of the present study. It suggests the contradictory messages and the restricted world that confront girls daily in popular culture, and it makes clear the sophisticated marketing efforts that ensure a girlhood driven by consumption. This observation has serious implications in light of recent cultural studies (Barnard, 1996; Dittmar, 1992; Furby, 1991; McNeal, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1999; Schor, 1998) linking consumption to identity. We are, to a certain degree, what we consume.

Background and Rationale of the Study

One of the more intriguing aspects of The American Girls Collection is that it seeks to blend being a girl, with all its gendered connotations, with being an American, a blend which Douglas (1994) sees as incompatible. In her discussion of growing up as a female in America, Douglas points out that America’s national mythology privileges independence, achievement, competition, and assertiveness. On the other hand, girls and women are socialized to be dependent, passive, and nurturing, not interested in achievement or success. Douglas concludes that all too often being a “real” American and a “real” girl at the same time “require[s] the skills of a top-notch contortionist” (p.

26). For better or for worse, Pleasant Company offers girls a way to navigate their way through this confusion.

Numerous features of Pleasant Company and its American Girls Collection further attracted me to this study. First established during Reagan's administration in 1986, the company itself reflects what Combs (1993) has called Reagan's romantic democracy and political nostalgia. The call, Combs writes, was "not for real solutions, but for romantic answers" (p. 21). Under such influence, national history may become "an aesthetic narrative of metaphorical figures and events who enact the pageant of America unfolding as a benevolent force in the world" (p. 25). Viewed as a cultural text then, the American Girls Collection offers what Brady (1997) claims is the "potential for a critical reading of how the politics of 'nostalgia' work to conceal the ideological principles used to legitimate an innocent view of history and a dominant conception of family values" (p. 225).

Discussing the impact of Disney movies on children, Giroux (1997) argues that Disney's powerful and far-reaching cultural authority merits respectful criticism—a criticism that engages in critical dialogue regarding the "meaning it [the Disney Empire] produces, the role it legitimates, and the narratives it uses to define American life" (p. 57). Giroux states forthrightly that no cultural influence of such enormity and power should go unchecked or unmediated. While Pleasant Company, now a subsidiary of Mattel, has not reached the magnitude of Disney's \$22 billion empire (Giroux, 1999), some idea of its staggering success can be gleaned from company reports. *Fortune Small Business* (Sloane, 2002) reports that Pleasant Company has sold 82 million books and seven million dolls, with 2001 sales being \$350 million. These figures indicate the considerable number of girls who have been exposed to Pleasant Company products. The financial success of the company, its merger with Mattel, coupled with its ever-growing off-shoots, including a school curriculum designed for use in grades 3-5 called America at School, American Girl magazine, a publication that as of March 2002 had

640,000 subscribers (Pleasant Company, 2001), an extensive line of clothing, and a theme park in Chicago more than qualifies Pleasant Company as one whose cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) is worthy of analysis.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of The American Girls Collection is what Pleasant Company has called in its promotional materials a “unique, collaborative publishing and manufacturing process” whereby the books, dolls, accessories, and clothing are created simultaneously. While it is true that commodities are available for other girls’ fiction series—one may, for example, purchase Baby Sitter Club calendars, diaries, and videos—no other series of books can begin to compete with the astounding number of products available in Pleasant Company’s glossy Gold award-winning catalogue. Moreover, its marketing strategies are uniquely its own. Like other series fiction, The American Girls series is marketed and produced by a company/publisher. But Pleasant Company markets only certain products, among them, the historical fiction books, to retailers. Most of its products are sold exclusively through direct mail order catalogue, described by one panelist of Gold Award judges as a catalogue where “everything is executed to the utmost perfection” (Bromfield, 1991, p. 89). Though Pleasant Company still relies primarily on direct catalogue sales, its catalogue is now online and it has opened a single retail store, American Girl Place, in Chicago and has announced plans to open another retail store in New York City.

Pleasant Company has been explicit about its mission. One catalyst for the development of the American Girls dolls was founder Pleasant Rowland’s dismay of Barbie dolls who “wore spiked heels, drove pink Corvettes, and looked as if they belonged to strip joints” (Dumalne, 1994, p. 106). Rowland wanted girls to have an alternative to Barbie, and despite advice to the contrary, she gambled that baby boomers would pay more than the usual \$10 to \$40 they were paying for Barbie, provided, of course, the dolls were fun, educational, and high quality. Rowland’s earlier aversion to Mattel’s Barbie did not, as I have already indicated, prevent her from selling Pleasant

Company to Mattel in an agreement reached in June of 1998 for \$715 million. In fact, as part of the agreement, Rowland became vice-chairman of Mattel as well as a board member (Milliot, 1998, p. 20) a position she held until her retirement in July 2000 (Pleasant Company, 2001). The dolls, initially created as an alternative to Barbie, now occupy the same corporate home with her in Madison, Wisconsin.

Whereas most girls' fiction books have been marketed to the consumer girl who can, in many instances, use her own money to purchase books, Pleasant Company's direct mail catalogue is aimed at affluent parents and adults whose incomes are high enough to afford the \$84 dolls and pieces of furniture whose prices exceed \$100. Indeed, Pleasant Company operates a sophisticated and complex business, hiring advisory boards of professional educators and historians to supervise the development of new doll characters and their stories and conducting extensive research in an attempt to assure historical accuracy and authenticity of their products, which are then showcased in the catalogue and in the museum-type displays of American Girl Place.

The close connection between the American Girls books and Pleasant Company's catalogue can be illustrated here with a brief example. The story of Addy was written by African American author Connie Porter and reviewed by an Addy Advisory Board of specialists in multi-cultural literature and African-American history.² It recounts Addy's escape from slavery via the Underground Railroad, where she is allowed to attend school in the North and subsequently learns to read. Thrilled with her newly acquired skills, she

² The advisory board members who reviewed the Addy stories and Looking Back essays, as well as product ideas, prototypes, and the illustrator's rendering of Addy included Mr. Lonnie Bunch, museum curator, historian and film maker; Ms. Cheryl Chisholm, film producer and programmer and Director of Atlanta Third World Film Festival; Mr. Spencer Crew, curator and historian; Dr. Violet Harris, educator and expert on multicultural literature; Dr. Wilma King, historian and educator with expertise on slavery in the U.S.; Ms. June Powell, educator representing National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center; and Ms. Janet Sims-Wood, librarian and scholar serving as co-editor of *Sage*, a scholarly journal about African-American women. Dr. Wilma King served as the project historian for the Addy books, reviewing the manuscripts and illustrations for historical accuracy.

patiently teaches them to her mother. Soon after, she opens her tin lunch pail to find some cookies her mother has baked and painstakingly shaped in letters that spell L-O-V-E. The reader-consumer may soon discover that a replica of these cookies, along with the tin pail and other lunch snacks packed for Addy, are available for purchase for \$18 in the American Girl catalogue. Moreover, the cookies themselves can be enjoyed at the \$16 per person tea regularly scheduled at the American Girl Café in Chicago. Finally, among numerous other accessories, a replica of Addy's historically authentic school desk appears in the catalogue as well for \$70, and her striped satchel, including a miniature version of *Union Reader* and her wooden abacus are available for \$18. As this example illustrates, it isn't possible to separate fiction from the larger economic and, as we shall see, the political arena that is its context. An effort to understand these contexts lies at the very heart of this study.

The most compelling feature of the series for my own research interests is the opportunity it provides for a feminist critique of what being a girl in America means. My initial introduction to Pleasant Company and its products was as a mother of two daughters, both of whom had friends who owned American Girls dolls and who had begun their own collections in earnest. One of the girls' mothers gave me a copy of the catalogue, and I was mesmerized. The front cover charmingly illustrated a young girl sharing her reading of an American Girls book with her American Girls doll. The inside pages had incredible warmth to them, and the photographs were gorgeous. The catalogue itself read like a story book. I was captivated by founder Pleasant Rowland's innovative idea to market dolls, along with the historical books, artifacts and other accessories to educate girls about American history, placing them at the forefront of history. I called the toll-free number to place my first order, and within a few days, my daughters and I had gained entry into this cultural phenomenon.

Within a few years of this time, I enrolled in a doctoral program in Language Education at the University of Georgia, motivated in part by my desire to continue a 15

year teaching career at a small, liberal arts college for women in Gainesville, Georgia. I wanted to develop a women's studies program at the college, having developed a professional interest in the education of young women. I decided to specialize as much as possible in the area of gender and education while in graduate school. In spring of 1994, I enrolled in a course taught by Dr. Joel Taxel, who would later become my major professor. Entitled "Women and Minorities in Literature," the course encouraged me to consider the ideological and political implications of literature, particularly within the context of gender, class, and race. The class also helped me to see the various subject positions available to readers, including the possibility of being a resisting reader.

My reading of two book-length studies, one by Radway (1984/1991) on women reading romance novels, and a second by Christian-Smith (1990) on adolescents reading romance novels, stimulated further my interest in the ways a text can construct meaning and subject positions for the reader. Combining textual analysis with a study of actual readers, Radway and Christian-Smith both found that readers may construct oppositional meanings from those unearthed by textual analysis. Christian-Smith found, for example, that the girls in her study sometimes used the teen romance novels to contest their unequal relations of power at school and in their daily lives. Radway discovered that the actual reading of the romance novels themselves was for some of her readers an act of liberation. Yet, both researchers also presented evidence suggesting that the reading of romances was deeply implicated in reconciling its reader to the patriarchal power structure. Hence, these researchers found support for Raymond Williams' and other cultural theorists' observations that popular culture often functions in a highly contradictory manner (Davis, 1987; Eagleton, 1979; and Williams, 1977).

A logical extension of such research, I reasoned, would be to examine popular books read by younger girls to see if the findings were similar. I was already both intrigued and puzzled by the American Girls series. Designed with an intent to celebrate girls' place in American history, the series was, in a sense, responding to a feminist

agenda. The characters were presented as being both feminine and strong. Descriptors such as “spunky,” “spirited,” and “courageous,” were used to describe them in Pleasant Company’s catalogues and the series book jackets. Yet, alongside these positive representations from a feminist perspective were less satisfying ones. Given their ages of nine year olds, the American Girls heroines were not involved in pursuing romantic relationships with the opposite sex, as were the heroines in romance novels that were often blatantly sexist (e.g. Christian-Smith, 1984, 1989; Roman & Christian-Smith, 1988). Judging from Pleasant Company’s catalogue, however, the heroines’ lives did appear to revolve around their appearance and their wardrobes. Moreover, the composite representation of *the* American girl included the dominant role of the girl as nurturer, and what occupied much of her time was historically traditional women’s work: sewing, cooking, and other crafts and activities which were available also for purchase in kits for young readers of the series. This combination of feminist rhetoric with traditional values of feminine virtue and activity organized around consumption seemed fertile ground for inquiry.

When I met with Joel Taxel to test his reaction to this series as a possible dissertation topic, he pointed to a box that Pleasant Company had sent him just that week. It contained a shipment of materials introducing an African-American doll, Addy, and her books to the collection, as well as a sample curriculum unit for grades 3-5, entitled *America at School*, featuring the paperback editions of the American Girls books, wall charts, activity cards, maps, and a teacher’s guide. Clearly, the scope of the company and its potential impact on everyday lives of girls could not be underestimated. I decided to pursue the study, which as of this writing has been ongoing for eight years.

Before moving to more specific discussions of Pleasant Company and the American Girls Collection, it is important to situate the American Girls series within the general area of series fiction for children. Though it shares similarities with other genres, there are important differences. The next section will attempt to clarify the differences

and identify salient features of the series books examined in this study.

The American Girl Series: Establishing its Place in Children's Literature

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to comment extensively on how The American Girls series compares and contrasts with other series fiction in children's literature, a few observations are necessary to establish its importance as popular series fiction as well as its distinctive characteristics, including its classification as historical fiction.

A debate in recent years over the importance of popular fiction in general for scholarly attention is beginning to abate since cultural critics, many of them influenced by feminist philosophies, have convinced their doubters that elitist positions have dominated discussions of what constitutes "literature." Critical theory has also been instrumental in encouraging scholars to turn to popular fiction in order to scrutinize its role in reinforcing cultural ideologies. Inness (1997), in her discussion of girls' series, notes that any literary genre that can last over a century and continue to thrive is clearly accomplishing important cultural work and is therefore worthy of critical attention. Though Inness acknowledges the 1990s upswing in studying girls' culture, she also points out that few girls' series characters, with the exception of Nancy Drew, have received serious scholarly attention. "If we wish to understand how we are constituted as subjects," Inness argues, "popular literature is a vitally important source that deserves our closest scrutiny...it is in such works that we shall discover the ideological messages that mold and shape us into the individuals that we are" (p. 10).

The series book is not as easy to define as one might think. Deane (1991) uses a definition wherein one author, either actual or the name of a single, non-existent author produced by a syndicate, produces a story-line involving the same major characters in a successive series of actions, scenes, and situations, with each separate book being complete in itself but continuing the adventures of the major characters. The American Girls series is actually eight (excluding the Girl of Today) separate series united by the over-all theme of being an "American Girl" representative of her distinct historical era.

Most individual series in The American Girls series have one author. Valerie Tripp is author of every book in the series for Felicity, Molly, Josefina, and Kit. Janet Shaw wrote the Kirsten and Kaya stories, and Connie Porter wrote the Addy stories. The Samantha series has three authors; books one and two, written by Susan Adler, book three by Maxine Rose, and books four and five by Valerie Tripp.

Inness (1997) remarks on the difficulties of distinguishing between “books in a series” (using Wilder’s *Little House* books as this example) and “series books” (using *Nancy Drew* and her ilk for these examples). One distinction made here is that books in a series normally contain characters who age as real people do. In series books, characters either never grow old, or they do so in a most gradual fashion. In the case of The American Girls series, each of the six books in the series represents events that take place roughly in the span of a year in the nine-year-old heroine’s life.

As Inness (1997) also points out, the plots of series books are more likely to be formulaic than those of books in a series. It follows that the characters in series books are typically less developed. The American Girls series books once again fit the series book mold. Each American Girls author uses the same general formula for telling the heroine’s stories, with some exceptions, already noted, for Kaya, the Native American girl-character. Six parallel stories are told for each character, focusing on family, school, Christmas, birthday, summer, and winter adventures, respectively. Each book concludes with a “*Looking Back*” section that uses historical pictures along with text to explain and highlight historical events in the time period. Finally, the Girl of Today in the American Girls series comes with her own set of blank books for the girl-reader to write. Each girl-reader is given a set of guidelines that come with the books. These guidelines are, in essence, instructional formulas to assist her in writing her own story.

The American Girls series books undoubtedly share characteristics with other girls’ series books. Girls series fiction typically features a girl who has one exciting adventure after another in a series of books that focuses on her experience. Though the

adventures are exciting and filled with intrigue, the world of the series books is generally one that is, in the words of Inness (1997), “reassuringly knowable” (p. 3).

This aura of realism is intensified in *The American Girls* series because the series also belongs to the genre of historical fiction, and hence, the even smaller classification of girls series historical fiction. Reed (1997), in her study of the historical *Betsy Tacy* series, by Maud Hart Lovelace, states that historical fiction for girls in America began in earnest with Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and subsequent books. Reed notes that history, for many children, begins with stories like *Betsy Tacy*. Though children build a sense of past through facts and chronology, the stories give those facts a face.

Agreeing with Reed (1997) that the forming impulse of historical fiction is essentially a realist genre, Stephens (1992) makes the claim that it is also most radically ideological. Though Stephens does not address historical *series* books per se, he does make the point that “a highly technological and extremely acquisitive society with great personal mobility and information resources” is not likely to be overly interested in delving into history, especially given twentieth century pressures to exist in the present and its orientation to the future. Commenting upon a society that is more interested in “doing and getting” than in “being,” Stephens suggests that such values move away from the essentially humanistic ideology of children’s historical fiction, his point being that the genre may risk losing its readership (p. 203).

The *American Girls* series then, would appear to be simultaneously part of the thriving world of series books and the declining world of historical fiction. If Stephens (1992) is correct in his “doing and getting” explanation, the success of *The American Girls* series might be attributed, at least in part, to Pleasant Company’s marketing strategy to offer girls multiple opportunities to “do” crafts and activities associated with the series and to “purchase” *American Girls* products that build a collection to be treasured. It should be noted that the success of the *American Girls* series initiated a

resurgence of historical fiction for girls, a notable example being Scholastic's *Dear America* series, focusing on American history as depicted in girls' diaries.

Finally, another distinguishing feature of the American Girls series is its previously discussed unprecedented marketing strategies. Because the books are critical to introducing the product line, they are sold in paperback for \$5.95, not only in the American Girl catalogue, but in a variety of retail stores. Though this price is slightly higher than a number of other series books for girls, it is nonetheless affordable to a rather large market of buyers.

Pleasant Company hopes to use the books to entice readers to order its catalogue so that they can purchase a host of other American Girl products. Therefore, every book concludes with a perforated page and a postcard for mailing to request a catalogue, with space provided for including a friend's name and address. Initially these postcards were postage-free, but recent books require that the buyer supply the postage. The top half of the page has a message to readers explaining that while the books are the heart of The American Girls Collection, they are only the beginning. Readers are also given a toll-free number they can call to order a catalogue along with the company's web site address. A group picture of each of the girl-dolls appears at the top of the page. Girls who enthusiastically order the catalogue may be disappointed that the "exquisite clothes and accessories" they find there are not nearly as affordable as the paperback books.

Given the importance of theories that inform the study, the next section will provide a brief overview of those theories before moving to a statement of the problem and the research questions. More detailed discussions of theory and related studies comprise Chapter Two.

Theoretical Stance

The present study resides at the intersection between post-structuralism and critical theory, and it draws on work done in the areas of popular culture, feminism, literary theory, children's literature criticism, the political economy of publishing, and consumption. One premise of the study is that no research effort is neutral. Reader

response theorists have long held that no matter how objective we think we can be when analyzing a text, we are nonetheless examining it from our own subjective stances. Poststructuralists would add that those stances may be unstable and changing. Moreover, they are always informed *both* by the way a researcher/reader is subjected by the constitutive forces of discourse and language *and* by the way a researcher/reader may exercise agency as a speaking subject (Davies, 1993, p. 13). Because this is the case, we may find ourselves both accepting *and* rebelling simultaneously. When I open a Pleasant Company catalogue, for example, I am both outraged by the transformation of girlhood into consumption and seduced by Felicity's miniature hot chocolate set, (as a Patriot, she is boycotting tea), complete with marzipan strawberries, fresh fruit tarts, gold-rimmed botanical plates, and damask napkins. As a critical researcher, I must process and evaluate the underlying reasons for these conflicting emotions with an eye for deciphering ways of seeing, knowing, and being that are made available to me.

The rather large umbrella of critical theory covers an area whose waters are sometimes purposefully muddy. Barry (1995) posits a conscious oversimplification of its recurrent ideas in an attempt to summarize a complex set of characteristics. The basic tenets he outlines are as follows: Politics is pervasive, language is constitutive, truth is provisional, meaning is contingent, and human nature is a myth. These general statements are central to many insights of this study.

Reason and Rowan (1981) succinctly summarize the position of critical researchers and suggest the potential power of the research itself: "Research can never be neutral. It is always supporting or questioning social forces, both by its content and by its method. It has effects and side-effects, and these can benefit or harm people" (p. 489).

A distinguishing characteristic of critical inquiry from more traditional positivist research is that while the positivist insists on "objectivity," the critical researcher acknowledges, values, and productively *uses* his or her subjectivity. Critical research has an explicit agenda: It seeks to uncover and change mechanisms of domination and power

(Maguire, 1987, p. 18). As Lather (1994) puts it, “the central issue of [critical inquiry] is how to bring scholarship and advocacy together in order to generate ways of knowing that interrupt power imbalances” (p. 106). My interest in this project is forthrightly feminist in that, as a woman, an educator, and a parent, I am committed to working towards a society where girls and women are no longer disadvantaged by gender stereotypes and inequities or denied a critically interrogated past.

My theoretical stance is post-structuralist in that I view the treatment of popular cultural forms of this study and their gender ideologies as constructs subject to undoing. The use of the term “construct” implies that subjectivity is not innate but is socially produced. This study contends that language constructs an individual’s subjectivity in ways that are socially specific. Within this theoretical framework, language becomes a site of social and political struggle.

Although meaning is contingent, the temporary fixing of meaning nonetheless has important social implications (Weedon, 1997). Meaning does not disappear altogether, but interpretation is at best temporary and specific to the discourse within which it is produced. Meaning is always open to challenge through critical readings of texts, which often include the use of deconstructive strategies, a kind of dismantling of words on a page when the reader reads “against the grain” of the text and attempts to uncover its unconscious dimensions. There is always room for resistance by readers who refuse to conform to the subject positions they are offered by a text. Even so, children may be especially vulnerable to a text’s ideology, particularly when they are taught that reading is a transparent medium giving them access to the story or message the author intended (Davies, 1993).

Even when we are empowered to resist a text, we are never completely immune from the force of its ideology. Nodelman (1996) defines ideology as “the body of ideas that controls (or at least tries to control) how we as participants in the society view the world and understand our place within it” (p. 67). A number of theorists have

emphasized both the power and the unconsciousness of ideology. Williams (1977) notes that the dominant ideology of a society is accepted by most of its members as “the way things are” and this sense of naturalness makes it difficult for people to move beyond an unconscious investment in the values and assumptions of ideology. Deeply embedded notions of what it means to be an “American,” for example, are part of our psychic make-ups.

Hence, literature in general, and children’s books in particular, are not above ideology; that is, they have a powerful and direct socializing effect on the reader. In fact, as Taxel (1989) reminds us, the belief that children’s literature influences children’s attitudes and behaviors is a basic premise of children’s literature. Stephens (1992) makes the case that historical fiction for children is especially powerful as an ideological tool, given its persistent urging of social conservatism and its humanistic leanings. One purpose of this dissertation is to articulate the dominant ideologies that are offered to readers of The American Girls Collection of texts.

A text must be viewed, however, in a context that is larger than its actual words, images, or the intent of its author. We cannot separate fiction from the larger political and economic concerns that inform it. Reminding us that it is our responsibility as critics of children’s literature to scrutinize any group that is successful in conferring cultural legitimacy to its knowledge, Taxel (1981) urges us to attend to the social structures and political processes that maintain and secure its power. These processes include the production, publishing, marketing, and distribution of texts, as Taxel’s (2002) study suggests.

Herein lies this study’s debt to Marxist theory and its recognition of the popular cultural form as a product of a capitalist mode of production. Writing about the way corporate America has revolutionized childhood, Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) note that “corporate cultural pedagogy has ‘done its homework,’” and has replaced “traditional classroom lectures and seatwork with dolls with a history, magic kingdoms,

animated fantasies, interactive videos, virtual realities, kick-boxing TV heroes, spine-tingling horror books, and an entire array of entertainment forms produced ostensibly for adults but eagerly consumed by children” (p. 4). The extent to which many children’s books can be seen as products of market research is an unsettling trend about which Roman & Christian-Smith, (1988), Taxel (1997, 2002) and others have warned. Companies are more than willing to demonstrate what Douglas (1994) has called capitalism’s greatest strength, “its ability to co-op and domesticate opposition, to transubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products” (p. 260). Hence, companies like Mattel with its Jamaican Barbie and Pleasant Company with Addy and Josefina can appear to be endorsing cultural diversity while safely containing it, all the while increasing the bottom-line that matters most: profit.

It is against this background that the research questions of this study emerged. The final section will state the research problem and present the related questions, followed by an outline of the remaining chapters and some concluding remarks.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Given the influence that popular fiction in general and girls’ fiction in particular has had and will continue to have on the ideological constructs of young girls and women, it is important to identify and examine the narrative strategies and modes of femininity offered by texts such as the American Girls series in an effort to disclose their discursive power to perpetuate ideological messages about what it means to be female in America. Since, from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, all meaning is political and contextual, this study will analyze the interplay of gender, class, and race, as well as the complex dynamics of the creation, marketing, publication, and distribution of texts, as these concerns are directly relevant to the political and ideological implications of The American Girls Collection.

Research questions.

1. What are the dynamics set up by the production, distribution, and marketing of Pleasant Company’s complex package of products and concepts? How are these

dynamics shaped by the political climate of the United States, especially as it relates to books and publishing?

2. How do the multiple products that are a part of Pleasant Company's ever-expanding package (the catalogue, American Girl Place, the historical fiction book spin-offs, the dolls and their wardrobes) interface with the historical fiction books and their readers? What impact might this interplay have on the ideological messages these texts offer girls?
3. How do the series books of historical fiction that accompany Felicity, Josefina, Kirsten, Addy, Samantha, Kit, and Molly participate in constructing a girl's identity as a female in America? How might these books position girls as subjects?
4. What particular set of social values and ideologies are legitimized by the historical fiction books in question three, and what social group(s) do they represent? What values and groups are omitted?

Chapters to Follow

Chapter Two reviews the major theoretical studies and related literature from which the present study operates, and Chapter Three describes the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter Four provides a chronological history of the company from its inception in 1984 and its actual marketing and distribution in 1986, to its continuing proliferation of products in 2002. It gives the reader a brief review of consumption theory in order to lay the framework for a discussion of the political economy of publishing, distribution, and marketing as it is manifest by Pleasant Company. In Chapter Five provides a brief overview of the historical fiction series accompanying seven of the historical doll characters, using examples from each series that are relevant to the research questions. The chapter concludes with a focus on the Molly series in greater detail, including an in-depth look at how the materials in these books interface with the catalogue. Finally, Chapter Six discusses the implications and findings of the study, its limitations, and the possibilities and recommendations for future research.

Concluding Remarks

I began this chapter by previewing some of the major themes of the study through a discussion of grin pins, a seemingly insignificant product of Pleasant Company. My “reading” of grin-pins was influenced no doubt by many texts and lived experiences I can no longer recall. The Prufrock passage alluded to at the beginning of the chapter pushed its way into my consciousness with no effort on my part, but I am sure other passages that nonetheless affect my reading remain buried, at least for the time being. The point I wish to make here is that this kind of multiple layering of discourse is recognized and used productively in poststructural analysis.

Davies (1993) uses a term that describes the way new writings in antiquity were once written over old parchment that was not fully erased. The term, *palimpsest*, is meant to suggest that while the new writing momentarily overrides the old, the two intermingle, and both influence the interpretation of the other. This kind of multiple layering may provide human subjects with multiple layers of contradictions. It is the effort to peel layer after layer of parchment, to view what has been written, as well as what has overwritten it, and even what has *never* been written, that captures the spirit of a poststructuralist approach to texts. The metaphor is also particularly apropos to this discussion of American girlhood, from the evolution of its past to the evocation of its present. Both the old and the new parchment still stand. Sorting through their layers is a painstaking endeavor, but one that must be made if girls are ever to see their lives in the context of larger cultural forces so that they can become empowered to change them.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Perspectives

What to do about the plight of girls in America is a concern shared by psychologists, educators, feminists, social scientists, parents, and a host of other, for the most part, well-intentioned individuals. In 1992, The American Association of University Women published *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, putting gender equity in schools on the American education agenda. Their study was followed by Sadker and Sadker's *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (1994), which offered still further documentation that girls were not being given equal education to that provided to boys. Indeed, after conducting twenty years of research, the Sadkers discovered that sexist values prevalent throughout a child's education were harmful to both boys and girls, with girls paying the highest price--loss of self-esteem, decline in achievement, and limited career options. This milestone study furthered the aims of liberal feminists whose efforts have historically been directed toward educational and legal reforms that would increase the professional and occupational status of women.

Citing the AAUW 1992 report's finding that girls were less apt to see themselves reflected in the materials they studied at school, a news release from Pleasant Company launching its *America at School* curriculum unit quoted Pleasant Rowland, creator of The American Girls Collection, as saying, "I am pleased to publish a program that puts girls on center stage in elementary classrooms. *America at School* gives both girls *and* boys a better understanding of the roles played by women and girls in American history."

Indeed, the AAUW report sparked the interest of numerous scholars who began publishing provocative accounts of the dilemmas facing adolescent girls. Brown and Gilligan (1992), Orenstein (1994), Pipher (1994), Cherland (1994), Mann (1994) and Barbieri (1995) all looked at school practices, home practices, and reading practices that jeopardize girls. Pipher emphasized in her analysis the “girl poisoned” (p, 12) culture into which girls come of age--a culture, she claims, that is saturated with sexist ads and pressure on girls to be popular, seek boyfriends, and above all, look attractive.

It was this kind of pressure Rowland hoped to delay when she introduced The American Girls Collection. She wanted to prolong childhood and give girls “anti-Barbies,” dolls that could teach them lessons and make them feel good about themselves. The unrealistic measurements of Barbie had for some time been a concern of feminists, who pointed out that were she five feet, five inches tall, her measurements would be 31-17-28, considerably thinner than the often anorexic figures of popular fashion models. Moreover, according to Lord (1994), Barbie’s concave stomach would lack the 17 to 22 percent body fat required for menstruation. For many, Barbie had become a cultural icon representing (if not instigating) the female obsession with body image.³

Instead of a shapely (albeit it thin-figured) Barbie, whose boyfriend Ken invites children to construct play scenarios around dating, Rowland would offer American girls a young girl-doll removed from the pressure of “getting Ken.” Rowland believed that heartfelt stories about the dolls--told in a series of historical fiction books--would endear them to readers and that their plethora of accessories would engage girls in hours of wholesome play.

³ Numerous studies and commentaries of Barbie as a cultural icon have been done. In addition to M.G. Lorde’s *Forever Barbie: The unauthorized biography of a real doll* (1994), other recent publications include Stienberg’s “The bitch who has everything” in *Kinderculture: The corporate construction of childhood* (1997); Rogerts’ *Barbie Culture* (1999); and McDonough’s (ed.) *The Barbie Chronicles* (1999).

Although most critics of Barbie would agree that her unrealistic figure encourages girls to obsess over their weight, at least one study cited by Mann (1994) found otherwise. The group of girls in this study were less affected by Barbie's shape than by her accessories. When Barbie didn't have her combs, brushes, clothes, and other accessories, the girls lost interest, leading the researchers to wonder if the more serious problem Barbie posed was that she encouraged children to become enamored with the materialistic trappings of being a girl. Should this be the case, The American Girls Collection, with its emphasis on consumption, might exacerbate the pressures girls face rather than providing a viable alternative to them. All of this assumes, of course, that the case can be made that mass-produced popular culture is, in fact, instrumental in influencing how girls learn to be girls and the meanings they attach to femininity. A major purpose of this chapter and of this study is to support that claim.

Popular culture and its role in socialization.

Any study that seeks to examine the role popular culture plays in the socialization of its consumers must acknowledge that the very term "popular culture" is a problematic one. Roman and Christian-Smith attempt to unravel some of its complexities, pointing out that, as is the case with language in general, the term has a long history and has undergone (and is still undergoing) transformation. In its career of definitions, popular culture has implied a way of life distinctive and apart from the "high culture" of the educated or elite. Seen in this way, it has often connoted opposition to the dominant power structures and has referred to those cultural forms enjoyed and embraced by "the masses."

For others, popular culture refers to the everyday and ordinary forms of people's experiences--the jokes they tell, the dress styles they wear, or the way they celebrate birthdays. Following this line of thought, Fiske (1995) maintains that "the mundane [as opposed to the transcendent] is the only terrain upon which popular culture can be made and can be made to matter. Culture is ordinary, and the ordinary is significant" (p. 335).

Cultural theorists like Raymond Williams (Heath & Skirrow, 1986) question whether mass-produced cultural forms really represent the everyday experiences of people or if, instead, they displace, manipulate, or redirect them. Hence, the term has been used in a positive way to refer to the authentic experiences of ordinary people and pejoratively to suggest that the “masses” are duped into manipulation by corporate structures whose primary motive is profit. Roman and Christian-Smith reject each of these extremes. They choose instead to follow a model conducive to this study, one suggested by sociologist John Clark, calling for an alternative position which recognizes that “structural conditions set limits on the modes of resistance, subversion, and opposition consumers of popular culture may articulate” (p. 13). A guiding concern of the present study is to interrogate the structural conditions that influence the way texts of popular culture are put to use.

It is worth noting that The American Girls Collection is both an elitist and a popular text. Its marketing strategies and product development are targeted to affluent, educated consumers (mostly mothers and grandmothers) who see themselves as buying quality products with educational value for their daughters and granddaughters, a purchase they consider well worth the substantial financial investment they are making. At the same time, the historical books are written according to formulas characteristic of popular fiction, and the Girl of Today is inundated with many of the trappings associated with the latest trends in fashion and activities of modern girls. Further, even though many girls are denied ownership of the dolls, accessories, and clothing because of their cost, Padawer (2000) reports that the company has sold 54 million copies of its history-based books since 1986. Though this figure would include the History Mysteries series that Pleasant Company also publishes, the American Girls narrative is widely known, and, arguably, the creation of desire for the products has been successful across a range of economic groups. From this perspective, The American Girls Collection may be

viewed as artifacts of popular culture that appeal to significant numbers of “would be” and actual consumers.

Finally, the series can be said to participate in the popular trend of “celebrating” girls as girls, highlighting their unique virtues, and establishing a sense of sisterhood among them. Viewed in this way, one might argue that the collection arises from an oppositional stance to the dominant ideology of patriarchy, though this view is problematic. Patriarchy has defined a whole series of traits associated with being feminine, many of which—looking pretty, for example—are embraced by Pleasant Company and its products. Nevertheless, alongside traditional images of femininity, Pleasant Company does offer girls the more adventuresome possibility, for example, of wearing a camping outfit and heading for the hills for a weekend of rugged fun. One can’t help but question, however, to what extent the American Girl can blaze a trail, encumbered as she is by so many “just in case” items and other necessities. She is, in fact, so laden with “backpack essentials” and “orienteering accessories” that one wonders if she will ever be able to take the first step. Another important point to be made regarding any attempt to form an oppositional stance to the dominant ideology of patriarchy is that even if feminists could develop an alternative list of designated “feminine” traits, such a move would still be essentializing.

Any serious inquiry of The American Girls Collection would be in vain if there were insufficient support for viewing texts, whether they be literary, popular fiction, film, video, or magazine texts (to name but a few possibilities), as being potential agents of socialization. Douglas’s (1994) book, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* supports that this is the case. Speaking both as an adult looking back on her own formative years and as a professor of media and American studies, Douglas asserts that the mass media have both defined and exaggerated codes of masculinity and femininity, ensnaring many women into a lifetime struggle for gender self-definition (p. 17). That this struggle begins in childhood is apparent to any observer of a pre-school

nursery. That it is complicated by the national mythology of what it means to be an American, as well as what it means to be female, is a message Douglas sees as being especially problematic for girls. As was noted in Chapter One, the value placed in America on individualism, the competitive spirit, and aggression are, according to Douglas, at odds with the social pressure on girls to be self-abnegating, cooperative, and docile.

The American Girls Collection is therefore a fertile ground for inquiry: designed for “American” girls, it has become a cultural phenomenon seeking to define both the American girl of the past and the American girl of today. To accomplish the dual mission of transmitting a message and making a profit, it has incorporated a wide variety of texts, ranging from its glossy catalogue to historical books of fiction, a magazine, craft and activity books, a CD Rom, and other spin-offs.

To what extent might these texts operate as agents of socialization for children? What social, political, and economic relations do these texts validate and reproduce? How do they participate in challenging, securing, or redefining a patriarchal society?

To attempt to answer these and related questions necessitates at least a brief review of the theoretical perspectives that inform the increasingly broad arena of critical inquiry and cultural studies. Insights central to critical and cultural studies are interconnected and dispersed throughout a spectrum of disciplines, including children’s literature, history, philosophy, feminist studies, psychology, sociology, and British and American cultural studies. While a few names are standard to most bibliographies of these studies, (e.g. Althusser, Cixous, Derrida, Eagleton, Foucault, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Lacan), a wide and numerous range of scholars engage in critical and cultural studies, and they study subjects as diverse as yard signs, baseball cards, detective fiction, Disney movies, children’s books, television sit-coms, or rap music. The critical terms used in literary analysis are themselves multiple and subject to seemingly endless discussion and definition.

It is beyond the purpose of this chapter to present any detailed analysis of structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Instead, I will try to situate the present study at the intersection of critical theory, particularly feminist, poststructuralism and Neo-Marxism. Such an approach views language and reality as plural, flexible, and contingent while still maintaining a view of reading that is both political and material; that is, part of social relations that have political effects and legitimize certain power relations of benefit to particular groups and not to others. Even as it seeks to expose women's oppression, the approach used in this study will also seek to be sensitive to the possibility that "the very categories we use to liberate us may also have their controlling moment" (Nicholson, 1990, p. 16). Hence, though terms such as "gender," "race," and "class" will be employed, an awareness of their complexity and reductive nature will haunt any assumptions made about them.

Butler's work (1990a) reminds us, for example, that the term "gender" is not even as stable as those who have gone so far as to argue that it is socially constructed, rather than innately determined, would have us believe. Referring to "metanarratives of infantile development," Butler points out that such story lines circumscribe gender meanings, effecting a "narrative closure on gender experience and a false stabilization of the category of woman" (Butler, 1990a, p. 329). If the male/female binary is disrupted, as it often is in fantasy, "a variety of positions can be entertained even though they may not constitute culturally intelligible possibilities" (p. 333). Butler's troubling of gender as a stable identity leads her to posit gender as a "performative accomplishment," (Butler, 1990b, p. 141) in which gender is created by various acts, the effects being produced through stylization of the body. These acts create the illusion of a stable gendered self, wherein the "doer" is constructed in and through the "deed" (p. 142). Butler (1993) locates performativity in discourse that has the power to produce what it names through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. Subjects move through these discourses and may take up or resist them in complex and contradictory ways.

The American Girls Collection offers girls one of many available discourses that seek to model the repeated gestures and acts of being a girl within socially accepted frameworks. Like most powerful discourses, it does so in a way that conceals the performative nature of gender by presenting it as natural and normal. Instead of being a “natural fact,” gender, in Butler’s (1990a) view, is “a kind of politically enforced performativity”(p. 146) that serves as a kind of impersonation that passes as real.

This daring and unsettling way of thinking and working risks frustrating the reader who seeks definitive answers and firm foundations and who views herself as a rational and unified subject. Its theoretical framework is, however, one that allows the researcher to plow the terrain—and through this turning of soil, inside out and upside down-- make it more fertile. It recognizes that some seeds grow, all change, and each one is part of a complex system that the seeds both help to create and are created by. It opens up the possibility for surprise, for new hybrids that challenge and expand our thinking. Old and established binaries are uprooted and displaced, a welcome disruption for feminists, who unfortunately find themselves “on the wrong side of binaries and at the bottom of hierarchies” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481).

The various discourses that inform this study--feminism, neo-Marxism, and poststructuralism--move together in complementary ways as they move apart in contradiction. The sections that follow will attempt to articulate this meaningful and necessary confusion, marking places where the present study will attempt to establish what Lather (1994) calls a “brief foothold”(p. 29) or a place from which to act. To some extent, my approach will be similar to the postmodern-feminist approach Fraser and Nicholson (1990) describe as looking more like “a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color” (p. 35).

The Tapestry: Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Neo-Marxism

Before discussing the various encounters and interweaving currents of feminism and poststructuralism, I want to begin by attempting to outline the components of a poststructuralist approach, recognizing as I do, that what is labeled poststructural theory,

as Butler (1992) has noted, is not solidly uniform and cannot be classified under a single rubric. One way of approaching an understanding of what much poststructural thought is about, however, is to see it as a critique of humanism, a discourse that St. Pierre (2000) reminds us has for centuries held us in its grip: “Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we imagine, the limits of our pleasures. Humanism is everywhere, stifling in its totality; and, since it is so ‘natural,’ it is difficult to watch it work” (St. Pierre, p. 478). In other, less eloquent words, humanism is hegemonic.

Poststructuralism has radically questioned and made problematic the various tenets of humanism, even as it cannot escape being implicated and held (albeit tenuously) by its sway. It is because of this uneasy positioning that we can smile and think of poststructuralists with both respect and hesitation when we read Michael Blumenthal’s (quoted in Lynn, 1998) wry remark: “Imagine being the first to say, with confidence: uncertainty” (p. 77).

Indeed, poststructuralists seem to enjoy poking fun at themselves at times. But their work is a serious interrogation of all that has remained, for the most part, unquestioned in a humanist philosophy that views language as transparent, human subjects as rational and unified, and knowledge acquired from a particular kind of logic as “true.” The following sections will discuss components of poststructural theory, commenting when appropriate, upon their relationship to feminism and neo-Marxism.

A Theory of Language and Subject

It is perhaps in its view of language that poststructuralist theory holds the most promise for radical transformation of ourselves as social beings, as women and men. Owing much to structuralism and the linguistic theory of Saussure (1974), poststructuralists embrace Saussure’s recognition that language shapes the world rather than merely reflecting it. As Barry (1995) expressed it, “*how* we see is *what* we see” (p. 61). Rather than seeing an inherent connection between a word or “signifier” and what

the word designated--the “signified”--Saussure saw meanings of words as being dependent on their relation with adjoining words or their paired opposites. His work led to a semiotic approach to the study of texts, an approach characterized by concentration on identifying signs, codes, and narrative structures that could be analyzed to establish meaning.

But whereas structuralism lent itself to a confident, scientific perspective, the philosophical orientation of post-structuralism unsettled secure knowledge, viewing it as multiple, slippery, and contingent. This troubling of words so as to make them forever unstable is most often associated with the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. The strategy of reading Derrida (1967/1974) proposed, known as deconstruction, looked at the suspended or “deferred” meaning of words, recognizing that words are always contaminated by their opposites or interfered with by their own histories.

Derrida (1978) used the term *differance* to refer to the processes of difference and deferral in language. The reader who engages in deconstruction knows that something is always left undone, unstated, unthought of, lingering. The reader engages in a kind of dismantling of the words on a page, reading “against the grain” to uncover the unconscious dimensions of the text. Lest we become caught in the comfortableness of our own need for “obvious” meanings when we read the term “deconstruction,” St. Pierre (2000) reminds us that “deconstruction is not about tearing down but about rebuilding; it is not about pointing out an error but about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces” (p. 482). What deconstruction allows us to do is not so much to obliterate a text as to extend it to encompass infinite multiplicity. It allows us to look at what is both present and absent in a text, in a phrase, or in a word. As Lynn (1998) so practically puts it, deconstruction of language recognizes that “there will always be a trace of ‘don’t buy this hat’ left in any urging to ‘buy this hat’” (p. 81).

When we come to see language as poststructuralists view it--not as a transparent system of labeling, but as constitutive of the very world we inhabit, we can better grasp the complex idea that we both “word the world” (St. Pierre, p. 483) and are, in turn, worded or shaped by our individual and collective wording of it. The liberating part of this recognition is that if the world is “made up,” it can also be “unmade.” The way we divide reality into “words” is, at least to some extent, in our control.

This is good news for feminists, whose political agenda requires an opening for action and for change. But the subject is, from a postmodern perspective, very different from the stable, unified, rational, and autonomous subject of humanism. It is instead a subject that is neither unified nor fixed. The poststructuralist conception of the subject is one that is, as Lather (1991) explains, “subjected to regimes of meaning” but also “involved in discursive self production” (p. 118) where it attempts to achieve some coherence and continuity in what is most often a struggle amidst competing and conflicting discourses. The postmodern critique of the subject is, according to Butler (1992) “not a negation or repudiation” but “a way of interrogating its construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise” (p. 9). The postmodern claim that the subject is constituted is actually, Butler says, “the very pre-condition of its agency” (p. 12). We can, in her view, reconstitute the legacy of our constitution.

Moreover, we are never fully constituted--we are always in process. To complicate matters even further, feminists insist that the subject status of women is constituted, at least in Western humanist discourse, as “other” or “object,” placing women in a situation where they are constantly deprived of agency. Feminists have called attention to the fact that the binaries of Enlightenment thinking (subject/object, rational/irrational, culture/nature) privilege one term over the other, and this privileging is gendered; that is, women are associated with the less desirable binary, the powerless instance (Cixous & Clement, 1975/1986).

Another area where poststructuralist theory has revolutionized the way we think of language and our positions as subjects is in its discussion of discourse, power, and “regimes of truth,” concepts theorized most usefully for feminists in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1984/1997). Also of importance to this study is the concept of ideology, a term whose history is rooted in Marxist theory but can be seen as being intricately related to discourse.

If the present study can be said to have a central focus, it is in its analysis of the ideologies embedded in the discourses of The American Girls Collection. A major purpose of this study and the aim of one of my research questions is to discover how the ideologies operate to position girls in gender specific ways that are both material and historical. This study will seek to determine how these ideologies open or foreclose negotiations of “what it takes” to be a girl. Hence, what follows is a discussion of how these terms—discourse and ideology—are conceptualized for the purposes of this study.

Discourse and Ideology

Like so many other terms used in contemporary theories, “ideology” and “discourse” each have a history of competing definitions. The relationship they have with each other is often ambiguous as well. Scatamburlo (1998) observes that in a number of postmodernist and poststructuralist narratives, “ideology” has been displaced by the concept of “discourse.” (p.178). Rather than thinking of one concept displacing another, situating ideology within discourse seems more helpful in that it allows the critic to benefit both from a postmodern emphasis on language as discourse and from a neo-Marxist emphasis on the material nature and effects of ideology. Hence, we can think of ideology as being at work in any discourse with which we are engaged.

A useful way of thinking about these related concepts is to view discourse as a structuring principle of society. It is “how language gathers itself together according to socially constructed rules and regularities that allow certain statements to be made and not others” (St. Pierre, p. 485). Discourses are located in institutional sites such as the family, law, medicine, religion, school, and the media. They also operate in academic

and professional disciplines—we speak of feminist discourse, humanist discourse, and postmodern discourse, to name but a few. Discourses embody specific ideologies that sustain and perpetuate particular material social relations.

Foucault's (1970/1971, 1969/1972) discussion of discourse has been especially fruitful to feminists because he examines discourse with an eye on how it operates in power relations and the extent to which it produces certain knowledges or "regimes of truth." In an insightful essay entitled "Discourse," Paul Bove (1995) credits Foucault with articulating the aims of discourse, explaining that discourse "describe[s] the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought" (p. 55).

Foucault's genealogical work illuminates the formative power that discourses and disciplines have by tracing how discourses constitute objects that, in turn, become "subjects of statements which can themselves be judged to be 'true' or 'false' according to the logic, syntax, and semantics of the empowered discourse" (Bove, pp. 56-57). What Foucault came to recognize was that "truth" is really an "effect" of the systems in place (i.e. the discourses) during a particular moment in history. It is by and through discourse that the effects of power are distributed or relayed. The practical significance of these insights is that power can subject subjects, shape and form them, and also effect the form of resistance that they can assume.

The implications of Foucault's theory for feminism are significant in their political possibilities. Different and competing discourses become the site of social and political upheaval as individuals and institutions jockey for power. This position clearly leaves an opening for political and social change. From a feminist point of view, this means, as St. Pierre (2000) explains, that when we begin to analyze the discourse of patriarchy and question the commonplace "truths" that allow it to function, we can also begin to refuse the practices that oppress us, and we can reconfigure them.

Both theories of discourse and of ideology view knowledge and power as inextricably linked. Discourse and ideology each work in material ways through social institutions to determine how women and men, girls and boys, live their daily lives. One difference between the notion of power in discourse and the notion of power in ideology stems from Foucault's insistence that power relations are not inherently evil or repressive, nor are they guaranteed to the rulers as opposed to the ruled. His theory is based on a strategic model of power that sees it as productive. Such power can be found, states St. Pierre, in the "effects of liberty as well as in the effects of domination" (p. 491). Though Foucault acknowledges that power relations are often asymmetrical (1984/1997, p. 292), critics who use the term "ideology" typically foreground the privileging of certain discourses over others and view power in its role as oppressive.

That ideology remains such a disputed term can be demonstrated by highlighting but a few of its popular versions as discussed by Williams (1977). One notion posits ideology as the belief of a particular class or group. Another, (the orthodox Marxist one), sees ideology as a system of illusory beliefs or "false consciousness" as opposed to "true" or scientific knowledge. A more generalized use of the term refers to the basic process of production of meanings and ideas. Romalov (1994) refers to ideology as lived experience that operates at all levels of literary production and reception. McLaren (1987) views ideology as constitutive, foregrounding its role in "the production of meaning, the positioning of the subject, and the manufacture of desire:" (p. 303). The definition of ideology that best suits its use in the present study is one offered by Ebert (1988). Ideology, she writes, is "not false consciousness or distorted perception [but rather] the organization of material signifying practices that constitute subjectivities and produce the lived relations by which subjects are connected--whether in hegemonic or oppositional ways--to the dominant relations of production and distribution of power... in specific social formation at a given historical moment" (p. 23). Such a definition emphasizes the materiality of ideology as well as the importance of its contextual

surroundings, considerations that are especially relevant to The American Girls Collection as a product of capitalism first introduced in the Reagan era.

A useful concept for recognizing the power of ideology is Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony. Gramsci used this term to refer to the way a dominant ideology becomes accepted as valid and natural, not through coercion, but by voluntary agreement that this is the natural way of perceiving reality. This process takes place through any number of social or hegemonic apparatuses, with literature and popular fiction being among them.

Numerous studies have documented the extent to which dominant ideologies work to determine what kinds of knowledge will be transmitted and privileged in a culture. Williams (1961) refers to this selection of knowledge from the whole available range as "the selective tradition," and Taxel (1981, 1984) and others have applied this concept of the selective tradition to children's literature and the instructional materials that are used in schools. It is important to note that the selective tradition is seldom the result of some centralized conspiracy, nor does it enjoy uncontested dominance. According to Williams, it is never definitive or permanent since it is constantly being constituted, reconstituted, and contested. Nevertheless, in examining The American Girls Collection, we can discern something of the collection's power and privilege when we scrutinize the complex maneuverings, both conscious and unconscious, that have enabled its entry into the classroom and homes of a significant number of American girls.

The self-reflexivity that has historically been an important aspect of feminism coupled with the postmodern insistence that we trouble and question all uses of language—including our own—means that any feminist poststructuralist approach must include a critique of the discourse of ideology itself. Because one's own ideological stance seems so natural and "right," it is quite often the case that the only ideologies we recognize and articulate as such are those that disagree with our own.

Emphasizing the invisibility that often characterizes ideology, Althusser (1986) remarks that “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology” (p. 246). Echoing Althusser, Ebert (1988) observes that to be outside ideology is merely to be located in another ideology (p. 85). Since there is no space outside ideology, the task of the researcher/critic becomes one of seeking to locate the contradictions in the discourse of ideology itself. Poststructuralist feminists have discovered, for example, that the feminist discourses that celebrate and privilege feminine characteristics in well-meaning attempts to improve women’s unequal positioning in society, may, in fact, be securing rather than challenging the ideology of patriarchy. The essentializing of women not only adds credence to the male/female binary of innate difference, but it also operates from the same logic that established the binary in the first place. To privilege females over males reverses but does not displace asymmetrical power relations. Hence, we must be ever vigilant of where ideologies—our own, or someone else’s—will lead us.

Before moving to a review of literature that refers more specifically to studies in children’s literature and popular culture that are related to the present study, I would like to address some of the thorny issues involved when one attempts, as I do in this study, to draw from discourses which, as I have indicated earlier, sometimes complement each other and at other times contradict each other. By highlighting these issues, I hope to situate more clearly where I stand in relation to these discourses.

If one of the discourses from which I draw is privileged in my approach to The American Girls Collection, I would hope that it is feminism, used here in its broadest sense as theory that seeks to foreground the oppression of women as well as to do something about it. Even so, I am aware that to claim a position in the name of the category of women (or girls) risks essentializing and assuming that women have universal needs and desires, which is, most certainly, not the case. Women have differences among and between them that are endless, not the least of which are

differences of race, nationality, class, age, and sexual orientation. Further, their experiences are different, and their goals and aspirations are often diametrically opposed to each other.

In fact, even the division of humankind into the two groups of men and women can be troublesome. We can impose arbitrary definitions of “male” and “female” but particular individuals may defy these definitions. Essential questions of identity are not just related to gender. We could pose similar questions relating to almost any identity category: What is an African-American? What does it mean to be upper class? Though some have suggested that it might be more useful to think of one’s “sex” in terms of a continuum, such a move is still ingrained in the idea of being male or being female, not to mention that it ignores the question of sexual preference. One value of a feminist poststructuralist approach is that it does not shy away from problematizing terms such as “gender” and “sex.” Though these terms are often used in such a way that sex refers to the biological status of being male or female, and gender to the conceptions of what in our society that means, there is always that recognition that the terms are not stable and not definitive, a recognition that is important if we are ever to move from the circumscribed roles of males and females in our society.

While poststructuralists insist on the non-essentializing category of woman however, they also question the necessity of relying on the category of “woman” in order to make political claims. This is not to say that they are apolitical. Butler (1990b) questions whether the fragmentation of the woman need be oppressive. Spivak (cited in Butler, 1990b, p. 325) concedes that for specific political purposes, a false ontological conception of “woman” might be useful. Haraway (1990 /1985) claims that women may be politicized recognizing their multiple and contradictory aspects by forming political groupings among themselves, citing the postmodern identity of “women of color” as one example of this trend. These feminists all believe that changes to improve women’s

status can be made within a poststructural framework, an important claim for the present study.

A poststructural framework, does, however, posit limits on the extent of women's emancipation in ways that counter the hopes and aspirations of neo-Marxist feminists, for example. Foucault's work is most helpful in articulating for poststructuralist feminists situations where change and resistance can occur. Rather than theorizing an inevitable revolution where oppression is once and for all dismantled, Foucault would have us see resistance as being more localized and as emerging and acting within the set of everyday practices of our lives. We learn, as St. Pierre (2000) puts it, that "what may seem necessary or set in stone hardly ever is," (p.493) and feminists can use this knowledge as they work for social justice on a daily basis. Whereas a Marxist notion of social revolution is far removed from the lives of most women, the poststructural emphasis on the local puts praxis in the hands of an individual subject at a particular time and place.

Some feminists have feared that poststructuralism's insistence on plurality of meaning forecloses seeing any interpretation as being valid. Weedon (1997) responds to this concern in words worth quoting: "To subscribe to the provisional nature of meaning does not imply that it does not have real effects....The meanings are only fixed temporarily, but this temporary fixing has important social implications" (p. 82). To specify an argument Weedon gives in general terms, The American Girls' emphasis on clothes and appearance can be said to be open to different readings. But that does not negate the potential of dress and appearance as sites of sexual and political contestation. I would also add that it does not negate the possibility that some meanings may be chosen more often than others, or given more weight than others.

The point to be made about "truth" in poststructuralist thought is that it is multiple and does not rest upon rationality or the dualisms or binaries that inform Enlightenment and humanist discourses. Hekman (1990) points out that whereas poststructuralists dismantle these binaries, feminists complete the Enlightenment critique by seeing the

binaries as gendered. Feminists have not only pointed to the illogic of the binary, they have profiled its clear bias in favor of men. They have exposed the inferior status assigned to women when women are associated repeatedly with the second term of binaries such as rational/irrational, subject/object, or culture/nature.

Finally, another subject of debate that deserves attention for the purposes of this study is the discussion of the “images of women” perspective and its critique. I am indebted to Walters (1995) for my summary of this point of contention. Much of the earliest work in feminist criticism of literature and of the media were content analyses and effect studies, embedded in a positivist sociology that resulted in the discovery of stereotypical and traditional images of women presented in these mediums. The remedies for these offending images were prescriptions for authors and media to show women “as they really are.” Hence, the call was for media images depicting women who were no longer always in the kitchen or highlighting women whose concerns amounted to more than being attractive to males. Showing an older woman who was actually comfortable with her wrinkles, for example, would be viewed as a step in the right direction.

Though these studies are not without merit, a major criticism offered by poststructuralists would be that they relied on a reflection model, made evident in the use of the term “image” itself. Assuming that fiction or the media could directly reflect “reality” is problematic to feminists who do not assume that there exists some composite “real” woman to be reflected.

An alternative view to the reflection model is the socialization model. In this conception, rather than reflecting reality, fiction and media representations might serve to teach or model behavior that its receivers would likely internalize. Writing more children’s books whose heroines are strong and resourceful would be one example of this model. Again, poststructuralists would argue that this model—though not without some merit—simplifies a very complex process. The image does not simply act on the receiver

in a direct coherent way, and there is no way of predicting how the receiver will construct the meaning of the image. To say that the process is more complex than socialization theory would have us believe is not to dismiss the socializing power of discourse. I argue elsewhere that fiction can and does have this socializing effect. It is, however, to see it as a partial and incomplete explanation of how images affect us.

More recent feminist work has also questioned the rather static and unhelpful presentation of stereotypes and sex roles that has often characterized feminist studies. The call has been for a deeper analysis of gender relations that recognizes the shifting, contested nature of stereotypes and sex roles. If these concepts were as simple as they are often made out to be, the remedy would also be apparent. We could simply adjust the images to make them more “real” or more “positive.” But any attempt to do so falls short of addressing questions that must be asked if we are to understand the complex dynamics of gender relations. How important is the social context of the images? What produces such images in the first place? If we change the images, how can we be sure that we can change the reception of them? These are questions that poststructuralist feminists would have to consider, and when they consider them, they realize that representation is an active process wherein sexual difference is constructed, not merely reflected. Further questioning becomes not so much “*what* sexist images are produced, but *how* they are produced and come to have meaning for us” (Walters, p. 47). The notion of woman seen in this way no longer sees her residing in the image; she is constructed as an image. Further, it is not possible to see woman as image as representing actual embodied women in any universalistic sense.

So far this chapter has attempted to outline in a necessarily partial way the primary theoretical approaches that inform this study. The remaining pages will attempt to situate the theory more specifically in the domain of children’s literature, including popular fiction. I have earlier discussed the assumption made in this study—that no one is ever “outside” ideology. But that children are particularly vulnerable to its powerful

effects is a concern worthy of further comment. Stephens (1992) notes that childhood is the formative period of life for a human being, the time in life when we are supposed to learn about the “nature of the world, how to live in it, how to relate to other people, what to believe, what and how to think—in general the intention is to render the world intelligible” (p. 8). Of equal importance is the recognition by poststructuralists that as children attempt to “render the world intelligible” they are also actively constructing it. Children’s fiction participates in this ongoing process, and as the next section demonstrates, it does so within a network of ideological and discursive positions.

Ideology and children’s literature.

“I cannot imagine anyone seriously arguing that authors of children’s books, whether past or present, operate in a political and ideological vacuum and pursue their artistic vision without constraint or limitation. Like other cultural artifacts, children’s literature is a product of convention that is rooted in, if not determined by, the dominant belief systems and ideologies of the times in which it is created” (Taxel, 1995, p. 159). The model for study suggested by these words leads to an analysis of the content of children’s literature within the context of its social world and ideological constructs. It assumes that such study is important because literature in general, and children’s books in particular, are not outside ideology; that is, they are believed to have a powerful and direct socializing effect on the reader. Numerous critics and theorists have acknowledged the role of children’s books in constructing and subjecting the child: Adkins (1998); Hollindale (1988); Hunt (1991); Kelly (1974); Overstreet (1994); Taxel (1989); and Zipes (1986), to name but a few.

Nodelman (1996) defines ideology as “the body of ideas that controls (or at least tries to control) how we as participants in the society view the world and understand our place within it” (p. 67). According to Nodelman, “literary texts offer children representations of the world and their own place as children within that world. If the representation is persuasive, it will *become* the world that those child readers believe they

live in” (p. 91). Nodelman sees children’s literature, at least to some extent, as an effort on the part of adults to “colonize” children and mold them to fit a particular view of normalcy (p. 82).

One example Nodelman (1996) cites is particularly relevant in a study of the American Girls series. He notes that much historical fiction for children transmits the ahistorical message that human beings today are what humans have always been, a point that resonates with Pleasant Company’s catalogue message to the girl-reader: “You’ll see that some things in their lives [reference is to the seven American girl-doll characters] were very different from yours. But others--like families, friendships, and feelings--haven’t changed at all. These are the important things that American girls will always share”(Spring 1996, p. 3). That theme, says Nodelman, represents an ideological bias—that the world is homogeneous and has always been so—that we want children to embrace, one that Eagleton (1991) calls “the *dehistoricizing* thrust of ideology, its tacit denial that ideas and beliefs are specific to a particular time, place, and social group”(p. 59). According to Nodelman, our best chance of being able to cut through this kind of oppressive ideology is to become consciously aware of its force in our lives.

That mission can be realized in elementary classrooms, argues Kinder (1991), if educational programs on how to read media images are made available to children and if teachers and parents encourage them to understand how meanings are constructed and can be contested. Following the same line of thought, Davies (1993) notes that “agency as it is usually understood is a combination of individual choices, of power and correct subjection” (p. 199), a combination that is not readily available to children. We must, she argues, engage them in a “redistribution of language” and we must recognize that agency is available only when we can learn to recognize the constitutive power of discourse and can “catch” it shaping our desires.

Ebert (1988) warns, however, that resistance to dominant ideology does not come from mere access to a nonideological truth (there is no such thing), but rather it must

come from recognizing the contradictions within the discourse of ideology itself. Often discourse that purports to contest a dominant ideology does so without transforming it. Barbie may become President of the United States, for example, but if in this manifestation she is still enmeshed in the same restrictive image of femininity, the change is not transforming. To use Ebert's metaphor, much change with regard to gender roles occurs in much the same way as a tailor "alters" a suit. The garment may be adjusted to fit the body's shape without ever transforming the basic structure or style of the garment. (Ebert, p. 170). The "girls can do anything" rhetoric of The American Girls Collection must be questioned and probed to see if its effect falls short of the kind of transforming change necessary for real equity.

MacDonald (1995) offers an explanation for what appears to be a rather commonplace phenomenon, particularly in the arena of popular fiction and popular culture: an appropriation of counter-discourses or non-hegemonic ones. To ignore the aims and claims of feminism is, Macdonald argues, simply not advisable from a good business, commercial perspective, particularly when the target population is young people. Fully accepting them is equally unsound, both financially and ideologically. The compromise is often to employ what cultural studies has called the process of "recuperation," a maneuver that appears to respond to the competing ideology but ignores its political challenge (Brunsdon, 1986, pp. 119-120). The effects, according to Brunsdon, are often misleading, causing us to believe that change has been effected.

Giving lip service to the causes of feminism often appears in the form of celebrating and lauding women as guardians and practitioners of moral strength. Williamson (1986) has described this process as a kind of colonization: "Women, the guardians of 'personal life,' become a kind of dumping ground for all the values society wants off its back but must be perceived to cherish: a function rather like a zoo, or nature reserve, whereby a culture can proudly proclaim its inclusion of precisely what it has excluded." (p. 106). Certainly, a question that must be asked of The American Girls

Collection is whether or not it participates in isolating girls in a world of their own, bestowing them with qualities and attributes uniquely theirs.

Finally, MacDonald (1995) points out that co-opting piecemeal and fragmented feminist discourses might be regarded as a gesture in the direction of feminism. “Making the most of yourself,” MacDonald asserts, may seem like it is a move toward dynamic self-fulfillment even as it simultaneously urges girls to accomplish this goal while participating in a traditionally feminine activity. “Being all that you can be” for girls often necessitates, for example, devoting countless hours to looking good.

Important to any study that seeks to examine the cultural and ideological underpinnings of texts, especially children’s texts, is Kelly’s work, *Mother Was a Lady: Self and Society in Selected American Children’s Periodicals, 1865-1890* (1974). Kelly’s study uses children’s magazines as a vehicle for showing how American culture goes about justifying its values and beliefs. Kelly asked the important question of whose interests were served in the stories the magazines published for children, and he concluded that those he examined reflected the ideology of the genteel class that seeks to sustain and maintain its hold on society.

Kelly’s (1974) work emphasizes that when we approach literature from a cultural perspective, we must acknowledge both its social function and the complex historical context in which it is produced. The theoretical base for such an approach is Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966/1984), which maintains that one becomes human in and through the context of ongoing culture. Literature becomes a way of legitimizing the social world, as Kelly makes clear in these words:

Written by adults for children, literature for children is, by definition and function, a meeting place between socialized, responsible adults and the incompletely socialized, often seemingly irresponsible, and generally untried young. To the extent that its creators are dominated by a need to transmit a

conscious world view, in a sense it is a frail bridge under which the precariousness of the social order is a threatening chasm (p. 22).

As a form of legitimization, literature, according to Kelly, is a complex dialectic, shaped not only by its authors, but also by its economic processes, its validating audience, and the “socially objectivated knowledge” they share.

Building on groundwork laid by Kelly (1974), Taxel’s (1980) study of the American Revolution as presented in historical fiction for children, while relying on structural methodology for much of its analysis, departs from the typical structuralist approach in its recognition that the authors of the historical novels must be viewed as social agents who respond to and help create their cultural environment and may be predisposed to write in certain ways. He found that the novels about the American Revolution, written over a span of sixty-two years, were, at least in part, reflections of the time periods in which they were written. They served to reinforce a selective tradition whereby upper and middle class whites were privileged in accounts of the war, and members of other groups were ignored or demeaned. His study paves the way for exploring how the time period during which historical fiction is written participates in constructing our understanding of history. It also gives evidence of a view of the past that privileges, in the case of the American Revolution, the patriotic quest for freedom from Great Britain while ignoring complex issues of social reform, failing to recognize, for example, the irony that slavery of African-Americans was being instituted by the very soldiers who were fighting for freedom from tyranny.

More recently, Taxel’s work (1986,1988, 1991) has been characterized by efforts to account for and articulate the power of ideology to marginalize the oppressed, finding examples of both dominant ideology and resistance to that ideology in children’s fiction. Increasingly, he has situated children’s fiction in the broad arena of the economy of publishing as well as the current political climate of the conservative ascendancy. A common thread of Taxel’s work has been his insistence that children’s literature be

viewed in its socio-historical and political context, a view reiterated by Greenfield (1985):

There is a viewpoint...that holds art to be sacrosanct, subject to scrutiny only as to its esthetic value. This viewpoint is in keeping with the popular myth that genuine art is not political. It is true that politics is not art, but art is political. Whether in its interpretation of the political realities, or in its attempt to ignore these realities, or in its distortions, or in its advocacy of a different reality, or in its support of the status quo, all art is political and every book carries its author's message (p. 20).

In addition to Taxel's study of the historical fiction depicting the American Revolution is Overstreet's (1994) ideological study of Vietnam novels written for young people. Similar to Taxel's study in its ideological findings, Overstreet concluded that by focusing almost exclusively on individuals who fought in the war, the novels managed to present the war from an ahistorical and apolitical point of view, a perspective that served to reinforce a hegemonic conservative interpretation. By focusing on individuals rather than complex issues, the novels failed to present the multiple facets of the war that in fact made it so controversial. The American Girls series also focuses on an individual, fictional girl of each historical era, and the stories are about her experiences and adventures. To what extent this emphasis on the individual precludes an examination of important historical and political issues that construct that individual is worthy of investigation.

The foregoing studies of historical fiction for children embrace what Watkins (1996) says distinguishes *new* historicism from the old: its refusal to engage exclusively in objective historical study. Rather, the studies view history as a textual construct that is both an interpretation itself as well as being open to interpretation (Felperin, 1991). Myers (1988) expands on the implications of new historicism for children's literature by explaining its mission:

A New Historicism of children's literature would integrate text and socio-historical context, demonstrating on one hand how extraliterary cultural formations shape literary discourse and on the other how literary practices are actions that also make things happen—by shaping the psychic and moral consciousness of young readers but also by performing many more diverse kinds of cultural work, from satisfying authorial fantasies to legitimating or subverting dominant class and gender ideologies....It would want to know how and why a tale or poem came to say what it does, what the enviroing circumstances were (including the uses a particular sort of children's literature served for its author, its child and adult readers, and its culture) and what kinds of cultural statements and questions the work was responding to. It would pay particular attention to the conceptual and symbolic fault lines denoting a text's time-, place-, gender-, and class-specific ideological mechanisms, being aware that the most seemingly artless and orthodox work may conceal an oppositional or contestatory subtext. It would examine, too, a book's material production, its publishing history, its audiences and their reading practices, its initial reception, and its critical history, including how it got inscribed in or deleted from the canon (p. 42).

In sum, new historicism has been instrumental in putting multiple questions and concerns on the agenda of theory, concerns that have often been neglected by critics of children's literature. This study intends to address many of the questions Myers is urging critics of children's literature to consider.

Because this study will be attending to the ways the discourses of The American Girls Collection offer girls gendered subject positions, it is important to reflect on how it might be that girls learn gender appropriate behavior. Is it through imitation? Can it be attributed to their cognitive development as they experience the world around them? Or do their clues come from their social environment and cultural frameworks? Theories of gender acquisition include psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes identification with the

same sex parent and ranges from a Freudian focus on the phallic stage, castration anxiety and penis envy, to more recent and less male-biased theories.⁴ The discussion which follows gives but a brief glimpse of theories that I think are most helpful to my study. They have in common the recognition that gender is assumed when people are positioned to behave and interact in gender appropriate ways that pose as natural. They acknowledge that “getting it right” is an important social accomplishment.

Gender Acquisition and Performance

One of the assumptions of this study is that, as children, we learn what girls and boys should be like, mainly because we “need” to know how to be appropriately gendered women and men. This recipe we acquire for being “normal” girls or boys, consists of, in its most common understanding, the ingredients we must acquire and the steps we must take in order for our “gender” to satisfy the tastes of our culture. Butler (1990a) has claimed that there is neither “an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires” (p. 140). Gender, in Butler’s view, becomes a survival strategy within compulsory systems, “a performance with clearly punitive consequences” for those who “fail to do their gender right” (pp. 139-140). The American Girls Collection might be viewed as being one means of legitimating the “performance of gender” within the matrix of gender norms. But Butler would not view the girl as unequivocally trapped in her performance. If gender is a performance, not an inner substance, it is also “open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (pp. 146-147).

⁴ For theories of gender acquisition that emphasize identification with the same sex parent, see Sears, Rau, and Alpert (1965); for social learning theory, see Mischel (1970); and for cognitive development theory, consult Kohlberg (1966). For a Freudian analysis see Freud (1933/1964; 1925;1959). For more recent theory, consult Chodorow (1978, 1989), Bem (1981), and Gilligan (1982).

Children are, according to Bem's (1974) psychoanalytic perspective, very much aware of their daily activities and the ways of "doing gender" that are available in their culture. They begin to store their memories in an associative network of cognitive structures or schema that serve as an internal guide to determine gender appropriate behavior. Because every facet of human behavior is linked to gender, these schemata become deeply embedded and internalized in the individual's psyche. Bem argues, in fact, that becoming a gendered person in our society is analogous to enculturation; it is but a special case of becoming a cultural native. She views culture more in terms of a text to be read than a lesson to be learned, but observes that its "readers" are unequally situated in a culture that privileges males and places females outside males' profitable and powerful spheres. Using Bem's theory, we could argue that The American Girls Collection, with its endless images of girls doing gender, no doubt contributes to the storehouse of gender schemata girls may acquire and repeat. In short, these texts and their spin-offs provide potentially powerful vehicles for the socialization of gender roles. It is, in the case of The American Girls Collection, clearly important that girls learn how to be girls and that they actively celebrate their girlhood and engage in "girl" activities.

A few of the studies that seem most relevant to this research are discussed in the final section, excluding studies by Kelly, Taxel, and Overstreet, which have already been cited. Additionally, I am postponing a review of literature relating to consumer and consumption practices to Chapter Four of this study.

Other Related Studies

Radway's (1984/1991) study of women reading romances paved the way for future studies of women's and girls' reading of popular fiction. It was, as a matter of fact, the reading of this book that prompted me to read Christian-Smith's (1990) study of adolescents reading romance novels. A logical extension of such research, I reasoned, would be to examine a group of books from popular literature that younger girls (ages 7 and up) read to see if similar findings might be warranted even when the focus of the books was not centered on romance. These studies also stimulated my interest in ways a

text can construct meaning and offer subject positions to readers. Combining textual analysis with a study of actual readers, Radway and Christian-Smith both found that readers may construct oppositional meanings from those unearthed by textual analysis. Christian-Smith found, for example, that the girls in her study sometimes used the novels to contest their unequal relations of power at school and in their daily lives. Radway discovered that the actual reading of romance novels themselves was viewed by some of their readers as an act of liberation. Yet, both researchers presented evidence suggesting that the reading of romances was nonetheless deeply implicated in reconciling readers to the patriarchal power structure. Their work demonstrated unequivocally that popular culture functions in a highly contradictory and unpredictable manner.

Moreover, neither of these researchers ignored the political economy of publishing in their studies. Radway's (1984/1991) book-length study has, in fact, as its first chapter, "The Institutional Matrix: Publishing Romantic Fiction." Radway traces the material and social factors that made *possible* the mass produced genre of romance novels. Radway sees book buying as an "event"—one that is "at least partially controlled by the material nature of book publishing as a socially organized technology of production and distribution" (p. 20). Likewise, Roman and Christian-Smith (1988) have noted the impact of marketing research on the format of romance novels and on the reading practices of young girls. Teen romance novels, they observe, are "one response to dominant publishing interests centering on profitability and instant appeal" (p. 77).

With the increasing interest in the plight of girls discussed earlier in this chapter, we have also seen a renewed interest in studying the books girls now read, or have read in the past, including the broad genre of children's novels, as well as the popular genre of girls' series fiction. Many of the studies look back to fiction read by girls in earlier decades; of these, some, like *Nancy Drew*, have been resurrected for today's girls, who are often encouraged to read the books their mothers read. Indeed, the authors of critical studies about the books often point to their own nostalgic interest in revisiting the books

of their childhood. Surprisingly, fewer studies concentrate on current titles; as of this writing, one dissertation, (Acosta-Alzuru 1999), has been written on The American Girls Collection. I would argue that as long as both life experiences and fiction are divided along gender lines, it behooves those of us with feminist interests to subject both past and current books, especially those written specifically for female audiences, to careful review and critique.

Trites' (1997) study of what she calls feminist elements in children's novels during the past thirty years is entitled *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Trites acknowledges in her conclusion that the study of gender roles is an ongoing process, and her recommendation is that we replace gender stereotypes of females with more complete versions of females. But her more "complete" version of the female includes a feminist character's ability to "transcend" gender roles by embracing and celebrating characteristics that gave "their literary foremothers strength: compassion, interconnectedness, and communication (p. 5). The problems with this emphasis on difference have been previously discussed: Gender cannot be transcended, nor do poststructuralist feminists desire to transcend it. But this isolation and celebration of so-called "feminine attributes" also risks becoming a kind of patriarchal feminism that intends to contest, but instead supports, inequity. Trites' designated 'feminist' character might win herself limited freedom by resorting to trickery or even by adopting some of the stereotypical (sexist) practices herself, with the difference being for Trite that she "is herself never imprisoned by them: She succeeds despite them and sometimes even because of them" (p. 6). Trites is convinced that the feminist girl-character is the one who--referencing Cixous' laughing Medusa-- "can laugh at and thus subvert the existing order" (p. 7). Again, though well-intended, the result of this analysis is to essentialize the female. Moreover, Trite's analysis does little to interrogate the enabling conditions of gender categories. It is no wonder that Kathleen Chamberlain's jacket cover review of *Waking Sleeping Beauty* says this about the book: "Teachers--especially those who might

at first resist feminism—should find this book helpful and enlightening. It’s challenging without being threatening.” Sleeping Beauty may be aroused from her sleep, but Trites’ brand of feminism will never keep her fully awake.

Trite’s (1997) close readings of novels to ascertain to what extent their characters (male or female) are feminist or not is based, she says, upon her definition of a feminist novel as one “in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender” (p. 4). But, as we have seen, many of the girl-characters she analyzes are given, in her reading, empowerment *because* of gender, not irrespective of it. Finally, Trites’ interpretation of girls’ laughing as being a subversive act of defiance does not recognize other possibilities. The giggles of today’s girls highlighted in Pleasant Company materials do not appear to be evocations of Medusa—they are closer to being a kind of reveling in the joy of girlhood femininity.

Articles collected by Inness, the editor of *Nancy Drew and Company: Culture, Gender, and Girls’ Series* (1997), focus only on series books written between 1910 and 1950, but most of these articles do inquire into the historical production of the books and address cultural and ideological issues of their discourse. A number of the studies point to the conflicting messages given to girls about their role in the world. In the words of Romalov (1997), whose contribution to the anthology is about early twentieth century girls’ automobile series, the reader of this series will quickly discover a genre “often at odds with itself, replete with contradictory impulses and convoluted narrative strategies, meant, it seems, to reconcile greater freedom for girls with their continued subordination in a patriarchal, genteel order” (p. 76).

Romalov’s article in the anthology is based on her 1994 dissertation, *Modern, Mobile, and Marginal: American Girls’ Series Fiction, 1905-1925*. She notes that at least on the surface, many of the series books she analyzes had to them “an implicitly feminist” cast (p. 5). She points to the contradictions inherent in many of the plots, explaining, for instance, that a book which purported to reject the restrictions of

domestic life would then detail the intricacies of dorm life tea parties. Romalov sees these contradictions within an historical and cultural context, and she asks the important question of whether or not the series phenomenon was capitalism's response to its increasing pressure to give women more freedom. In sum, her study engages in ideological critique; moreover, it does not neglect the conditions of publication, marketing, and distribution that are so critical to a materialist approach. Romalov also looks for meaning as it is located within the generic form of the series novel, paying attention to those features that precede the text.

Romalov's (1997) article is especially helpful in demonstrating what she refers to (citing Raymond Williams) as the "Janus-faced" nature of popular culture in its "articulation of the uneasy co-existence of residual and emerging cultural meanings" (p. 77). The American Girls Series must be viewed in the context of its attempt to blend traditional feminine virtues and values with the emerging, supposedly more modern image, of the "Girl of Today." Finally, when Romalov discusses the automobile series for girls, she does so from an ideological perspective that sees the narrative structure of the books as supporting and participating in the acquiescence to male control; the structure becomes, in effect, a purveyor of patriarchal ideology. Though Romalov provides a number of examples of how the narrative structure of the books is used to support patriarchy, one is the apparent imperative the publishers had to end the automobile series books by returning the "girl on the go" to the final celebration of home over wandering and of marriage over continued independence (Romalov, 1997, p. 83).

Reed's (1997) study of the *Betsy Tacy* books, written in the 1940s and 1950s, but set at the turn of the century until America's entry into World War I, resonates with Taxel's (1980) study of the Revolutionary War fiction. As was the case with Taxel's review of Revolutionary war novels for children, Reed's analysis reveals how series books present a very limited view of American history, one that she says is obviously slanted toward an optimistic view of the past. Issues of racism, labor, sexism, and

politics are not in the forefront of Betsy Tacy's sentimental life, a silence that speaks loudly. The possibility of a sanitized version of American history must be examined in analyzing The American Girls series, especially for the purposes of this study, to the extent that its versions contribute to patriarchal ideology. The *Betsy Tacy* series becomes problematic as history, as do the books in the American Girls series, because of its focus on one girl's life. Though Reed recognizes that historical fiction can provide the "human touch" to historians' reduction of history as broad trends, she appears to see this as unproblematic. While no one could argue with the notion that history, and by extension, historical fiction, needs to return to the people from which it emerged, the great detail of settings and day-to-day experiences outlined in the stories of the central character have the ideological effect of naturalizing the story as unquestionably "the way things were." Ebert (1988) sees this effect as one of the pitfalls (and powers) of mimetic fiction, (fiction understood to be reproducing an external reality), but her point could arguably be applied to historical fiction as well.

Reed (1997) does say that the *Betsy Tacy* books idealize the "American pioneer tradition" and do not question its privileging of white males though she appears to excuse this injustice as being related to the unenlightened times during which the story takes place. But to argue that alternative voices of opposition to such privileging just didn't exist at a particular time in history is to distort the truth, as Adkins' (1998) study of presentism in children's historical fiction reveals. Reed's rather mild admonishment that "one must wonder" (p. 115) about such things as limited historical views understates without intending to a serious problem in historical fiction for children.

In fairness to Reed (1997), she does state the necessity of teaching children to use a critical framework when reading books like *Betsy Tacy*, admitting that Betsy is no feminist crusader. Reed even compares *Betsy Tacy* to the American Girls series, suggesting that the *Tacy* books are not nearly as progressive, prompting one "to wonder" what Reed's reading of the American Girls series would be. Reed's own fondness of the

Tacy series and her pleasure of remembering her girlhood days when they comprised an important part of her world is at the heart of her plea that we continue to read such books critically. Such admiration for the books is apparently shared by numerous adults—Reed reports that a Betsy-Tacy society numbering nearly 1,000 has headquarters in Maud Hart Lovelace’s hometown in Mankato, Minnesota (p. 102). But Reed also genuinely sees the important function of using these books to encourage children to ask critical questions that will reveal the workings of their ideologies, a point that has merit.

The last article in the Inness anthology I wish to highlight is Siegel’s (1997) essay on the *Nancy Drew* series. Siegel’s focus is on what the experience of reading this series has meant for the construction of American girlhood across the decades. The gist of her argument is that Nancy Drew “solved” the contradictions of competing discourses about being a woman in America by entertaining them all. Siegel’s study uses Banta’s (1987) *Imaging American Women: Ideas and Ideals in Cultural History* as a model for commenting on the feminine images that appear in cultural forms. Generating a verbal portrait of Nancy Drew, Siegel says she embodies Banta’s classification of outdoors girl, beautiful charmer, and New England woman. Siegel views Nancy Drew as a kind of “Robin Hood” of the 1930s who restores wealth and property to those victimized by the Great Depression. Her study is important in situating Nancy Drew squarely in the politics of its composition as well as understanding the historical and material conditions of its production. One of the concerns of this study will be to examine the American Girls Series as a product of the Reagan-Bush era and to reflect on how its ideologies are positioned with regard to both contemporary and past notions of femininity and women’s position in society. It will look at the present day focus on consumption--the getting and spending mania that has important implications for how we define ourselves as women or men, girls or boys.

Studies of contemporary media’s influence in constructing childhood, including articles that examine movies, television programs, video games, toys, popular horror

fiction, children's magazines, professional wrestling, Barbie, McDonald's, and even the American Girls series, appear in Steinberg and Kincheloe's (1997) collection, *Kinder-culture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*. More than any of the studies previously mentioned, this collection stems from an approach that is materialist and sees contemporary childhood in a state of crisis. The framework of the book is, as its editors announce, one of cultural pedagogy, a term which, in their words, "refers to the idea that education takes place in a variety of social sites including but not limited to schooling" (p. 3). Sites of learning include, of course, books read both inside and outside school. It is the overall thesis of *Kinder-culture* that the cultural curriculum for children is in the hands of commercial and corporate interests and that such interests are rarely in the best interest of children.

Though each of the *Kinder-culture* articles is provocative and contributes in some measure to the thrust of this project, I will limit discussion here to Brady's (1997) article "Multiculturalism and the American Dream," since it contains a brief analysis of The American Girls Collection. Noting that both books and dolls encode the cultural values of their creators, Brady views The American Girls Collection as an effort to embrace diversity and literacy. Brady speaks of the romantic notions of innocence and nostalgia associated with the commercial packaging of the series as well as the "elegant packaging of the catalogue" creating a "stylized world of consumption while keeping books and dolls alive for a profitable business" (p. 220). Her acknowledgment that while appearing to provide an opening for gender equality, these books fail to measure up to a critical interrogation of the past or a serious questioning of traditional gender roles is compatible with this study. She also notes that their contribution to a multicultural version of history is seriously undermined by their concept of pluralism as a "common culture," excepting the first text of the Addy series from this indictment. Brady's focus differs from mine in that she centers her discussion around historical presentations of the past and does not

emphasize the construction of gender. Her article points to the need for a more extended study of The American Girls Collection.

In 1998 Inness edited another volume, *Delinquents & Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures* which included an article she wrote about Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection, which she titled "Anti-Babies." Inness confesses her own unsettling reaction to the products, wondering whether the company was empowering girls or situating them in traditional and repressive roles.

Using Sutherland's (1985) three forms of ideology, the politics of advocacy, attack, and assent, Inness applies these to the American Girls Collection. Inness argues that the American Girls books do participate in a form of revisionary history that forefronts girls and their history, a history that has often been ignored. Citing Kirsten's friendship with a Native American girl as her example, Inness sees the company as promoting issues of multicultural understanding. For the politics of attack, she uses the example in the Addy series of the disparaging attitude toward Jiggy Nye, the town drunk, to show that Pleasant Company is in the business of attacking drunks as cruel and mean-spirited people, an attack which can be seen to have both positive and negative impact. Another example she uses to support the use of attack ideology is in the presentation of slavery in the *Addy* stories as evil. Inness makes the point that even though we may agree with the ideas of the politics of attack, we must nonetheless be mindful of how politics functions in literature. In discussing the politics of assent as it relates to The American Girls Collection, Inness explains that this ideology might be viewed as being especially powerful because it affirms and reinforces the status quo and is invisible and natural. In the case of The American Girls Collection, Innes points out its "overwhelming American-centric view of the books, dolls, and other items" (p. 175). She sees the emphasis on rather minor events in the life of Molly as supporting an ideology that stereotypes girls as concerned with insignificant issues. Further, she rightfully observes that the pursuance of traditional girl activities—playing with dolls,

cooking, sewing, etc.—work to foster the idea that these are the “‘natural’ province of women and girls” (p. 178). Inness calls for more research and scrutiny in the area of girls’ culture, seeing *The American Girls Collection* as one subject worthy of analysis.

Acosta-Alzuru’s (1999) dissertation, “*The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood Through Representation, Identity, and Consumption*,” does offer a more extended study of the American Girl dolls and their related products in the context of a feminist cultural studies tradition. Beginning with a brief history of Pleasant Company, Acosta-Alzuru analyzes the American Girl texts using du Gay’s et al. (1997) definition of what constitutes a product as cultural; that is, it is constituted as a meaningful object, is connected to a distinct set of social practices, and produces, through association with certain kinds of people and places, a social profile or identity that is represented through communication media.

The methodological model for her study is an adaptation of Johnson’s (1986/1987) circuit of culture, which specifies four moments, listed in the order they occur: production, texts, readings, and lived cultures. Johnson’s model posits these moments as “a complex and interdependent set of moments that are distinct, but not discrete” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 45), and he proposes that if they are studied in isolation we get at best a partial view of how “meanings associated with a particular cultural product are produced, negotiated, and contested” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 45). A reworking of this model by a group of British cultural studies scholars who studied the Sony Walkman as a cultural product (du Gay, et al., 1997) added a fifth cultural moment to the circuit of culture, positing representation, identity, consumption, production, and regulation—as moments presented in no particular order. Acosta-Alzuru uses du Gay’s adapted model as a blueprint for her study of *The American Girls* collection, remarking that one of its advantages is that it does not privilege texts over audience or audience over texts, but, as in Johnson’s model, sees culture as being a highly complex and interdependent set of moments.

Acosta-Alzuru's study examines the moments of representation, identity, and consumption through a combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews with sixteen middle to upper class mother/daughter units who were all Caucasian and lived in Athens, Georgia and surrounding towns. Through detailed textual analysis of three years of the American Girl catalogue and a brief review of American Girls historical books, Acosta-Alzuru explores the area of representation. Through interviewing, she examines issues of identity and consumption.

Acosta-Alzuru's thoughtful analysis of the American Girl catalogue leads her to conclude that Pleasant Company constructs a powerful connection with its audience of young girls by equating the young girls with the company's image of the "American" girl—represented not only by the historical dolls and their fiction, but also by the American Girl of Today doll, one that the catalogue insists is inspired by "you," the "American Girl." She found that the identification established between the girl/consumer and the historical dolls was at least in part due to the use of photographs of the girls and dolls with identical outfits, as well as to the conflation of the dolls and their stories with the "American" girl. Acosta-Alzuru highlights the use of "American" girl to indicate a girl of the United States. For Acosta-Alzuru, whose own roots are Latin American, the company's use of "American" to refer exclusively to girls of the United States is problematic.

The educational value of the Pleasant Company texts was valued more by mothers than their daughters, according to Acosta-Alzuru's study. Only a few of the participants even bothered to read, for example, the historical section at the end of each historical novel, "A Peek into the Past." For the girls in this study, the dolls were valued because the girls could dress them up and play with them. Acosta-Alzuru found that the mothers in her study were impressed by the "traditional" and "wholesome" values they felt were being passed on to their daughters. Her study is less clear on whether or not the

girls in the study are assimilating, at least at a conscious level, the values the Pleasant Company seeks to promote.

What the study does suggest about girls' assimilation of ideological messages promoted by the texts is in keeping with the constructionist view of subjects. The play patterns of the girls in the study show that the girls often produce their own meanings through consumption. Even so, Acosta-Alzuru found that the text "certainly establishes the parameters of reading(s)" (p. 150) and was successful at generating a subject position that projected the reader/consumer as "you=American girl" and hence influenced the reading process.

Finally, Acosta-Alzuru's study points out the importance of intertextuality—how other texts and other cultural references of readers may influence their "readings" of American Girls texts. The most powerful of these examples Acosta-Alzuru gives is that the depiction of Josefina is one that perpetuates stereotypical images of Mexicans and Hispanics. Acosta-Alzuru reserves her most biting criticism of the American Girls series for the image portrayed of Josefina:

Josefina looks and dresses like the women we see in re-runs of the Zorro television series. Her books, outfits and accessories may be historically accurate, but it is misleading to represent her as hispanic, which is a word of relatively recent usage that is commonly associated with people of Latin American origin (p. 92).

Nor do the books make any effort to establish parallels between Josefina and the United States. Pointing out that Josefina's books end twenty years before New Mexico became part of the U.S., Acosta-Alzuru concludes that this doll never takes her place as a "real" American girl, an observation supported by the fact that most of the participants in her study reported that "hispanic" was "not American" (p. 138).

Acosta-Alzuru's study is a serious and valuable first step in analyzing The American Girls Collection as a cultural product. Her interviews with girls and their mothers, while being a small and homogeneous sample, nevertheless begins a vital component of the research. Her study does not, however, provide an in-depth analysis of any of the historical novels in the collection and its emphasis on nationality as opposed to gender (i.e. what does "American" mean as opposed to what subject positions are offered to girls in their roles as *girls*) leaves a gap this dissertation will attempt to fill. Further, though Acosta-Alzuru grounds her study in a feminist cultural tradition, her analysis does not employ poststructural reading strategies as is the case in the present study. Finally, this study seeks to explore in more depth than Acosta-Alzuru does the political climate and economic factors that have contributed to the enormous power that The American Girls Collection and its many spin-offs have.

A final word regarding the role of toys in the socialization of children is appropriate to the present study because dolls and their accessories are marketed as a part of The American Girls Collection. Bulger (1988) has written persuasively that the creation of the doll She-Ra, the princess of power, is a cultural icon that mirrors the social and cultural concerns of parents as well as the economic interests of manufacturers. She-Ra is, in a sense, similar to the American Girls dolls in that her marketing package (though far less comprehensive) included accessories, comic books, coloring books, story books, clothing, board games, videos, wallpaper, linens, and a cartoon show. Bulger reveals how She-Ra can be seen as a logical outgrowth of the women's movement and women's increasing battle for equality in the work place. Co-opting this positive imaging, she argues, has been the agenda of the toy industry--as Mattel's She-Ra demonstrates. Laden with moral messages and exciting adventures, She-Ra is actually a composite of numerous folk heroines, according to Berger. She-Ra is an early version of a growing number of female toys that envision equality in terms of male attributes while still preserving all the trappings of femininity. Though the

American Girls dolls could not be viewed as princesses of power, they nonetheless are laden with moral messages, their spunk and fortitude failing to belie their intense femininity.

What these studies demonstrate is the ongoing importance of examining children's popular fiction and other cultural media forms if we wish to understand and address the current pressures that position all children to some extent, and girls in particular, to adopt oppressive ideologies with regard to gender. The next chapter will outline a methodology that will allow for such a study of The American Girls Collection.

This chapter has sought to frame the theoretical perspectives which will guide this study. It has openly acknowledged that the relationships between and among feminism, poststructuralism, and neo-Marxism may at times be wrought with conflict and question. But it has also demonstrated that alliances between and among them can be productive and fruitful. As a feminist study, my attempt to decipher selected texts of The American Girls Collection stems from my desire to open some space for a more gender equitable world to be constructed. From a poststructuralist's stance, I know that the ground from which I make this stand is never firm; it is always shifting, always contingent. But it is in this very state of instability that, as a feminist, I can see hope for resistance and change. By approaching the multiple texts of this study with multiple strategies, I can reach provisional understandings which in no way belie their effects. When I remain cognizant of the neo-Marxist insistence that these effects are often material and political, I can no longer separate theory from practice.

I would like to be optimistic enough to believe that my selection of approaches represents, to borrow Voltaire's (1759/1998) phrase in *Candide*, "the best of all possible worlds" (p. 11). But as Candide comes painfully to realize, the world is too complex for such categorizing. Fortunately, Candide does not throw up his hands in despair. With a renewed commitment to improving the world—gradually, locally, and incrementally, Candide decides that theory and practice belong together, however imperfectly, and

though the glamour of his undertakings might be somewhat diminished, he nonetheless begins to “cultivate [his] garden” (p. 75). This, I believe, is the work researchers are called to do. We take the tools that seem most suited to our aims, we go to work, and we hope--not so much for miracles--as for growth. The suitable tools for this study will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As has been the case with most terms in this study (and is, in fact, the case with language in general), the term “methodology” has been interpreted in various ways. Stanley (1997) emphasizes its operational and procedural aspects, defining it as “a set of linked procedures which are adopted because they specify how to go about reaching a particular kind of analytic conclusion or goal” (p. 198). In Stanley’s view, a feminist methodology is how we think—how we conceptualize, how we investigate, how we determine what is sufficient evidence, how and where we decide to draw the boundaries of our investigation, and how we engage in a constant “re-thinking” about the same topic from various perspectives over time. The driving force behind this “thinking” is, of course, theory, and feminists have, as numerous studies have shown, not been reluctant to draw from numerous theoretical perspectives. As I have outlined in Chapter Two, the present study draws from feminist, poststructuralist, and neo-Marxist theories in its attempt to disclose the discursive power of The American Girls Collection to perpetuate ideological messages about what it means to be female in America and to foreground the complex ways that the marketing, publication, and distribution of its multiple texts participates in what might be called “the corporate construction of girlhood.”

Privileging the consonance of theory and method, Harding (1987) has distinguished between “method” as the use of a specific technique (the interview, for example), and “methodology” in the sense of a theory or conceptualization. As Stanley (1997) notes, for many feminists, method in the sense of technique has never been as

important as the presuppositions one sets forth regarding the ways of seeing and understanding and the epistemological claims one makes about knowledge. I have situated the present study in a postmodern epistemology which rejects the notion that a “real” reality independent of interpretation lies before us, awaiting our discovery of its “truth.” Instead, using poststructuralist insights, I have chosen to highlight the existence of multiple truths and avenues to meaning—meaning which is never permanently fixed but nonetheless has real effects.

The power of poststructural thought is that it enables us to analyze how ideology operating in multiple and conflicting discourses participates in constructing human subjects. Moreover, its very indeterminacy opens up space for a feminist agenda to be realized. The state of flux that characterizes all that we say and do means, practically speaking, that the discourses that are using us can also be used by us—they are not unchangeable. Deconstruction—a poststructural reading strategy which was employed in this study—can enable us to “re-construct” what has already been “constructed.” We come to realize, as Clifford (1991) has stated, that “we are only partially written by the discourses we inhabit. There are always opposing voices that create contradictions for our sense of self” (p. 111). It is this empowering moment that is so crucial to the feminist commitment to troubling the unjust but dominant ideology of patriarchy.

I am aware that the theories from which I draw are at times in harmony and mutually supportive of each other, and I am also aware that discord and tensions exist between and among them. I have highlighted some areas of their contention, as well as their agreement, in Chapter Two. In the early stages of my research, I found myself, much to my consternation, nodding in agreement with theories I knew some scholars would view as being incompatible with each other. A moment of recognition came for me when I read a defense offered by Apple in his preface to *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996) regarding the use of multiple strategies and theories to inform inquiry. I starred the passage, making a marginal note “Use this!” Though I now feel more secure

with my theoretical inclinations, I am nonetheless still comforted and invigorated when I read his words, which follow his admonition that postmodern positions may be no more immune to reductive analysis than any other position. Apple continues:

Thus, in this book it will not be a surprise that side by side with poststructural and postmodern understandings are those based on structural theories. While they are not totally merged, each one serves as a corrective and complement to the other. This is a point I wish to emphasize. Rather than spending so much time treating each other so warily—sometimes as enemies—we should view the creative tension that exists as a good thing. We have a good deal to learn from each other in terms of politics in and around education that makes a difference (no pun intended here). (p. xiii)

Eagleton (1983) rather boldly asserts that attempts to define literary study by method or object are bound to fail. He prefers a more strategic approach: The researcher should be open-minded about questions of theory and method, choosing and rejecting theory based on practical considerations of what he or she is trying to do. I have attempted to ask of theory what I would ask of any text: To what use can this be put?

The more I reviewed the multiple texts of *The American Girls Collection*, the more I realized that an analysis of these texts would clearly not be a simple undertaking. I saw that the multiple texts-- including the historical fiction books, their spin-offs, craft and activity books, *American Girl Place*, and a beautifully designed catalogue--could not be seen in isolation, but required a view that situated them in an intricate web of connection and rupture. They participated in a complex process of being commissioned, authored, produced, marketed, distributed, and read by multitudes of readers who differed from one another in terms of age, class, gender, race, and any number of other variables. They attempted to unfold the very history of *the American Girl* even as they participated in constructing the American girl of today. Finally, they were clearly involved in a capitalistic move to address girls as consumers, giving them the opportunity to

“consume” their way to a “personal” style of being an American girl. The critical interrogation of these texts could best be accomplished by using a combination of methods and theoretical approaches.

To make the claim that critical theory could be construed as providing a practical method of criticism would be misleading at best—none of the poststructuralist theories provides a step-by-step procedure for analyzing texts. Instead, they offer their own particular insights and a body of work which comprises a repertoire of examples (Barry, 1995). As we have seen, from a poststructuralist’s point of view, the critic is urged to read against the grain of the text and discover its disruptions and absences (Davies, 1993). Similarly, Giroux (1994) urges the critic to examine both what the text includes as well as its “articulated silences,” (p. 68) those subtexts that speak to forms of knowledge and ideologies that are not acknowledged. Cultural critics of popular fiction would call for a combination of close textual readings of the texts in question with a consideration of various other materials that are part of the larger world of the text. My understanding of poststructuralist reading does not preclude using many of the conventional strategies of text analysis; it does, however, preclude an authoritarian reliance on them as being fixed and universal readings, and it views any reading as subject to undoing.

I have discussed the theories that will inform my reading of the historical fiction books in Chapter Two. What I hope to do here is discuss the definition of “text” in the sense I will be using it, as well as elaborate on the notion of intertextuality, since both of these notions have obvious implications for my methodology. Because my study concerns the texts themselves and my reading of them, I will comment upon my own role as reader and detail the reading strategies I will be using in my analysis. Finally, I will explain my sample selection and give a brief description of the chapters to follow.

Texts and Intertextuality

In one sense, we use the term “text” to indicate the “work”—the novel, the poem, the play, or the short story, for example. However, the use of the word “work” to suggest

a written text foregrounds its author as one who crafts a finished object enclosed within the covers of a book whereas “text,” in contrast, is intended to suggest an unstable product that changes from reading to reading, remaining open. Likewise, the term “textuality” can be opposed to the concept of literature. Johnson (1995) explains: “While literature is seen as a series of discrete and highly meaningful Great Works, textuality is the manifestation of an open-ended, heterogeneous, disruptive force of signification and erasure that transgresses all closure—a force that is operative even within the Great Works themselves” (p. 40). Finally, the word “text” calls attention to the surfaces and textures of written words, highlighting how texts are, to use Eagleton’s (1983) words, composed of “a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes, through which the critic may cut his own errant path” (p. 138).

Though we most commonly think of texts as relating to the written word included in literary genres, popular culture theories have further extended the notion of texts. Soap operas, pop music, comics, films, advertisements, and cereal box covers are usually referred to as cultural texts (Storey, 1993, p. 2). Mailloux (1995) has gone so far as to say that ultimately anything can be viewed as a text, anything, that is, that can be interpreted. When I refer to the multiple texts of The American Girls Collection, I am referring to the historical fiction books, the catalogues that are used to market the dolls, accessories, and host of other products that Pleasant Company sells, the *American Girl* magazine, the craft and activity books, the curriculum aids, the grin pins, the calendars, the videos, the CD ROM, the web site, and other publications too numerous to name. All of these texts come together to comprise the immense “package” of The American Girls Collection. Although I have reviewed countless American Girls texts during the course of this study, I have limited my analysis to a discussion of the historical fiction books, the catalogues, American Girl Place, and a few selected ancillary publications.

One way of conceptualizing the synergistic relationship among these texts is the notion of “intertextuality,” defined by Stephens (1992) as “the production of meaning

from the interrelationships between audience, text, and other texts, and the socio-cultural determinations of significance” (p. 84). The theory has its origin in the work of Kristeva (1969) and Bakhtin (1973). Kristeva actually coined the term when she set forth the idea that texts have meaning because they depend on other texts, both spoken and written. Though Bakhtin did not use the word himself, his notion of “dialogics” speaks of the continuous conversation between creators wherein each new piece of literature is a new line in their dialogue. Barthes (1970/1975) notes that intertextuality also involves the reader whose “I” approach to the text contains a plurality of other texts as well as lost codes. These embedded codes may dwell in texts, in readers, and in authors, who, after all, are readers before they are authors. Wilkie (1996) observes that the idea of intertextuality has powerful ramifications for children’s literature since, for the most part, children’s literature has been written by adults. It is then, in a sense, an intertextual sub-genre of adult literature. All of these dizzying connections and layers point to the plurality of ways texts speak to each other.

Critics who undertake intertextual studies often examine myths and archetypes that recur in modified forms, or allusions to various pre-texts. Bulger (1988) is engaging in intertextual analysis when she explores the Greek and Roman mythology Mattel often mines in creating toys like She-Ra (p. 187).⁵ But critics may also explore how a text interacts with paintings, popular songs, advertisements, or television. They may examine how a child’s encountering of a literary text after having been exposed to its film adaptation affects the reading experience. In the case of the present study, an intertextual approach would examine how various texts from within the network of texts Pleasant Company has created speak to each other. Novels written in a series by their very nature have intertextual relationships—they are, in a sense, separate novels that nonetheless exist

⁵ Bulgar points out, for example, that She-Ra’s platonic friend resembles Cupid with his ready supply of arrows in his quiver. Plot lines for She-Ra’s adventures also draw from mythology, with one episode being a re-working of the myths of Pandora and Narcissus.

in their relationships both with the novels in the series that precede them and those that follow after. But as I have already mentioned, another aspect of the intrigue of The American Girls Collection is the way these novels interface with the catalogue used to market them, as well as with the numerous spin-off publications.

Researcher Stance

The methodology for this study consists of reading strategies and questions of inquiry that guide those strategies. It involves, of course, a particular reader, in this instance, the researcher, and hence the study, as a text, must be read by other readers with an understanding of the limitations of my reading, as well as a recognition of my own theoretical orientations and feminist perspectives. Because reading is always a product of multiple factors that work in different combinations to produce different readings, it is always overdetermined. Its processes may be neither linear nor logical, and it is impossible to account for all that influences it. Theories that inform this study would, as we have seen, view any attempt to stabilize the activities of reading to be extremely problematic. Although reading cannot be pinned down to any one specific activity, we can make certain observations about ourselves as readers, and we can describe some of the conscious processes with which we engage when we read.

At the outset, I wish to emphasize that multiple readings—differing substantially from my own—are possible. Lather (1991), in fact, notes that poststructuralist readings should present “material rich enough to bear re-analysis” (p. 91). My reading of these texts will be, of course, what *I* consider to be a “preferred” reading, but it is preferred only in the sense of my particular convictions—shared, I would hope, by many but certainly not by all. I am approaching these texts from the position of a white, middle-aged female who is a wife, a parent, and an educator. My feminist inclinations align more closely with feminists who oppose identity politics and wish to see the category of “woman” become more open and flexible, recognizing that there are important differences that elide categorization. I share the concerns of neo-Marxist feminists who view political and economic forces as empowering and sustaining asymmetrical power

relations between the sexes. I find deconstructive strategies of reading useful in my analysis of texts, but I recognize that there are multiple ways of reading a text. I subscribe to the notion that as reading subjects, we are at least in part subjected to the various ideologies of a text, and further that these ideologies are powerful tools for shaping who we are. Even so, I welcome the poststructuralist and Marxist insight that as subjects we can also actively participate in constructing our identities and resisting oppressive ideology.

I make no claim that my reading of the American Girls texts is a reading that would be similar to the pre-adolescent and adolescent girls who are the typical readers of the texts. A study of those readers is beyond the scope of this dissertation but would be a worthwhile endeavor for another study such as those conducted by Christian-Smith or Radway. I do make the claim that my reading offers insights into the possible subject positions other readers may assume, and I would argue that my reading participates in articulating dominant ideologies that have real effects on real people. My analysis will, I trust, encourage others to be more mindful of the complexities of a text that cannot be understood in isolation from the political, material, and historical moments that give rise to it.

Strategies of Reading

One strategy I use in my analysis of texts is commonly referred to as deconstructive reading and is based primarily on the philosophical work of Derrida (1967/1976). In her preface to the translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Spivak (1976) describes what a reader who wishes to deconstruct a text must do:

If in the process of deciphering a text in the traditional way we come across a word that seems to harbour an unresolvable contradiction, and by virtue of being one word is made sometimes to work in one way and sometimes in another, and thus is made to point away from the absence of a unified meaning, we shall catch that word. If a metaphor seems to suppress its implications, we shall catch that metaphor. We shall follow its adventures through the text coming undone as a

structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability. (p. lxxv)

Johnson (1980) describes this troubling of a text as proceeding by “the careful teasing out of warring forces within the text itself” (p. 5). The point is that a deconstructive reading looks at what is suppressed in a text. It finds oppositions, dismantles them, and exposes a text’s indeterminacy. The deconstructive reader learns how to use and erase language simultaneously, a process often referred to as placing a concept “under erasure” (Davies, 1993. p. 8).

Close readings using a deconstructive analysis may locate binary oppositions that can be found inscribed within the text. In each of these pairs, (masculine/feminine, rational/irrational, central peripheral, etc.), one of the two terms controls the other; that is, it is the “privileged” term (Sarup, 1988/1993, pp. 50-51). Feminists have pointed out that the second, inferior term, is often associated with women and the superior term is assigned to men. Davies (2000), referencing Wilshire (1989), argues further that if women have been constituted on one half of the divide, and that half takes its meaning in opposition to the other half, the two cannot be simply added. Rather, they must be disassembled and viewed as nondualistic couplings.

In an interview, Derrida commented on how binary opposites could be dismantled by deconstructive scrutiny. Dividing the process into two phases, Derrida, (quoted in Fink, 1991) spoke of the first phase as

...a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with the peaceful co-existence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other...or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition (p. 41).

In this phase of “overturning,” the deconstructive reader examines how tropes, images, narrative structures, characterizations, and abstractions of the work operate in such a way that the privileged term relies on the inferior term for its status, a status which can be either arbitrary or ideological. Derrida goes on to explain that in the second phase, we must reverse the binary, making room for “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (quoted in Fink, 1991, p. 42).

Drawing from Derrida’s own description of this process, Fink (1991) has identified a procedure for reading texts from a deconstructive perspective. This procedure is one that will be useful in my analyses of The American Girls texts, as the example below will illustrate. Fink identifies the first step as one of discovering the binary oppositions implicated by the text, including a recognition of which term can be read as being “superior” to the other. Having accomplished this, the reader seeks to envision how these terms could trade places. By further envisioning a chain of words that relate to the two binaries, the reader pays close attention to both the similarities and differences between the words, choosing a particular theme, idea, problem or question that relates to the binary opposition. By discussing and articulating this theme or idea, the reader comes to see that no single word dominates; they all interact. The binary is hence disassembled, and it can no longer be viewed in simple opposition.

In Chapter One of the present study, I introduced The American Girls Collection by focusing on one seemingly insignificant product of the Collection: grin pins. The reader may recall that grin pins are small metal pins that girls are encouraged to purchase and exchange with their friends, attach to their clothing or bookbags, or even display on a banner designed for this purpose. I have elected to use the grin pins once more as an example, this time of the way a deconstructive reading can enrich our understanding of the text. I will be using Fink’s (1991) method in my analysis of a particular grin pin,

which may be described as a thumbprint with a smiling face inscribed in it, along with the words written across the top: “Thumbs up!”

I would view the binary suggested by this text as being approval/disapproval, with approval being the superior term since it implies acceptance rather than rejection, conformity rather than non-conformity. The assumption I am making is that we all want others to accept us, to see us as “somebody” worthwhile and positive. The thumbprint pictured on the pin would suggest the binary of individual/collective, with individualism privileged because it suggests an important ideological message in America. The individual—unique and independent—is prized over one who merely blends in with a crowd.

I can envision how these binaries might be reversed. The approval/disapproval binary could be reversed if a girl who wanted to assert her independence did so by defying what she knew was approved behavior. But we are still left with the thumbprint binary, individual/collective, which would appear, as has been noted, to privilege the individual. When we think more closely about reversing this binary, we realize that the privileging of individualism is undermined by societal pressure to conform to acceptable standards of what it means to be a girl, and more specifically, an American girl. “Approval” under patriarchy’s rules may mask itself in a “be yourself” rhetoric, but for women and girls, this self one must be is highly circumscribed.

When we think of the words “Thumbs Up” and of the image of the thumbprint, other words and associations surface. The thumbprint image inscribed with a smiling face suggests that each person (like the snowflake analogy we remember from our childhoods) is different and unique; further, this is a happy circumstance. We associate the thumbprint with the very essence of our genetic make-up that separates us from every other person on the planet. Ironically, it is this very imprint that makes us capable of being tracked or identified if we don’t obey society’s legal dictums.

We use the gesture of “thumbs up” in our everyday lives to signal that everything is okay, and tacit, if not overt approval, is relayed to the recipient of this gesture. But these messages of approval—the smile and the “thumbs up” text—are potentially at odds with other possible meanings. We know that as women and girls, if we do not conform to gender appropriate behaviors, we are censured and solicit a “thumbs down” response, perhaps accompanied by a frown.

Further, the whole idea of the grin pins—their proliferation and the idea that girls are to wear or display them as statements about who they are—serves in part to “undo” their effect. If gender is given and natural, if we could count on certain attributes as being inherently feminine, why would we need to see them used repeatedly to reinforce certain images, indeed, going so far as “to pin” them on girls for all to observe? This need to repeat images suggests that they are never final and always subject to both a refusal to repeat and the challenge to reconfigure. Hence, to read the grin pins from a deconstructive perspective is to see that much more interaction is at play here than the simple, untroubled binary reveals.

A seemingly endless number of binary oppositions might be said to frame the texts of *The American Girls Collection*. Among them, the most obvious and prominent include male/female, competition/cooperation, positive/negative, public sphere/private sphere, heirloom/unexceptional, and past/present. In my analysis I have pointed out the term that appears to be privileged in the texts and discussed the contradictions that disrupting these binaries reveals.

Fiske (1995) identifies a method of textual analysis that recognizes the close connection between struggles for social power and semiotic struggles for meaning. These social and political dimensions of texts, can, according to Fiske, be discovered both in the structure of the text itself and in the position of the reading subject to that text. In other words, the researcher must seek to discover how meanings are constructed through the text, recognizing that meanings may be multiple, contradictory, and unstable.

Further, textual analysis is, as Acosta-Alzura (1999) points out in her study, distinct from qualitative content analysis, in that it does not view the text exclusively as the center of analysis. In textual analysis, the conditions surrounding the text—its production, marketing, distribution, political, economic, and cultural circumstances—are all seen as critical areas of inquiry. The text(s) is studied as a process. The process must include, as Davies (1993) discusses, a recognition that the text is not simply a transparent medium for giving readers access to the story the author intended. It is instead a text that “visibly draws on cultural/discursive resources through which the world can be seen and felt and understood in particular ways, and through which we are positioned and come to feel and desire in particular ways” (p. 44). In a word, the text is approached as discourse that is powerfully constitutive. When readers of American Girls historical fiction books align themselves with the main character of the book, for example, this identification may be an extremely powerful ideological tool.

Textual Analysis and Sample Selection

Hall (1975) outlined stages of textual analysis that describe, in general, the steps I have undertaken in this study. Identifying three stages, Hall characterized the first as a “long preliminary soak” (p. 15) in the text(s) under study, allowing the researcher to study both the details and specifics of the texts, as well as grasp their more general and global parameters. The second stage constitutes a close reading of the selected texts, including preliminary identification of their discursive strategies, themes, and recurring patterns (though not necessarily in quantifiable terms) and ways of registering emphases that may focus on “position, placing, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery, etc.” (p. 15). The third stage involves interpreting the findings of the first two stages and situating them within the larger framework of the study. Hall argues that this kind of analysis is appropriate for a study that wishes to uncover unconscious and perhaps unnoticed social frameworks.

Stage one of this study began nine years ago, in 1993, when I identified Pleasant Company and The American Girls Collection as being my research interests for this

dissertation. Since that time, I have reviewed catalogues, read and re-read the historical books of fiction and kept abreast of the company's development and launching of new products. I have subscribed to *American Girl* magazine since 1994 (it debuted in 1992) and I bought and read a number of newstand issues prior to my subscription. I have attended an American Girls Pastimes Party sponsored by a Junior League to raise money for charity and a book signing by Pleasant Company author Connie Porter, who wrote the Addy books. I visited American Girl Place in Chicago, toured the facility, and saw *The American Girls Revue* in its theater. I have reviewed curriculum materials in Pleasant Company's *America at School*. I subscribed and read each issue of *Daughters*, a newsletter for parents of adolescent girls until Pleasant Company sold it in August of 2001 to a non-profit organization. I was a member of *The American Girls Club*, which published a newspaper, *The American Girls News*, from its inception in 1996 until Pleasant Company discontinued it in 1999. I have regularly visited the American Girls Web site since it was introduced in 1996. I have read selections from Pleasant Company's advice books, craft books, and cookbooks which are a part of the American Girl Library collection. I have read all ancillary publications for the *Molly* series—the four short story books, “Molly Takes Flight” (1999); “Molly and the Movie Star” (2000); “Molly Marches On” (2001), “Molly's A+ Partner” (2002), and *Welcome to Molly's World: Growing Up in World War Two America*, (1999), *War on the Home Front: A Play About Molly* (1994), and the latest Molly publication, *Molly's Route 66 Adventure* (2002). I have also read *Lindsey*, the American Girl book written about an American Girl of Today doll, and a few titles from A.G. Fiction novels, History Mysteries, and the *Wild at Heart* fiction series, though none of these is a part of The American Girls Collection historical fiction books. I have had numerous informal conversations with girls and their parents (particularly their mothers) about The American Girls Collection, and I have observed my own daughters' interests in these products.

In addition, I began to conduct research about Pleasant Company itself—drawing from newspaper articles, trade publications, and journal and book references. I frequently conducted web searches for information about the financial status of the company and any other news regarding it. In short, I have accomplished, I believe, what Hall (1975) had in mind when he spoke of “a long preliminary soak” (p. 15).

During the second and third stages of the research process, I chose to concentrate my research, first by focusing on information about the company that could then be placed in a social, political, and cultural context. Drawing from literature about consumption and the power of discourse, I attempted to situate Pleasant Company in the realm of power, politics, and ideology by examining its production decisions, its marketing strategies, and its distribution patterns—my goal being to demonstrate that The American Girls Collection is more than innocent entertainment. It is also about politics, education, identity, and economics. To accomplish this goal, I carefully reviewed 57 American Girl Catalogues beginning in 1994 through 2001 with an eye for determining the marketing strategies the catalogues employed, as well as the ideological messages they offered. I chose to focus also on the American Girl Place as a further extension of Pleasant Company’s mission and ideology, using my own personal observations and published articles and testimonials about it to substantiate my claims. I then included a short section on the charitable contributions of Pleasant Company and the unique way it uses events such as fashion shows and parties both to enhance its giving and to market its products. These concerns constitute Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Keeping the theoretical positioning outlined in Chapter Two in mind, I read each of the 42 books of historical fiction in the order of their chronological history. My primary aim in this reading was to get an overview of the series as a whole and become familiar with the narrative structures of the books. In subsequent readings, I read each book of a particular series, focusing on passages and patterns that were pertinent to my research questions, underlining passages and making marginal and extensive notes. From

these readings I wrote the first sections of Chapter Five, which provide examples and illustrations from various characters of the series. Molly, is discussed in greater detail in the remaining sections of Chapter Five.

For the Molly series, the books I had selected to study in more depth, I color coded words, phrases, and passages in each of the six books using highlighters. Pink codes included words or phrases that signaled ways girls performed as girls (or women performing as women) including images of themselves and activities they performed with the exception of specific references to appearance, clothing, and hair, which I made a separate category. Samples of words and phrases in the pink coded category included images of girls/women as Hawaiian hula dancers, as princesses of England, pretend Cinderellas, or housekeepers. They also included activities such as girls' taking ladylike bites, giving hugs, or writing in round even letters. I then made a list of the verbs used when girls performed as subjects. I highlighted words and phrases in blue that signaled the way boys performed as boys (or men performing as men) including images of themselves and activities they performed. Examples of blue codes included images of Dad smoking a pipe, or a boy character shooting a basket, or moving furniture. I then made a list of the verbs used when boys performed as subjects. This coding helped me to analyze the presentation of gender in the books.

Because references to clothing and appearance were noticeably abundant, I highlighted in yellow any words or phrases that related to a girl's appearance, her clothes, her accessories, or her hair. A few of the items in pink codes were repeated in yellow codes, but I tried to make decisions on the coding based on specific references to what girls were wearing, clothing they admired, and comments that they or others would make about their appearance. Some samples from the yellow codes include a heart-shaped locket worn on a thin chain around a girl's neck, a pink floaty skirt, very red lipstick, or bobby-pinned curls. This coding helped to support my contention that these

books reinforced the culture's mandate that an important part of being an American girl resides in how a girl looks and dresses.

Finally, because I was also interested in what version of history the *Molly* books offered of life on the home front during World War Two, I coded in orange any references to changes that had come about as a result of the war, any references to the war itself, or any dialogue or text revealing attitudes about the war. I also coded in orange references to historical events or phrases that might be indicative of social history. References to Molly's victory garden, to sugar rationing, German bombs, blue and gold stars hung in windows, black-out drills, or buying war bonds are examples that were included under orange coding. Reviewing these lists gave me a composite picture of what facets of the war were presented and what facets were left out.

Finally, I reviewed all of the extension products and texts that are associated with the *Molly* historical fiction books with the goal of seeing how the interplay of these materials reinforced or challenged the dominant ideology of the historical fiction books and participated in strengthening or challenging their construction of gendered identities.

CHAPTER 4
PLEASANT COMPANY: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND
THE CONSTRUCTION OF GIRLS AS CONSUMERS

It may be recalled that my initial interest in this study began with what Rowland has called the core of the American Girls concept: the books of historical fiction that accompany each doll. Part of my intrigue with the books was that they were intricately bound with an increasing proliferation of products that permeated almost all areas of a girl's life. This chapter attempts to create a fuller picture of the Pleasant Company empire within which these books reside. It would be fair to say that most readers of the books are also exposed at some level to Pleasant Company's multiple commodities. As this chapter demonstrates, Pleasant Company is very much about fashioning girls as present and future consumers. Since consumption practices are also highly correlated with identity (Schor, 1998; McNeal, 1992; Furby, 1991; Dittmar, 1992; Barnard, 1996)—girls both shape and are shaped by the commodities they consume—a critical look at how these commodities are produced and marketed is important if we are interested in analyzing their potential impact on girls.

This chapter will begin with a chronological history of the company, followed by a profile of Pleasant Company's founder, Pleasant Rowland, who conceptualized the products, established the company's mission, and remains influential as its spokesperson in spite of her recent retirement. The next section will provide an overview of the political and social arenas that help to account for the company's financial success. Following the overview will be a look at how the company operates, develops, and introduces new American Girl doll characters, focusing on the ideological operations at

work in its decisions. A short review of selected consumption theory will then lay groundwork for a closer look at Pleasant Company's marketing strategies, with particular emphasis on The American Girls Collection, including the catalogue, American Girl Place, and charitable fund-raising activities.

Chronological History of Pleasant Company

The birth of an idea.

The American Girls Collection is the brainchild of former elementary school teacher and textbook author Pleasant Rowland. According to Pleasant Company promotional material, Rowland's inspiration for the development of The American Girls Collection came about as a direct result of two seemingly unrelated events: a trip to Colonial Williamsburg and an exasperating Christmas shopping expedition. When Rowland visited Williamsburg in 1984, she was struck by the way history came alive in the sights, scents, and sounds of the historic district. Resting at a nearby arbor, she began to wonder how she could make history come alive for her students. She wanted them to see that in the midst of all the change over the past 200 years, "the vision of [their] forefathers endured" (Pleasant Company, 2000).

During the same year, Rowland became dismayed while searching for quality dolls for her niece at Christmas. Feeling swallowed up by a "sea of tawdry plastic toys" (Pleasant Company, 2000), she longed for something better. Combining her two concerns, she designed The American Girls Collection to give young girls an understanding of American history and foster pride in the traditions of growing up as a female in America.

With a desire, as Rowland expressed it, "to give girls chocolate cake with vitamins" (Pleasant Company, 2000), Pleasant Company, whose corporate headquarters are in Middleton, Wisconsin, has consciously attempted to present a composite portrait of *the* American girl, based on doll-characters and six parallel stories told about each of them in historical fiction books.

The American Girls Doll Collection and Accompanying Books

The first three dolls—Kirsten, Samantha, and Molly—were introduced in 1985. Kirsten, a “pioneer girl of strength and spirit” arrives from Sweden to America in 1854. Samantha is a “bright Victorian beauty” living in 1904, and Molly, who “schemes and dreams of the home front” while her father is overseas in World War Two, is set in 1944 (quoted phrases are from book jackets and catalogue descriptions). Believing that reading the book would encourage subsequent buying of products, Rowland made an early marketing decision that has remained consistent: Each doll purchase would include the first book of introduction to the doll-character. Doll wardrobes, accessories, and replica period pieces from the respective historical eras which were mentioned in the particular stories of each doll character were available for purchase through the catalogue. From the beginning, each doll has had a set of six books to tell her complete story. To tell Kirsten’s story, for example, are the following titles: *Meet Kirsten: An American Girl*; *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*; *Kirsten’s Surprise: A Christmas Story*; *Happy Birthday, Kirsten: A Springtime Story*; *Kirsten Saves the Day: A Summer Story*, and *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*. Each doll has parallel stories (with the exception of Kaya) whose titles, except for the doll’s name, are identical. The seasonal settings necessitate new wardrobes, and the stories in each book lend themselves to merchandise which complement them.

In fact, as the books are being researched, Pleasant Company’s product development staff generates miniature historical reproductions of items found in the stories. For example, Kirsten’s Christmas celebration, given her Swedish ancestry, includes the tradition of a Saint Lucia celebration. Her Saint Lucia wreath and tray are available for purchase in the catalogue for \$16 each, and her white and red gown is priced at \$20. Her hand-painted trunk can be used for storing her treasures and ordered for \$155. This synergistic marketing strategy, used throughout the collection, ensures constant traffic between the books and the catalogue.

In 1991, the company added to its collection Felicity, a “sprightly colonial girl” whose debut in Williamsburg included a live performance of a play based on one of Felicity’s books, a real fashion show of her clothes and accessories, and a formal tea complete with appropriate period treats. The 2,500 reserved seats sold out in seven days with ticket prices ranging from \$30 to \$50. Pleasant Company responded to the 7,500 people on its waiting list by hosting twenty-four Felicity parties in two weeks. By the end of the month, more than 11,000 people from forty-eight states had journeyed to Williamsburg to be a part of the fanfare welcoming Felicity as the newest member of the Pleasant Company family (Neal, 1992, p. 35).

Two years later, in 1993, the first doll of color, Addy, was introduced, Addy is an African-American girl who courageously escapes slavery during the Civil War. To ensure the books’ historical accuracy, the company chose an African-American author to write the Addy books, and solicited advice from an advisory board of African-American historians, educators, and museum curators. In the Special Edition Catalogue for Addy, issued in 1994, a message to parents included these persuasive words:

Addy’s stories are moving and inspirational. They provide a glimpse into a proud past that has often been excluded from American history. They are stories that must be told and that every child should know. To accompany these books, there’s a beautiful Addy doll with period clothing and accessories that bring the stories to life (p. 14).

Calling Addy quite possibly “the best dressed slave in history,” an anonymous critic in *Economist* singled her out as the character who nonetheless faced the toughest challenges of the American Girls doll-characters (American past and present, 1995).

Joining the collection in 1995 was The American Girl of Today, the only doll in the series whose books contain blank pages on which the girl-reader is instructed to write the doll’s story, assisted by a handy *How to Write an American Girl’s Story* guidebook. Girls can custom order The American Girl of Today, choosing her color from twenty

ethnic skin shades as well as a number of eye and hair shades. Since the wardrobe of The American Girl of Today could not be attached to particular stories, the company continuously designs a number of modern day outfits and accessories to fit any number of contemporary lifestyles. Girls can choose to clothe their American Girl of Today in a cheerleading uniform, blue jeans and jacket, Girl Scout uniform, soccer clothes, a Kwanzaa outfit, a Christmas Recital dress, a dress to celebrate Hanukkah, a ballet costume, and equestrian riding habit, beach attire, ski gear, a skating skirt and roller blades, pajamas, and a host of other selections. Accessories for the Girl of Today include a sled, crutches, a wheelchair, a computer, a violin, and a croquet set. For the animal lover, an American Girl horse is available for \$58 and a Husky dog for \$15. The Girl of Today can even “Trick or Treat” on Halloween, masquerading in a choice of costumes that include a Kitty Cat, a Medieval Princess, a Rootin’ Tootin’ Cowgirl, a ‘50’s Sock Hopper, a 60’s Hippie, or a Sparkling Mermaid.

The next American Girl doll goes by her middle name, Josefina; her complete name is Maria Josefina Montoya. Introduced in 1997, Josefina is an Hispanic girl who lived in Santa Fe in 1824, on a rancho with her widowed father and three older sisters. To research the six books that tell Josefina’s story, author Valerie Tripp spent three summers in New Mexico. As was the case with Addy, Josefina’s creation was supervised by an advisory board of multi-cultural specialists (Maughan, 1997, p. 252). The official newspaper for Pleasant Company, (now defunct) *American Girls News*, gave readers of the 1997 August/September issue the inside scoop on Josefina’s conception and development. The article quoted Pleasant Company’s historian, Kathy Borkowski: “We started reading everything we could about New Mexico and its history” (“Welcome Josefina!” p. 1). Modeling Josefina’s rancho after two history museums near Santa Fe, company representatives made numerous visits to New Mexico. The company chose real models for Josefina and her family, whose pictures are highlighted in the special issue devoted to welcoming her. Three of Josefina’s book were released in the fall of 1997; the

other three appeared the following year and were simultaneously printed in Spanish paperback editions.

Entering the collection in September of 2000, Margaret “Kit” Kittredge is a nine year old whose story is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the Great Depression. In promotional materials from Pleasant Company’s on-line newsroom, Julia Prohaska, brand director for American Girl, explains that “through Kit’s trials and triumphs, girls will begin to understand this time period in a personal way” (Pleasant Company, 2001). Valerie Tripp, author of the Kit stories, says that she drew upon her research, interviews with people who lived during the Depression, and her own parents’ experiences, as she wrote the stories. Kit’s story begins in 1932 when unemployment was at its peak, and her father has lost his job. Kit’s debut event was a fund-raising *Kit’s Care and Share Party*. Hosted by twenty-five non-profit organizations, these parties raised funds for children’s charities. Also a part of welcoming Kit was a national food drive sponsored by Pleasant Company, *Kit’s Can-Do Challenge*, a campaign whose goal was to collect one million cans of food nationwide.

In 2001, Lindsey Bergman, the first Girl of Today to have a specific name and character, was introduced. She comes with a *Lindsey* paperback book written by Chrysta Atkinson and sells for \$84. Her scooter is available for \$34, and her laptop computer is \$32. According to the AG Holiday Catalogue, Lindsey is only available for a year, when another Girl of Today character will be introduced.

The newest girl of The American Girls Collection is Kaya, who debuted in Fall of 2002. Kaya’s time period is 1764 and Pleasant Company is promoting her as the “first” American girl. American Girl brand director Julia Prohaska is quoted in *The Capital Times* as saying that Kaya’s addition to the collection was “a wonderful way to demonstrate that our American history didn’t start with the American Revolution” (Welch, 2002). Kaya is a member of the Nez Perce tribe, and as has been its custom with other dolls, Kaya was developed with the assistance of an eight member advisory board,

including tribal elders and anthropology experts. Author Janet Shaw, who also wrote the *Kirsten* books, is the author for the series. Because of the time constraints of the study, the *Kaya* books will not be included in my analysis.

This brief outline of the chronology of dolls and books in The American Girls Collection does not include products from outside its parameters. As has been noted, Pleasant Company has also introduced a brand new line of international dolls. One thing appears to be certain: The phenomenally popular American Girls dolls and their books are only the beginning of a constantly multiplying number of spin-offs, which will be the focus of the next subsection.

Off-shoots and Spin-offs: From Fashion Shows to CD ROMS

Rowland has said that The American Girls Collection was “envisioned from the beginning as a multi-faceted concept with long creative legs that would support the development of a wide variety of products and stimulate a broad array of marketing tactics” (quoted in Neal, 1992, p. 33). As we shall see in Chapter Four, this vision has materialized into a prolific number of support products and concepts. These include, among others, the *American Girl* magazine; American Girls Fashion Shows; *America at School*, a curriculum for elementary school children; the American Girls Historic Museums, established in cities throughout the United States; American Girl Gear, a clothing line for girls, and a host of craft, activity, and advice books. The company has an impressive web site that includes an on-line catalogue and has an American Girls CD-ROM that allows girls to choose one of the American Girl characters to star in a play the girls themselves create. Perhaps the most dramatic of all the spin-offs was the Fall 1998 opening of a two-story complex, American Girl Place. The theme park—a premier entertainment destination for girls across the country--includes a number of boutiques, an historical exhibit, a bookstore, a café, and a 150 seat theater that has entertained visitors with *The American Girls Revue* and a variety of other programs. Describing the American Girl Place in the 1999 American Girl Spring Catalogue, Rowland writes that

girls can “dine in [its] charming café and walk out with bright berry shopping bags brimming with treasures” (p. 1).

Pleasant Company announced in August of 2001 (Hallmark and Pleasant Company announce licensing agreement, 2001) that it had signed a leasing agreement with Hallmark to produce a wide range of personal expression products inspired by American Girl brand. Hallmark has developed gifts, ornaments, stationery, gift wrap, greeting cards, and party goods highlighting the historical American Girl characters. The company has also announced its intention to open another American Girl Place in New York City.

There appears to be no limit to Pleasant Company’s ever-growing American Girls Collection. American Girl Gear, the contemporary apparel line that began on a small scale in 1995 as an insert in Pleasant Company’s catalogue, has now expanded to the point of necessitating its own catalogue. In July 2000, AG Gear added to its clothing and accessory line new products for decorating a girl’s bedroom. Tie-dyed bed covers, pillow shams, alarm clocks, picture frames, and a string of multi-colored star lights were among the new items.

The Bitty Baby line was introduced in 1995, featuring a baby doll marketed for the little sisters of American Girl doll collectors. Like the American Girl dolls, Bitty Baby comes with a host of outfits and nursery furniture. She comes in various skin tones and eye colors. Holding a stuffed bear and her family album book, Bitty Baby sells for \$40 (Winter 2002). Bitty Baby and her owner can dress in matching outfits, and Bitty Baby’s bear has a collection of friends, all of whom can have tea around a miniature table and chairs and tea party set. The collection now also includes Bitty Baby Twins, introduced in Fall of 2002. This brother/sister pair (available for \$76) are noteworthy in that the brother is the first boy Pleasant Company has produced.

In 1999 Pleasant Company purchased the rights to author Marissa Moss’s *Amelia* stories, which had appeared in *American Girl* magazine in 1995. Pleasant Company

News Room reports that since January 1999 (Pleasant Company, 2001), Pleasant Company has sold more than 1.6 million Amelia notebooks. In 2000, Pleasant Company purchased the rights to Angelina Ballerina, whose books were written by Katharine Holabird. Angelina is a little mouse who longs to be a world class ballerina. Since her purchase by Pleasant Company, she has acquired a whole new world of outfits, her own stage, and a cottage with collections of miniature furniture and accessories for each room. The diversification of Pleasant Company's products has occurred since its buyout in 1998.

Unquestionably a significant development for Pleasant Company, a private company prior to 1998, is its position as a subsidiary of Mattel and one of a number of Mattel's girls' brands. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, Mattel was attracted to Pleasant Company's "state-of-the-art" direct mail marketing, as well as its integration of books and magazines to market toys (Milliot, 1998). Jill Barad, who was a Mattel executive when the decision to purchase Pleasant Company was made, said that Mattel could be instrumental in spreading The American Girls Collection around the world, a prediction that turned out to be accurate with the introduction of the Girls of Many Lands.

When Mattel ran into financial difficulties due to its purchase of The Learning Company, Barad resigned in February of 1999 and was replaced by Robert A. Eckert (Mattel, 2000, Feb. 3). Pleasant Rowland sat on Mattel's executive board for a short time before retiring in July 2000. Under the new structuring, Adrienne Fontanella, who has been in charge of "girls" products for Mattel, now oversees the management of Pleasant Company. Ellen Brothers, named president of Pleasant Company, reports to Fontanella and oversees the day-to-day operations of Pleasant Company's headquarters in Wisconsin (Mattel, 2000, July 10).

Rowland (2002) has recently written about her career at Pleasant Company. She points out that a critical factor in her success was her recognition that execution was paramount even to concept. She realized that it was attention to detail that would make

the products sell. The products still bears her mark, and the company still embraces the mission she articulated and executed. It is therefore important to recount her story.

Pleasant Rowland's Vision

“I’m just another entrepreneur with the kind of blindness that makes us convinced we have the idea for a better mousetrap” (quoted in Erickson, 1997, p. 166). This modest but revealing statement by Pleasant Company’s founder, Pleasant Rowland, hints at the kind of innocence Rowland says she had when, in 1986, she began a company that was to earn her the honor of being named one of the twelve outstanding entrepreneurs in the nation by the Institute of American Entrepreneurs. Its mousetrap metaphor perhaps unwittingly foreshadows the all-encompassing captivation of girls that has become increasingly apparent as the company continues its expansion, providing girls with everything from fashion shows to a school curriculum, or accessories to decorate their bedrooms to an advice book on how to style and care for their hair. Girls can vacation with their families in cities that house museums featuring programs and activities starring their favorite American Girl doll, or they can be entertained in the American Girl theme park located in Chicago’s prestigious “Magnificent Mile” shopping district. Moreover, these examples just begin to suggest the range of products and experiences available to girls through Pleasant Company.

Pleasant Company, aptly described as “not just a business but a point of view,” (Rosenfeld, 1993, p. 2) was, as we have seen, a result of a shopping trip at Christmas when Rowland wanted to buy her nieces a doll for Christmas. Disgusted by her choices of Barbies or Cabbage Patch dolls, she began a search that ended in more frustration. A trip to Toys R Us, followed by a Saturday morning viewing of TV commercials, convinced her that toy companies, television networks, and retail stores were, as she told one interviewer, “turning kids into mindless consumers and turning parents into helpless victims with no choices other than those the mighty band of mass-merchandisers decided should be perpetrated on the American public” (quoted in Erickson, 1997, p. 166). Rowland’s outrage at such conditions prompted her to start a competing company. In 18

months, she hired a staff of six workers and created three dolls, nine novels, a line of accessories, and a direct-marketing apparatus.

Stating outright her belief that sometimes “ignorance is bliss,” (a belief that, as we have seen, some critics argue is also operative in the AG version of history), Rowland says that when she started the company, she knew nothing about the doll business and had never been a merchant. She did, however, have a definite mission, which she has stated forthrightly: “All I wanted was a chance to express what was in my heart and to use my creativity for the betterment of young girls. If I could create attractive products that really had value, that really taught moral and historical lessons and captured the hearts of young girls, I would have done my job” (quoted in Erickson, p. 167).

Despite Rowland’s disclaimers, she had a wealth of experience, both personal and professional, to equip her for the job. Her father was president of a major advertising agency in Chicago, and Rowland remembers his sharing ads about the Jolly Green Giant and Campbell Kids around the dinner table, pointing out the details that were responsible for executing ideas with perfection. She gives her father credit for shaping her as a person who “loves to dream big and execute small” (Erickson, p. 175). Evidence of the fine attention to detail abounds in the catalogue used to market Pleasant Company’s products. In Josefina’s Sweet Dreams Collection, which retails for \$110, the tiny treasures in Josefina’s carved memory box (one of the many components of the collection) include a piece of Mama’s lavender soap, a swallow feather, a silver thimble, a nugget of turquoise, a rattlesnake rattle, and a heart-shaped *milagro* charm. Examples such as this one and countless others illustrate that Rowland had learned well the alluring appeal of sensory details.

Rowland nostalgically paints her own childhood as one of innocence and pleasant memories. It is precisely this kind of childhood she seeks to recreate in her products. Her catalogue Messages to Parents are scripted with language that evokes the magical glow

of childhood. In the 1998 Holiday Catalogue, on a page opposite a tinsel and sparkling Christmas tree, in front of which Molly stands poised steadying her new bicycle, Rowland responds to a question she says she is frequently asked: Are you a doll collector? Though her answer is “no,” she proceeds to write about the dolls she remembers throughout her life. She recalls dolls on Christmas mornings that had been “trimmed with blue ribbons and embroidered bowknots” patiently sewed by her mother, grandmother, and aunt after she and her sisters had gone to bed (p. 1). After recounting several other stories of pleasant doll memories, Rowland leaves the reader with this parting message:

If the dolls we make at Pleasant Company and the books and treasures we create have given you and your American girl even one moment as memorable as my own, then our labors have been repaid a hundredfold. Memories made in childhood warm us for all our days and leave an indelible mark on our spirit. When it comes to memories, we are all collectors. (American Girl Holiday, 1998, p. 1)

Rowland’s childhood memories—real or fantasized— are powerfully recounted as stories in the catalogue, tempting readers to forget for the moment the high price of the products and focus instead on the memories these books and treasures are helping to make possible.

Rowland’s professional life prior to the founding of Pleasant Company also contributed to her future success. She realized her first dream of becoming a teacher after graduating in the early 1960s from Wells College in New York. Rowland taught elementary students in public and private schools for six years. Enthralled with teaching, but disappointed in the bland instructional materials, she created her own materials for teaching children to read.

Disillusioned by lack of rewards in pay or status for excellence in teaching, Rowland left the profession to take a job as a television reporter and TV anchor. Though

the job was challenging and provided her with modest fame and good pay, she sensed a vague dissatisfaction as she realized she lacked a sense of purpose. After shooting a feature story about a reading program used in bilingual classes in San Francisco, Rowland began to offer her suggestions on how the program might be improved. Before it was all over, through a rather serendipitous turn of events, the publicist of the reading program initiated a contact with another publisher in Boston who offered Rowland the chance to write a reading and language arts program for kindergarten children.

In what she admits was a gutsy decision, Rowland resigned from her television job and took a job with a Boston publishing company that ran out of money six weeks later. Undaunted, she continued to develop her instructional programs which were soon published by J. B. Lippincott and became the largest-selling kindergarten program on the market. Rowland then went on to produce *The Addison-Wesley Reading Program* and eventually ended up as vice president of the Boston publishing company that had run out of money earlier. Her next move was prompted by her marriage to Jerry Frautschi, owner of a large printing company in Madison, Wisconsin.

Her experiences in Madison included being a publisher of *Children's Magazine Guide*, a publication that tripled its circulation under her guidance. Becoming involved with numerous projects, Rowland was feeling unfocused and ready for a new venture when, in 1984, she had the inspirational Christmas shopping trip described earlier. In the same year, she had visited Colonial Williamsburg and was inspired by the idea of making history live for both youth and adults. But as she examined the materials for children, the school teacher reaction she had had on so many other occasions set in: The materials were unexciting and dull. She sent The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation a proposal to write a family guidebook about the Virginia Living History Museum. The proposal was accepted and the guidebook was successful. The two experiences—the shopping trip and the trip to Williamsburg—came together in a vision that resulted in the founding of Pleasant Company. Using royalties from her instructional reading program,

along with help from a private investor and bank loans, Rowland launched The American Girls Collection, a venture she has often equated with celebrating girlhood (Erickson, 1997).

Rowland does not hide her convictions about The American Girls Collection. She has often addressed her customers (both parents and girls) directly. The theme of celebration and joy is embedded in almost every one of her messages in the catalogues. Almost all of her selling strategies make an obvious attempt to downplay the materialistic side of spending and highlight instead the sheer joy of being an American girl with wholesome and positive values. In an introductory note to the Gear Holiday catalogue in 1998, Rowland characteristically writes:

Brrr! Winter's on its way! Get ready to celebrate! Twirl on ice. Bake cookies with spice. Hang tiny white lights! A.G. Gear helps make the season bright with clothes that let you shine.Have fun dreaming up your own festive style. But remember, the holidays are about sharing and caring, not about what you're wearing. A friendly smile is always the best accessory. And a kind heart will warm up the frostiest of days. That's the real spirit of the holidays!. (Inside cover and p. 1)

Without reservation, Rowland has enthusiastically embraced the idea that The American Girls Collection is about establishing a girl's sense of self and identity. Repeatedly, she has compared the dolls and books to chocolate cake with vitamins, explaining that the real nutrients are those which give young girls "a sense of self and an understanding of where they came from and who they are" (quoted in Fanger, 1999, p. 16). Commenting on her mission to put girls at the forefront in history, she says of American girls of the past: "They lived in times that in many ways limited their ability to be independent, spunky, spirited, confrontational—and they found ways to do it, in spite of that. I wanted people to have the sense that women just didn't discover themselves in

the last 20 years, that this has been a fire burning in women—and in little girls—for a long time” (quoted in Miller, 1991, p. 1E).

When the company launched the American Girl of Today, Rowland explained that she wanted to “link past to present and empower girls to take pride in this, their moment of history” (Spring 1996, p. 1). Rowland has indicated her desire for girls to see that the lives of the American Girl characters were very different from the lives of girls today in some ways, but that fundamental values represented by families, friendships and feelings haven’t changed at all. The essential feelings of girlhood, she maintains, are timeless: “From time immemorial, the emotions of girlhood override what is going on in the world around us. I don’t care if a girl grew up in the Colonial times, Victorian times, in 1950, or today, the emotional experiences of childhood are absolutely true and constant” (quoted in Erickson, p. 168). Such statements oversimplify the complexities of childhood experiences and suggest that there are “essential” feelings inherent in being a girl.

There appears to be no limit in Rowland’s mind to the company’s possibilities. Indeed, speaking on behalf of Pleasant Company, she has said that “anything that is of service, interest, or importance to young girls is within our purview and our responsibility to create”(quoted in Erickson, p. 169), adding that the company has the trust of parents who know it will deliver what they want for their daughters.

As we have seen, the price of the delivery is not cheap. Kit Kittridge, the American Girl doll of the Depression era, may be purchased, along with her paperback book, for \$84, her roll-top desk and swivel chair for \$70, and her dresser trunk for \$155. Her crocheted hat, straw purse, printed hankie, and compass necklace come in a package for \$20. Rowland has consistently defended the price of the products, pointing out that Nintendo, the largest selling toy in the world, starts at \$100 and Barbie’s plastic palace retails for \$400 plus (Evans, 1991). She insists that American Girls products are known

for their quality, authenticity, and durability, and consumers are willing to pay for those qualities.

Erickson (1997) depicts Rowland as one fiercely protective of her company. His profile speaks of her refusals to turn the company over to mass-marketers as well as her regular rejections of TV and movie offers. At the time of this interview, Rowland explained that her company was too valuable for that kind of hype:

I don't mean valuable in terms of money, but in terms of the stories, the experiences, and the memories it gives little girls. This is too important to have disappear in a comet's streak...Pleasant Company is a form of giving back in a way that nourishes me and makes the world better. That's ultimately where businesspeople need to come from. It's one of the reasons I don't want to go public. First, the company is in excellent financial condition. Second, the person who would get the most money from going public would be me, and I have all the money I need. Finally, I don't want to answer to the stockbrokers of the world. I want to answer to girls. (pp. 179-180)

These words, coupled with Rowland's inspiration when she began the company to find an alternative to the "mighty band" of mass producers churning out the likes of Barbies and Cabbage Patch Kids, made her sellout to Mattel shocking to those who had counted on Rowland's principles to empower her to resist the temptation of becoming the highest paid woman in America (Hansen, 2000) In a speech to her employees, Rowland confessed that she had undergone personal struggle making the decision and was well aware of its irony: "Every single one of us knew that the very idea of American Girl living in Barbie's Dream House would horrify all of you and all our customers, and that the press would have a heyday casting the merger as a sellout of all we stood for, all we believed. No one felt this more keenly than I" (Hajewski, 1998, p. 1).

Rowland explained that her decision to sell the company was aided by her admiration for Mattel executive Jill Barad, whose leadership prompted more realistic

measurements for Barbie as well as her “anything is possible” ad campaign. As a part of the sale, Rowland became vice chairwoman and member of Mattel’s board of directors. In February of 2000, Barad was ousted from Mattel due to faltering sales of Barbie and other financial disappointments associated primarily with Mattel’s purchase of The Learning Company. Five months later, Rowland announced her retirement as president of Pleasant Company and vice chairwoman of Mattel.

Her career with Pleasant Company had made her a wealthy woman in addition to being recognized and honored as one of the 12 outstanding entrepreneurs in the United States by the Institute of American Entrepreneurs, named by *Advertising Age* magazine to their Marketing 100, and cited for six consecutive years by *Working Woman* magazine as one of America’s Top 50 Women Business Owners. She had been widely praised for Pleasant Company’s charitable donations of more than \$35 million to children’s charities (Pleasant Company, 2001) as well as her own personal contributions to the arts.

While it is true that Pleasant Rowland conceptualized the vision that became The American Girls Collection and that its success can be attributed in part to her savvy and smart business acumen, it would be naive to ignore the political and social context that provided the climate it needed to thrive. As a successful business person, Rowland surely realized that the time was ripe for her product. Like other individuals, she is both a product and a producer of the social and political environment that has made Pleasant Company a cultural phenomenon.

Explaining Success: The Right Climate

Washington Post staff writer Megan Rosenfeld’s 1993 feature on the American Girl dolls tries to account for why the millionth American Girl doll had been shipped from the Pleasant Company factory in the previous few weeks and why a series of 24 books of historical fiction had sold 11 million copies. Marveling that 11,000 girls and their Moms had traveled from as far away as Anchorage, Alaska to Williamsburg, Virginia to pay \$50 per child and \$30 per person to have tea with Felicity, Rosenfeld concludes: “It couldn’t have happened without the WASP aesthetic that has always

defined Good Taste and Success: the flowered fabric hegemony of Laura Ashley; the make-it-from scratch dogma of Martha Stewart; the ruling sartorial ethos of yacht club blazers and deck shoes. The world was ready for a line of upwardly mobile dolls” (Rosenfeld, p. 2).

Rosenfeld (1993) also cites many parents’ worst fears about Barbie as one big boost for the American Girls. Parents envision, Rosenfeld says, that their little girl will become a Barbie look alike, “a cheap tart in neon spandex pants and high heels, driving around in a pink Corvette for the rest of her life with her dyed hair floating in the breeze, the neutered Ken at her side” (p.1). M.G. Lord (1998) echoes this fear when she comments that American moms worry if their daughters emulate Barbie they might live in trailer parks.

The alternative Pleasant Company provides, is at least on the surface, a more feminist picture of girlhood, one that Rosenfeld says is for the girl who “prizes her Mary Janes as much as her cleats”(p. D1). And The American Girls Collection is definitely more cultivated. Lord (1998) notes that the American Girls teach “connoisseurship” and promote what social historian Paul Fussel calls “‘archaism’—a preference for old, distinguished objects over flashy new stuff, and a hallmark of the upper classes” (p. C01). Lord says that in contrast to this highbrow approach is Barbie, who has the “joyful, uncultivated taste of a lottery winner” (p. C01).

What these social critics so rightfully acknowledge is that none of the Pleasant Company products exists in a vacuum. They are all intricately connected with the larger issues of class, race, gender, and moral values. As I have already stated, American Girls came to fruition just as psychologists and educators were hotly debating why the self-confidence of girls began to plummet at the onset of adolescence. Gilligan (1983/1993) had argued that the dominant culture often ignored or trivialized the “different voice” of girls and women. The Sadker report (1994) had alerted the country that girls were even being shortchanged in schools. “Girl power” was not an unfamiliar term in the media.

Moreover, moms of young readers welcomed a celebration of girls, having been influenced themselves by the women's movement and the rise of feminism.

The political economy of publishing also helps to explain why American Girls books were so eagerly purchased. Engelhardt (1991) provides an historical look at children's publishing beginning in the mid-sixties, when the Great Society money began pouring into children's libraries across the United States. A group of children's writers and children's books emerged in this time period that dealt with realistic issues such as war, race, drugs, sex, and death. Children were not protected from the vision of social inequality embedded in many of these books (Engelhardt, pp. 56-57). By the mid-seventies, as funding dried up, libraries were no longer able to underwrite these efforts. Chain bookstores came along to fill the void, and the upscale children's bookstore became commonplace in suburban malls. What Engelhardt refers to as the "second boom" of children's book publishing, was designed, he says, for the consumer child. It is interesting to note that Pleasant Company chose to name its collection of books *The American Girl Library* (italics added) suggesting the idea of educational and academic enrichment as well as equal access. But the term also connotes private collections and libraries in the homes of the rich and affluent.

As the eighties progressed, children of baby boomers arrived, and with them a wave of anxiety about the failure of American education. In 1983, the Education Department released a study entitled *A Nation at Risk* conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This "report card" on the nation's public schools consisted mostly of failing grades, and the report urged parents to do more. What parents needed to do was nurture the habit of reading, a daunting challenge given the multi-media culture of kids. Predictably, such advice provided a market for "experts" who could help parents decide what books their children should read and why. Further, a resurgence of the "series" books arguably could establish this *habit* of reading parents sought to nurture (Engelhardt, pp. 57-58). Hence, Pleasant Company's offer to educate

girls by teaching them history and their own importance in it, as well as to nurture the habit of reading, was hard to turn down as a parent. Girls would, parents reasoned, be hooked on both history and reading. When a healthy dose of positive values was added to the offer, it was hard to refuse. Further, though the American Girls Collection books are essentially formulaic, mass-produced books, they had the look of elegance and refinement when compared to the popular Baby Sitters Club and Sweet Valley High books.

Pleasant Company was launched during the administration of Ronald Reagan, a president who both reflected and shaped the times. He will be noted, says White (1998), for the “sense of return” (p. 7) he gave American people to their traditional values. Reagan was adept in his presidency at drawing a Norman Rockwell-like portrait of America (often in story form) reminiscent of earlier, simpler times when family, religion, and morality were thought to be restored to their proper places and relatively immune to threats by big government, liberalism, and feminism (White, p. 15). The American Girls Collection, launched in 1986, came with a highly articulated and visible set of wholesome ideals that were in keeping with America’s growing enthusiasm for traditional values. The ascendancy of family values was evident in the media, when in 1984 the television industry began to use the term “warmedies”(p. 145) to describe such shows as “The Cosby Show” and “Family Ties.” In this vein, in 1987 the cast of “The Andy Griffith Show” was reunited in a made-for-television movie (White, pp. 140-145). The resurgent interest of traditional family values in the eighties continued through the nineties and on in to the twenty-first century. Tipper Gore led a campaign to rid sexual innuendos from rock music lyrics. Clinton carried on the Reagan tradition of repeating tales of individual heroism and preaching the gospel of family values (White, pp. 249-250). White also points out that in 1996, First lady Hillary Clinton published a book defending traditional values entitled *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children*

Teach Us. That the extolling of family values has not lessened accounts for one reason for Pleasant Company's continued success.

In the midst of this emphasis on family life and traditional values, feminism in the 1980s suffered from what Faludi termed "backlash" in her 1991 best-selling book of that name. The popular mainstream backlash attempted to convince women that feminists were tortured women whose extreme and strident measures were responsible for the plight of their followers: unsatisfied women who discovered that the price of being a superwoman was too costly (Walters, 1995, p. 121). Popular rhetoric of the 80s depicted women as perceiving that a new, post-feminist era was dawning, one that would help troubled women trying to "juggle" work and family. It attempted to convince women that the gender equality war was over, women having achieved their full status even if it was to their detriment.

In keeping with the backlash theme, Walters (1995) identified a trend in television and films during the 80s that had "the veneer of feminism" but nonetheless rendered a traditional image of women. A major point of Walter's analysis of postfeminism and popular culture is that the backlash that began in the 80s was "couched in language of liberation, made to seem trendy, even mildly feminist..." (p. 139) and often "borrow[ed] from feminism selectively" (p. 121). Arguably, *The American Girls Collection* offers a picture of girlhood that mothers seduced by the eighties backlash would find comforting: traditional girls whose wholesome values and feminine appearance exist in harmony with words of empowerment. Indeed, *The American Girl* appeared to have the best of both worlds.

Another component of the New Right movement was its emphasis on the individual and individual choice. The core of the American creed, White (1998) argues, is a "belief in the malleability of the future by the individual," noting that Jim and Tammy Bakker ended their daily "PTL" television show with the words, "You *can* make it!"(p. 22). The Bakkers knew that the message the evangelism community wanted to

hear was one of reaffirmation and optimism. By the late seventies and on into the eighties, many questioned America's future and bemoaned the loss of traditional values. Capitalizing on the disillusionment and sense of despair many Americans felt, American Girls historical books featured heroines who adhered to the belief that as individuals, they could make a difference. The books feature heroines whose cheerful dispositions and determination allow them to overcome obstacles seemingly insurmountable. And they do so by using "the enduring strength of faith, family, and friendship" (multiple American Girl catalogues).

Though no one would deny that individuals can and do make a difference in their own lives as well as those of others, a danger lies in focusing on personal and private responsibility to the exclusion of collective and public response to social problems. Children who admire Samantha's decision to tutor her friend Nellie who, as a working class girl, is going to a public rather than private school may fail to realize the significance of its larger context. Most markedly, they may fail to recognize one of feminism's most important insights: The personal is political.

Finally, the phenomenal rise in the earnings of the rich and very rich between 1979 and 1989 can be seen to have initiated what many have called the decade of greed. This shift, which began in the 70s and accelerated in the 80s and 90s resulted in nearly half of the total income earned in the United States each year going to the upper 20 percent of the population, with a disproportionate amount landing in the bank accounts of the top 5 percent. Having received a big tax break from Reagan and benefitting from trends in the financial markets, upper middle class American families began conspicuously purchasing luxury symbols of the 80s--Rolex watches, luxury vehicles, and Gucci shoes, at least in part to compensate for the growing gap between their lifestyles and those of the very rich (Schor, 1999, p. 12). This group of parents were prime candidates for buying their daughters an American Girl doll for \$80 and spending hundreds more in equipping her with furniture, clothing, and other accessories. The

pattern set by such upscale spending is one Schor has named the “new consumerism.” She uses the term to describe the commonplace practice of today’s consumers comparing themselves with a “reference group” whose incomes are three, four, or five times their own (Schor, p. 3).

The pattern spirals downward as consumers of less affluent classes seek to match the spending of the upper middle class. Hence, though purchase of American Girl dolls may represent a significant expenditure for middle class parents, they are often willing to make the sacrifice. Schor (1999) points out that as the bottom 80 percent of the population have fallen relatively behind the top 20 percent, they have become even more inclined to imitate the spending of the top group (p. 46).

Rowland has said that she would not characterize American Girl customers as wealthy. “We have files of letters from parents who’ve said their child saved for two years or their child is willing to have just one wonderful Christmas present, an American Girl doll,” Rowland explained to a New York Times reporter who questioned the high prices of the dolls (Rejecting Barbie, doll maker gains, 1993). To Miller (1991), she noted that people of modest incomes are willing to save their money for purchases from The American Girls Collection because “when you give children something of value, you give them a sense of their own self-esteem” (p. 1E).

Rowland’s statement suggests that a person’s possessions are symbols of self-worth and implies that the more valuable the possessions, the more valuable the person. Ostensibly, the words “something of value” refer to the intangibles of wholesome ideals and lessons in history offered by the collection instead of the products themselves. It is clearly the case with The American Girls Collection, however, that the tangibles and intangibles are ingeniously woven together. They’re all in the package—which may be purchased only by cash or credit.

It seems clear that Pleasant Company sells not only its products, but also its images and identities. Moreover, these are aimed at teaching girls how to be consumers

as well as convincing their parents (usually Moms) that the money they spend is a wise investment in the future lives of their daughters. And what could be more American than that? As Rosenblatt (1999) reminds us, we may believe that in the process of acquiring things, we are participating in the very soul of democracy. Embracing this ideology means viewing America as “a gigantic supermarket” kept alive and well by the consuming citizen acting on free choice (p. 18).

Producing the Package: Product Development and Operations

Pleasant Rowland has said that the development of Pleasant Company was “all instinct, all gut”(Evans, 1991). Starting out with six workers, she was able to create the first three dolls (Kirsten, Samantha and Molly), a line of accessories, and a direct marketing apparatus in just 18 months. Today, the company’s expansion (including its buy-out by Mattel) has made production far more complex. The company has close to 1000 employees and hires as many as 3,000 employees to handle the holiday season. It has four operating divisions: the consumer catalogue division, the publications division (which includes American Girls books and *American Girl* magazine), the retail division (which consists of American Girl Place retail store in Chicago and an Outlet store in Oshkosh, Wisconsin), and the Customer Programs division, which provides living history programs and coordinates charity events. Its headquarters are near Madison, Wisconsin, and its physical facilities include two warehouse operations and distribution facilities totaling 620,000 square feet. In addition to these, it has opened three other facilities in nearby locations so that it has corporate properties in excess of 1.3 million square feet. Finally, it announced plans in Fall 2002 to open another retail store in New York City.

One of Rowland’s first steps in founding the company was establishing business connections that are still in place with the Gotz family in Roedental, Germany, whom she commissioned to manufacture the dolls, and Jonathan So in China, who agreed to make the dolls’ clothes. The furniture is made in Taiwan, and the period accessories come from vendors in the Far East, Sweden, Spain, Russia, and the United States (Rejecting

Barbie, 1993). Hence, the quintessentially American Girl is actually a product of the world market. American patriotism—one of the values Pleasant Company embraces most avidly—does not apparently include a commitment to American-made products, especially if those products can be produced for less money elsewhere.

Halter (2000) points out that when individuals buy something they consider representative of their culture or even someone else's, they expect a certain level of legitimacy. She further notes that these so-called genuine expressions of ethnic identity are based on highly subjective criteria (p. 19). In the case of The American Girls Collection, the items chosen to represent cultures are selected from those that appear in the stories told about the doll-characters in the historical books. Eco, in his 1975 essay "Travels in Hyperreality," points to instances when Americans "demand the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (quoted in Halter, p. 19). The American Girl customer who cherishes Felicity's "authentic" Windsor Writing Chair (one reportedly identical to the one Jefferson sat on when he signed the Declaration of Independence) is unlikely to realize it was made in Taiwan nor is she likely to consider why certain period pieces and accessories were chosen over others.

An example from the Josefina collection illustrates how decisions with regard to particular products that will appear in the catalogue are rarely random. In the case of Josefina, advisory board member Felipe Mirabal, whose research interests include the religious traditions of the Spanish Colonial era, insisted that the products and accessories for Josefina sold through the catalogue have no religious significance. "In the books," he explains, "you'll see a santo in the background, an altar screen, a retablo of San Jose... but we didn't want to make anything religious a toy" (quoted in Stiger, 1997, p. D4). Such concerns were apparently considered by Pleasant Company to be specific to the Spanish culture; the company advertised a brass menorah with pretend candles and a silver Star of David necklace in its December 1998 catalogue as a part of the American Girl of Today collection.

Rosenfeld (1993) describes the atmosphere in Pleasant Company's complex: Posted on the wall of the lobby is a quote in three-dimensional letters: 'Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.' Rowland's extensive collection of contemporary art hangs throughout the complex, including vast metal mobiles in the stairwells. The desk workers—executives, mail order takers, book editors and so forth—work in modular pods. The liveliest place is the product development workshop, where three designers work amid bolts of fabric and tiny things....On the ground floor are huge storage racks of dolls and their accouterments, and lines of women at conveyor belts bagging dresses, checking the blink of doll eyes or boxing baby dolls. (p. D1)

The production of the dolls is far more complicated, however, than this picture suggests. The development of the doll characters (at least after the initial three were conceptualized) arises from much more than merely gut or instinct. According to numerous accounts, much research and consultation occurs, sometimes as many as three years in advance of the doll's actual debut. Detailing some of the process involved in the creation of Addy and Josefina will illustrate this point.

Addy, a slave girl of 1864, was introduced in 1993 (having been three years in the making) and represents the company's first undertaking of producing an ethnic doll. Demographics detailed in the 1990 Census indicated that marketing to targeted minority groups was a sound business strategy. Halter (2000) quotes an anonymous toy company executive, speaking in the aftermath of the Census report as saying, "How can you ignore these ethnic streams of revenue? You can't. The color of money is green, and you get it from whatever skin tone has got it" (p. 25). *Nation's Business* (Dunn, 1992) cited Pleasant Company as an example of a firm who had responded to this lucrative ethnic market.

Pleasant Company commissioned the noted African-American writer Connie Porter to write the Addy stories and then enlisted the help of an advisory board of seven scholars of African-American history and culture to review the stories and product ideas and offer constructive criticism. According to Rosenfeld (1993) they addressed such issues as what historical era the doll would represent and what Negroid features she would have.

Not surprisingly, the introduction of Addy in 1993 was rife with debate, with respected members of the African-American community divided in their reactions to her. As children's book author Eloise Greenfield explained: "They asked me for advice, and I said that kind of story did not fit in with the other dolls. It's a stereotype to continually go back to that period. It's our Holocaust. How can you compare the horror of slavery with Kirsten's mother having a baby?" Greenfield then reported that a Pleasant Company editor had told her the choice was dictated partly by the need for a period "with attractive clothes" (quoted. in Rosenfeld, p. d1). Indeed, Addy has been lauded as the "best dressed slave in history" (American past and present, 1995, p. 62). It is worthy of note that her freedom from slavery occurs early in the sequence of stories. Although her extensive wardrobe is still a bit of a stretch, it would have been inconceivable for a slave girl to have acquired the array of products available in her collection.

Greenfield's concern was shared by others. Some critics wondered why a doll from an era such as the Harlem Renaissance was not chosen. Reddick (1997) quotes a black Tampa psychologist: "We all know we have been slaves. We also know we have done so many other things that have contributed to this country and to the world." Pleasant Company spokeswoman Julia Prohaska defended the choice of the slave era: "It was the one period that most African Americans have in common" (quoted in Reddick, p. 1).

Despite such critiques, the Addy stories have received mostly positive reviews. Virginia Hamilton, recipient of the National Book Award, the Newbery Award, and

Coretta Scott King Award is quoted in the catalogue introducing Addy: “I am most impressed, and believe that with Addy, a stunning new star is born. Hers is an American story out of American history, one that all children should read and know” (Special Edition for Addy, 1994). Connie Porter, author of the series defended the depiction of Addy as a slave girl: “Some people don’t want to see a character in slavery—that’s ridiculous. You can run the risk of being so politically correct that you lose whole periods of history. Children are more ready to talk about these things than some adults are” (quoted in Rosenfeld, 1993, p. D1).

The Addy debates illustrate an important issue that is applicable to the development of any of the doll characters in *The American Girls Collection*: When a girl and her era are chosen as representing *the* American girl, countless other girls and eras are omitted. Realizing that selections have to be made within a seemingly endless number of choices does not cancel out the political and ideological implications of the selection.

The introduction of Josefina in 1997 is another example of a doll who took years to develop. Rather than soliciting an Hispanic author to write this group of stories, Pleasant Company relied on Valerie Tripp, who has written the majority of stories in the *American Girls* historical fiction books. Tripp reports that she does background work for her stories a year in advance and uses a variety of sources, including letters, catalogues, magazines, and even recipes from the era she is writing about. She even moved her family to Santa Fe for several months while writing Josefina’s stories in order to interview descendants of early Mexican settler and conduct research in local libraries, museums, and historical sites. Tripp told reporters of *The American Girls News* (Welcome! Josefina, 1997) that she “got to know Josefina by seeing, smelling, and tasting New Mexico” (p. 1). An eight member advisory board decided the look and color of Josefina’s skin, hair, and eyes—and even dictated the placement of her cheekbones. Pleasant Company made an entirely new face mold for Josefina, who was

modeled after Kristina Roybal, a Santa Fe sixth grader who was chosen through a modeling agency for the job (Stiger, 1997). Josefina's books were published in both English and Spanish. More than \$500,000 in marketing funds were spent to ensure Josefina's successful entry into the world of American Girls.

At least to critic Acosta-Alzuru (1999) however, Josefina never achieves the identity of being an "American" girl as do the other doll characters in the collection. Acosta-Alzuru argues that Josefina's world is purely New Mexican. Further, her marketing as an "Hispanic" girl—associated entirely with Mexican outfits and accessories—is misleading at best, in part because the term "Hispanic" is polysemic and problematic.⁶ Perhaps because her stories take place before New Mexico became a part of the United States, neither the books nor the catalogues establish connections between Josefina and the United States. According to Acosta-Alzuru, the representation of Josefina perpetuates "the simplistic idea that all hispanics are Mexican. Mexico functions as a synecdoche of Latin America" (p. 149). In spite of all of the American Girl rhetoric of "belonging," Josefina stands apart, an observation confirmed by the girl participants in Acosta-Alzuru's study.

The American Girl Doll introduced with the most fanfare was Felicity, the colonial girl, whose formal tea in Williamsburg attracted 6,000 girls and 5, 800 parents from all states except North Dakota. Capitalizing on the success of this event—the sittings drew more attendees than any other event in the history of Williamsburg (Evans, 1991)—Colonial Williamsburg now promotes a Felicity tour package that allows children and adults to participate in a walking tour of the historic district, craft activities and games that might have occupied Felicity's leisure time, and even receive instructions

⁶ Acosta-Alzuru points out in her study that while the term "hispanic" is commonly associated with people of Latin American origin, it also connotes people who speak Spanish. The term is problematic, as confusion exists, for example, in specifying differences between "Hispanic" and "Latina." Acosta-Alzuru asks: Is a person from Spain Hispanic? Is a Brazilian Hispanic? How does an Hispanic look?

from Felicity's teacher, Miss Manderly, an older woman whom the book describes as being a "gracious gentlewoman," regarding such essentials as how to curtsy, sew, dance, and take tea. According to Ross (1997), Miss Manderly is careful to instruct the tour participants regarding the political implications of their choice to purchase tea, an issue that is given considerable attention in the Felicity books. Loyalists to the British crown drank tea; Patriots, including Felicity's father, drank hot chocolate. Having said that, Miss Manderly continues her explanation. Ross's description is worth quoting: "Miss Manderly explained that tea is a ceremony and gentlemen should be served first, followed by ladies according to their rank. She reminded her students that polite conversation is as important as serving tea and they should 'focus on refinement, not politics'" (p. N41). Ross's detailed account of the tour mentions a number of subjects the participants learned about: rural trade, colonial clothing, punishment in the stocks, etc. But Ross was struck by the reaction her granddaughter Sinclair recorded in the travel journal she had been given in the registration packet. Sinclair said that she would like to have lived in Felicity's time because "I would like to be a proper girl" (quoted in Ross, p. N41).

Thus, while appearing to educate girls about their pasts, what appears also to be happening is a reinforcement of traditional gender roles that define girlhood in limiting and restrictive ways. The American Girl Library has a whole series of craft and activity books, including a cookbook for each American Girl doll/character in its historical collection. In addition to teaching girls "about" these activities, these books encourage girls to incorporate the activities into their daily lives. This "sense of return" is certainly counter to feminism's progressive agenda to move girls beyond activities that restrict their choices to domestic duties or encourage them to behave in ways becoming to a "proper" girl.

Another way that The American Girls Collection encourages girls to conform to a traditional feminine stereotype is by shaping their desires and fashioning girls (and their

mothers) as consumers. As Winner (1998) points out, the association of women with consumption dates back at least to Felicity's time. The next section will consider how insights from consumption theory may enhance our understanding of consumer behavior as it relates to women, girls, and The American Girls Collection.

Consumption, Consumerism, and The American Girl

The role of the woman as consumer is a familiar one in American society, and the subject of numerous jokes at the expense of women. With associations with waste and use, consumption has typically been deemed less important than production. Mackay (1997) makes the point that the privileging of production over consumption reflects Protestant values that heralded work as being "noble and productive" and denigrated consumption as "frivolous, even wasteful, indulgent, or decadent" (p. 2). When this ideology merges with gender associations of women as passive and men as active and productive, it is "natural" to classify women as consumers and men as producers. This may account, in part, for the historical emphasis on production rather than consumption until recently. Consumption also took a back seat to production in the highly influential theories of Karl Marx, who concentrated on production, viewing consumption as being solely determined by it. The extreme position of the Frankfurt School, in fact, viewed the consumer as one duped and victimized by capitalistic endeavors. According to Miles (1998), Marx was the first to note that "the wheels of capitalism are oiled by the workers themselves" (p. 17). That Marx was the first theorist to see many of the inherent contradictions of what Miles refers to as "the consuming paradox" (i.e. consumption is both psycho-socially constraining and enabling) makes his contribution to the sociology of consumption a significant one (Miles, p. 5).

One of the crucial dividers in consumption theory is the extent to which the consumer is seen as an active and creative participant in the act of consumption or as a passive and manipulated victim, even largely unconscious that the desires he or she assumes to be natural or self-induced are, in fact, created and shaped by advertising and media. Hence, whereas some theorists have seen the act of consumption as a rich site for

personal development and free choice, (Nava, 1991; Featherstone, 1991; P. Willis, 1990), others have chosen to emphasize its limits and dangers (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Bauman, 1988; Baudrillard, 1970/1998). Further, though scholars in the field may assume various postures regarding the particular significance of consumer culture and personal identity, most agree that people's involvement with consumer culture is pervasive and does affect the construction of their identities. One similarity of most recent theories is the recognition that participation in consumer culture is both uneven, contradictory, and unstable. Not all consumers participate in the same way. Rather, they hold varying views and employ differing strategies to guide their consumer decisions.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to present a thorough review of consumption theory; at best what will be offered here are thumbnail sketches of theories that I have found helpful in my study of The American Girls Collection. Much of what I review here emphasizes how consumption practices may both shape identity and reflect the social status of consumers. At the outset of this discussion, two points need to be clarified. The first is that not all consumers are passive dupes –even children may be active interpreters of the products offered them, and their readings and responses may be very different from those encouraged by the products' developers. Recognizing that oppositional readings are possible, however, does not cancel out the fact that particular interpretations of texts are nonetheless powerful to large numbers of girls.

The second point is that I do not intend to suggest that Pleasant Company (or any other toy manufacturer) is involved in a conspiracy to hoodwink children or manipulate them in harmful ways. To the contrary, it is my belief that Pleasant Company's interpretation of its mission and impact on girls is that it provides a sense of empowerment to girls, teaches them the importance of their history as American girls, and encourages them to adopt wholesome values, while at the same time offering them hours of pleasure and fun. That it may accomplish some of these goals does not negate the need for a critical inquiry that highlights the complexities and contradictions that may

otherwise lie dormant. Indeed, it remains possible that good intentions may lead to negative outcomes.

Because one of the tenets of this study is that we must take seriously the linkages between a girl's identity and her participation as a reader of American Girl texts and a consumer of American Girl products, it is necessary to consider consumer theory as it relates to issues of identity. It may be recalled that Chapter Two discussed theory that connects a child's socialization with his or her reading of texts. Since the books of The American Girls Collection are so intertwined with the products—ranging from reproductions of period piece furniture to accessories for the hair—if the products consumed can also be shown to influence identity, then we are looking at a particularly powerful arena wherein identity negotiations are being played out. Dittmar (1992) takes a social constructionist position when she argues that people define themselves and others by what they possess. She points out that people often describe possessions as aspects of the self and experience the loss of possessions as a lessening of self. Objects are used to encompass symbolic meanings that transcend their utilitarian function. Possessions may serve to communicate to others who we are or who we want to be. This dynamic is rather obvious in the consumer behavior of girls who purchase and publically display multiple and various American Girl products. A girl may project her identity as being an “American Girl” by wearing an AG jacket, carrying an AG book bag, performing an AG play for her neighborhood, hosting an American Girl birthday party, decorating her bedroom in AG decor, or simply shopping at the mall with her doll, dressed, if she chooses, in a matching outfit. In fact, her choices seem to be infinite, one of the oft-praised and so-called freedoms of consumerism. Such a view runs the risk, according to Dittmar, of obscuring the fact that opportunities for consumption are not equal. Products have price tags. Moreover, a girl's choices within the world of American Girl Products are constrained by products that are in keeping with the clearly articulated mission of Pleasant Company.

Dittmar further points out the paradox of the dominant Western ideal of personal identity. As we have discussed earlier, one powerful ideology in America is that the individual is unique and autonomous, and as Dittmar notes, relatively uninfluenced by others and socio-cultural surroundings. Ideally, “who we are has nothing to do with what we possess” (p. 200). This belief stands in direct contrast to the ideology of the market, an ideology Dittmar expresses in the subtitle of her book: *To have is to be*. Lury (1996), whose discussion of Dittmar guides this commentary, points out that for some, a “magical” solution to this dilemma is to suggest that the link between identity and possessions is merely play. If we don’t have to take the connections between our identity and what we own seriously, we can still remain who we really are, regardless of what we possess. But the extent to which consumers (and I would argue particularly consumers who are children) can learn to assume a reflexive posture and decontrol their emotions, thereby opening themselves up to the range of playful and fleeting identities, is a matter of debate.

McCracken’s (1988) study of how consumer goods are used in ritual processes which in turn help to establish social identity and concepts of self is particularly pertinent to the present study. McCracken speaks, for example, of the possession rituals involved in collecting as well as gift rituals, especially gift rituals to commemorate birthdays and Christmas. He argues that the activity of collecting surpasses simple ownership and imbues objects with a stamp of the personal. Individuals may proudly display their collections, compare their collections to those of others’, and form close attachments to the objects. Indeed, they may view themselves, to use McCracken’s terms, as “keepers” rather than mere “possessors.” To keep involves relating the goods to family, to history, and to the preservation for posterity. As we have seen, The American Girls Collection encourages girls to add “heirlooms”-- piece by piece--to their American Girl Doll collections in order to solidify connections with girls of the past, accumulate treasures for future generations, and establish channels of communication that span generations. It is

in this sense that owners of American Girl products might be viewed as keepers. Boynton (1995) quotes one mother who justified the expense of the dolls--especially when compared to "Barbie stuff" that would soon become "junk"--as having been well worth what she spent on her daughter's collection: "This is something I'll keep forever for her, and she can pass it on to her daughter if she has one" (p. D1).

It might be argued that one binary Pleasant Company sets up is the opposition of heirloom/unexceptional. Pleasant Company is insistent that its products are high quality and authentic reproductions of period pieces and wardrobes. As we have seen, it hires experts to research these matters, and consumers are presumably more inclined to pay high prices for items they consider to be classic and collectable. This privileging of the heirloom risks, however, undermining the very item it seeks to value. Addy's Family Album Quilt, "inspired by an authentic style from the 1800s" (Winter Fun 2000, p. 24), may be based on an original quilt, but that quilt was in all probability made from worthless pieces of scraps the quilter was trying to use for a practical purpose. That such items have been elevated to the status of heirlooms to be sold, collected, and displayed is at cross purposes with their original function.

This is precisely the situation in a modern short story, "Everyday Use," by Alice Walker. Walker (1990) writes of two sisters in a rural black family. One has gone off to college, changed her name to one of clear African descent, and comes home with a new perspective of her past. Assuming an educated, "enlightened," and condescending attitude about her humble homestead, she endows it with cultural importance, snapping photos of it on her Polaroid camera. In contrast, her sister has stayed at home, failing, in her sister's eyes "to make something of herself." The first sister asks her mother for a few quilts to take back with her, refusing her mother's offer for machine-stitched quilts for the more authentic ones her grandmother has made. Now viewing these quilts as priceless, she wants to hang them for display. When the mother hesitates, the second sister, who had been promised the quilts to use on her bed, tells her mother to give the

quilts away, assuring her that she can remember her grandmother without the quilts. The story ends when the mother impulsively takes the quilts from her college daughter and dumps them on the lap of Maggie, the stay-at-home daughter. The college daughter's reaction is one of indignation that her mother and sister simply don't understand their heritage. After the car dust settles and Maggie and her mother are alone again, they enjoy a dip of snuff, the mother obviously relieved that the quilts will be put to everyday use, the reader left to ponder the question of who really understands their heritage.

This story points to a contradiction that resides in the binary described above. The showcasing, collecting, and elevation of Pleasant Company's products as heirlooms can be viewed as somewhat elitist. As we shall see later, the museum-quality Pleasant Company wishes to bestow on its products is apparent in their display at American Girl Place behind expensive glass showcases. The question is raised: Is this the way affluent girls can comfortably appreciate their heritage?

Schor (1998) points out that individuals often seek distinction through collecting. Such individuals often buy goods privately or by appointment. Their stated reason for this is typically that they are looking for quality, craftsmanship, and individuality. But Schor argues that for those who are creating for themselves a new middle class lifestyle, the less obvious reason for their purchasing patterns is that they seek social distance. They want to feel that the products they are purchasing are somehow superior to the mass market productions. In the AG Summer 2001 catalogue, Pleasant Rowland's message on the translucent front cover appeals to this mind set:

We believe American Girl offers thoughtful alternatives to the disposable toys so prevalent today. All of our products are exquisitely made and designed to last. Our toys and clothing are available only in our catalogue, at American Girl Place in Chicago, and on our Web site, [web site address given]. American Girls books are also sold in fine bookstores nationwide.

On the back cover of the same catalogue is the message that American Girl's

friendly customer service representatives can “offer a happy respite from the frenzied environment of warehouse toy stores.” This setting oneself apart from the “run of the mill” products is a recurrent theme of American Girl marketing. It helps to establish the brand as an exclusive and high status one. Schor (1998) has noted that research on self-image reveals that the higher the brand’s status is perceived to be, the more closely consumers associate their self- image with it (p. 59).

Also functioning as a way of enhancing simple ownership is the ritual of gift-giving, which McCracken sees as participating in a transfer or movement of meanings. The American Girls Collection features both a Christmas collection and a birthday collection to accompany each American Girl Doll’s Christmas story and birthday story. These divisions undoubtedly make such products appropriate as gifts on these occasions in the life of a girl. Pleasant Company has, in fact, published an entire catalogue devoted to birthdays with everything a girl needs to make her birthday party complete. McCracken’s claim is that the gift chosen by the gift-giver may have the effect of bestowing meaning that the gift-giver wishes the gift-receiver to internalize. A parent may purchase an American Girl doll recital outfit for a daughter who is a violinist, for example, hoping to reinforce the image she has of herself as a musician. Or, in a slightly different scenario, the parent may make the purchase in an attempt to make such an activity more appealing to the daughter. The point here is that the sentimentality and emotions that may be involved in the ritual of gift-giving might arguably make identity messages more enticing to the girls who receive American Girl gifts.

Much of the research in consumption has focused on how consumption relates to social status, which is, of course, a component of one’s identity. Still influential in this regard is Veblen’s 1899 publication *Theory of the Leisure Class*. The crux of Veblen’s argument is that the higher social classes consume in order to stay one step ahead of the lower classes. Veblen saw the rise of what he designated the leisure class to be a result of the affluence in society as a result of developing technology and mass production. He

noted that the wealthy sought to mark their status through conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. His work is important to subsequent consumption theory because it drew attention to consumer practices that worked simultaneously both to establish social cohesion and foster social division.

Using insights from Veblen, Bourdieu (1984) studied patterns of consumption in France in the sixties and seventies, with an eye for seeing how consumption establishes and expresses distinctions between social groups. His empirically driven analysis led to his conclusion that consumption is a symbolic activity, experienced differently according to a person's personal taste. Rather than viewing taste as a matter of individual choice, Bourdieu claims that it is socially patterned. Hence, different class positions struggle to maintain or improve their social status by demonstrating their abundance of *cultural capital*—a kind of reservoir a person builds through education and family socialization. People who come from families rich in cultural capital, for example, are discriminating in their tastes, knowing how a formal table is set or being able to discern classic literature as opposed to popular texts. Their individual tastes are dependent on what Bourdieu calls “habitus,” a term that is more complicated than mere environment. It involves a complex set of mental schema and everyday knowledge (cultural capital) that is primarily shaped in childhood and reproduced between generations, becoming evident in a person's taste, which is so inscribed that it is experienced as “natural” when it is, in fact, socially patterned. As we shall see in our discussion of the American Girl catalogues and American Girl Place, Pleasant Company makes a concerted effort to attract customers whose cultural capital sets them apart from the masses.

According to Bourdieu, “cultural intermediaries” —style experts, image consultants, and the like—often serve as advisors to the middle classes in regard to tastes and lifestyles. As Corrigan (1997) notes, since consumption communicates social meaning, it is also a site of struggle. As we have seen, Schor's (1998) research demonstrated the emergence of a larger middle class of consumers who aspire to emulate

the consumption practices of those whose incomes far surpass theirs. Pleasant Company is hence able to draw from a wider base of customers than might otherwise be assumed. No doubt appealing to this wider base are the American Girl Library “self-help” advice books for girls, giving them helpful hints about manners, the making and keeping of friends, “grooming” their rooms, and taking care of their bodies.

Commenting upon trends in the market that developed in the 1980s, Gunter and Furnham (1998) point out that children and teenagers are a primary market in their own right: “Richer parents with fewer, but better educated children, have created a more sophisticated young people’s market which comprises a body of individuals with money to spend and increasing well-informed tastes and opinions in the sphere of consumerism” (p. 2). Toy companies must, of course, market to both adults and children. But it would be easy to assume that children in the age range of the American Girl products (7 to 11) would rarely be making their own purchases and/or spending their own money. To the contrary, Gunter and Furnham report that children in the United States often make their first independent purchase around the age of five. That children do have money to spend is evident in Schor’s sobering report that American parents give their children “more in pocket money than the world’s half-billion poorest adults earn each year” (p. 86). Further, marketing consultant Gene Del Vecchio (1997) cites statistics from Youth Market Alert estimating that 34 million children ages 4-12 receive some \$15 billion a year, spending all but the \$4 billion they save, on snacks, sweets, toys, games, and clothing. Moreover, their wealth appears to be growing significantly each year.

This growing recognition of the child as consumer, coupled with an economy that has given rise to affluent middle class parents who are not shy about indulging their children, has produced, according to survey data reported by Schor (1998), a marked increase in materialistic values in children. Interestingly, this is a concern that Pleasant Company has sought to address in the newsletter *Daughters* it published for parents of girls ages 10-16 until Fall of 2001 when it sold the newsletter to a national education non-

profit organization, Dads and Daughters.

The article from which I quote appears on the front page of the *Daughters* newsletter for Nov/Dec. of 1999. Its title, “Is She a Material Girl?,” is, I am assuming, an allusion to Madonna’s hit song “Material Girl,” and the article is written by Amy Lynch, editor of *Daughters*. Ironically, the newsletter came to its subscribers during the same month and year as the 128 page American Girl Holiday Wishes catalogue arrived, featuring on its front cover a young girl and her American Girl doll, both fast asleep on luxurious white linens and wearing white night clothes. Surrounding their heads are their dreamy visions of American Girl accessories dotted with small twinkling stars. The soft pastel colors emote a feeling of whimsical pleasure.

The inside cover is a double spread of eight pictures in brighter, less muted colors than the front page that showcase special pieces in the collection of products that appear in referenced page numbers throughout the catalogue. White letters crossing the double spread horizontally read: “The stuff of dreams from American Girl!” The inside back cover announces “Two Exciting New Places to Shop!” and features a picture of Pleasant Company’s only retail store, American Girl Place as well as a computer screen image of American Girl web site for online shopping.

The front cover of *Daughters* is an artistic rendering of a teenage girl, sitting on the floor with arms outstretched holding a sweater she has purchased. She appears to be reviewing her decision. Above her head in large pale red letters is the word “Values.” She is surrounded by shopping bags, a purse, and an open box of shoes. Smaller letters are used for the words “consume,” “buy,” “spend,” and “shop,” that are interspersed among the shopping bags.

The article begins with a mini-play, a convention that is followed on all lead articles on the front cover of *Daughters*. Stage directions match the illustration: A girl is sitting on the floor of her room, surrounded by shopping bags. The action begins when her mother enters and the two engage in a short dialogue, the mother being somewhat

alarmed by her daughter's multiple purchases, the daughter shrugging her shoulders at first ("I only bought a few things. It's no big deal") before becoming increasingly defensive. The brief drama is the springboard for a discussion in which Lynch gives advice to parents who live "in a cultural climate that leads our daughters to expect they ought to be able to buy everything they want, and now" (p. 1). She continues, "You and I know that the girls we love *are* so much more than what they buy or wear. Your job and mine is to be the voice of love and limits in our daughters' lives. Every girl can benefit from being reminded that her real power often lies in being able to say 'no.'" (p. 10).

Lynch then recounts a shopping trip she made with her daughter to buy her daughter's first bra. She shamefully confesses that she purchased *four* bras instead of one. "If I had it to do over," she writes, "I'd buy my daughter fewer bras and teach her more about making choices." In a section she labels, "Shopping for Identity," she explains to parents the importance of shopping for girls: "Digging through a stack of jeans or leafing through a catalogue, is, in a sense, a reflection of the search for identity that's going on inside them"(p. 10). Sharing ideas that might help curb a daughter's desires, she advises: "Ask your daughter, 'What emotions are being used to sell this product?' Point out how girls and women are portrayed" (p. 11). Finally, she advises parents to teach their daughters to give to charitable causes, presumably as a way to combat being a "material girl." That Pleasant Company never acknowledges or addresses its own role in encouraging girls to be material is but one of many examples of this striking contradiction that attends the company and its products.

In keeping with its educational mission, Pleasant Company has even sought to instruct girls regarding their stewardship of money. American Girls Savings Game is available *absolutely free* from the catalogue for girls who are "puzzled about how to save money for something special from The American Girls Collection" (Insert, Spring, 1996). It includes how to design a savings plan, set goals, and offers suggestions on how girls can earn money. The American Girl Library advice books publishes *Moneymakers:*

Good Cents for Girls, whose front cover is a dollar bill with a blond, smiling face girl in the spot George Washington's face would normally appear.

Girls and their parents definitely need financial resources to become collectors of American Girl treasures. The contradiction that is so blatant in Pleasant Company's efforts to curb materialism and its own marketing strategies is one that the company never recognizes. The final sections of this chapter will focus on the major marketing tools Pleasant Company uses to create and shape desires of consumers, be they child or adult. It will begin with the most powerful marketing tool Pleasant Company has—an award winning catalogue mailed directly to the homes of target customers.

The American Girl Catalogue

They drop into American girls' mailboxes every month or so—most frequently during the holiday season--some 50 million of them a year (Mahany 1998). For the uninitiated, another catalogue arriving in the mail during the holidays is a non-event. But Scher (1998) describes perfectly what countless parents have observed: “To understand the American Girls phenomenon, you probably have to be close to a child in the grip of the mania. My 8-year-old daughter, Sabrina, studies the catalogue the way scholars study the Dead Sea Scrolls” (p. 44).

Many mothers give it rapt attention as well. For one thing, it is simply too beautiful and sleek to throw away. It reads like a story book. It's about memories and it is educational. Moreover, shopping can be done in the comfort of one's own home, purchases made easily with the dialing of a toll free number, and payments are as simple as reading out the number and expiration date of one's credit card. Within a few days, the carefully packed and classically packaged items arrive, and nothing could be easier. It's a perfect solution to grandparents' dilemmas of what to buy granddaughters for birthdays and holidays. And it all happens through direct marketing.

Rowland's expertise and remarkable success with direct marketing, in fact, was one of the reasons Mattel cited for its desire to purchase Pleasant Company. Her award winning catalogue has been the envy of other marketing professionals. Typical of their

reactions is this one, published on the Web and Catalogue News Site in March of 1999, when the catalogue had been designated “Consumer Catalogue of the Month”:

Her catalogues are too big. They cost too much to mail. They are printed on paper much better than required. She uses much too much space inside to present her products. She doesn't sell on the cover or back cover. Many items inside are reproduced so large that they go across the binding line. And the most outstanding violation of all is that she shows items horizontally so that you have to turn the book in order to view them. On top of all, the catalogue is too big to fit in a traditional mail slot! Now add all that together and what do you get? You get the most outstanding, most successful and one of the best catalogue businesses created in the past twenty-five years, anywhere in the entire world.

In 1992, Rowland spoke at a New England Mail Order Association meeting about a number of her initial marketing decisions with regard to The American Girls Collection. According to Neal (1992), she decided to use direct marketing, she told the audience, because she had four problems. The first was that she didn't have the financial resources to compete with companies like Hasbro and Mattel. The second was that the uniqueness of her product idea simply didn't mesh with the “neon frenzy of discount toy stores” (quoted in Neal, p. 33). Third, she wanted to avoid television promotions whose commercial hype victimized both parents and their children, and last, she feared that licensing to a manufacturer would mean a proliferation of the concept's appearing on everything from sleeping bags to lunch boxes. Such saturation, she feared, would ruin the product image and make it a mere fad.

With these concerns in mind, Rowland created a catalogue to market her products that is aesthetically pleasing, interesting to read, and educates its targeted audience about the product's mission. Another early strategic decision was that no doll would be sold without a book. In this way, Rowland embedded a synergy in the product line that has been a hallmark of its success. As we have seen, the catalogue sells products that appear

in the story lines of the books. In order to have more product exposure, the books are marketed to retailers, each book containing a perforated card with information about the catalogue. All other merchandise was available only through the catalogue until the opening of American Girl Place in 1998 and the availability of online ordering in 1999. Company spokeswoman Julie Parks explained that the decision to sell online was based on information revealing that a high proportion of American Girl customers owned computers. Indeed, Pleasant Company's web site reports over 8 million hits per month.

Acosta-Alzuru's (1999) dissertation on American Girl Dolls contains a detailed description and analysis of the AG catalogues, with an emphasis on how its visual and verbal languages depict the products and construct an image of American past and present, as well as a particular version of American girlhood. One of her conclusions is that the catalogues construct an American girl identity with empowering features (p. 72), a point that is not without merit, but is debatable on grounds I hope to suggest in the present discussion. She rightly argues that Pleasant Company establishes a very personal connection/identity with girls by directing its messages to "you," a reader whom the text constructs as an "American girl" (p. 86). This point is illustrated best by the message that appears in numerous catalogues:

The American Girls Collection is for you if you love to curl up with a good book. It's for you if you like to play with dolls and act out stories. It's for you if you want to collect something so special that you'll treasure it for years to come. Meet [the historical characters are named}...lively American girls who lived long ago....You'll see that some things in their lives were very different from yours. But others—like families, friendships, and feelings—haven't changed at all. These are the important things that American girls will always share. (Holiday Catalogue 1995, p. 3)

Acosta-Alzuru (1999) also notes that especially with the American Girl of Today, Pleasant Company embraces diversity and multiculturalism, though she acknowledges

that the reality presented is both idealized and socially-privileged (p. 98). She points out that the historical collection of American Girls contains at the time of her study, six different combinations of skin, hair and eye color. This ethnically and visually diverse picture (it may be recalled that the AG of Today offers 20 combinations of skin, hair, and eye color), is, according to Acosta-Alzuru's analysis, reinforced by the use of girl models from various ethnic backgrounds in the catalogue.

My findings on this last point, based on girls depicted on the front covers of the catalogues I reviewed, is that Pleasant Company's representation of the American Girl is predominately white. I reviewed catalogues I had received in the mail beginning with a Special Holiday Edition for Addy in 1994 and ending with the 2001 Summer catalogue edition. The sample included 57 catalogues which are listed specifically in the Appendix B. Other catalogues may have been published between these dates that are not included in my sample. Of the 57 catalogue front covers I reviewed, 38 had at least one girl model on the cover. The others featured dolls only. Out of 43 girl models on the front cover, 38 were white. Only five catalogues had a front cover depicting a minority girl. The 1994 Special Edition, introducing Addy, featured a black girl holding Addy and reading one of the Addy books. Another 1994 holiday catalogue promoting Addy featured a white girl holding Addy, the only example of a girl on the front cover holding a doll of another race that I found. In Spring of 1996, an Asian girl is pictured with an Asian Girl of Today doll. The Holiday issue of 1997 shows an Hispanic girl with Josefina, and in Fall of 1998, a black girl sits with Addy on a library bench, dressed in AG back-to-school gear, reading "Addy Learns a Lesson." A biracial girl also appears on the cover of the 1999 Winter catalogue holding a Girl of Today doll. In no instance were girls of different races presented together on the front covers in the samples I reviewed.

Racially diverse representation does appear to be more present in the American Girl Gear catalogues, a much smaller catalogue that is published separately and is

devoted almost exclusively to advertising girls' clothing and accessories. Its Spring Gear 2000 catalogue features racially diverse girls on a majority of its pages.

The inside cover of the Spring 1997 American Girl catalogue, whose front cover pictures all of the American Girl dolls of the historical collection at the time of its publication, does feature a black girl sitting by a white girl in front of a window. The black girl is holding Addy and the white girl is holding Felicity. The back cover of that same issue shows two white girls sharing the same hoola hoop. Another catalogue, also in Spring of 1997, whose front cover features a white girl eating watermelon, has an inside cover that extends the picture. On the inside cover, four girls are pictured sitting on steps or bleachers. The first two white girls are eating watermelon, followed by a black girl and a white girl who are looking on.

The point I wish to make without belaboring it here is that the predominant racial image of American Girls is white. White girls play with white dolls, black girls with black dolls, hispanic girls with hispanic dolls, though, of course, exceptions do exist. Though Acosta-Alzuru is correct in identifying the use of racially diverse models in the catalogue, they are not featured very often on the prestigious front covers. Further, the no doubt well-intended effort to present the American Girl of Today with a palette of colors from which to choose her skin, hair, and eyes, flattens at best understandings of racial differences and emotes a kind of "race in a bottle" mix and match perception of ethnicity. Race becomes something a girl wears when she dons her Hanukkah outfit or dresses in her Kwanzaa buba, outfits both available in the catalogue for \$22 each. Class, as Acosta-Alzuru points out, is socially privileged, judging from the American Girl of Today's accessories that include ski suits and ski gear, a dog sledding outfit, a lazy day hammock, and a personal computer that actually works.

Acosta-Alzuru (1999) provides a thorough description of the catalogue for readers who have particular interest in it. Rather than reiterating many of the excellent points she makes, I focus on amplifying a few of the most salient points and clarifying,

in instances where my interpretations differ from hers, where the differences lie. I also make some observations regarding the changes in the catalogues, particularly since the Mattel buyout in 1998. I then move on to a discussion of marketing tools Acosta-Alzuru does not treat in detail: American Girl Place and American Girl charitable programs.

The format for the catalogues does change slightly from time to time, but the basic components remain relatively stable. The catalogues prior to 1995 were 10" x 12"; since 1995 they have been reduced to 9 1/4" x 11 1/2" and more recently, to a shorter, but wider 10 1/4" x 10 1/4". In the sample of catalogues I reviewed, the number of pages was typically from 65 to 113, with the pages expanding in holiday seasons to a high of 129 for the larger issues and 138 for the more recent 2000 Holiday issue. An inside cover message from Pleasant Rowland in the Summer Catalogue of 1999, (only 49 pages) makes the only reference for the benefit of customers I have ever seen regarding the catalogue mailings. It reads:

In response to customer requests, this year we've made a commitment to mailing fewer—and slimmer—catalogues, but always with news of special offers in them. As you browse through this issue, you'll find great summer savings wherever you see the sunburst symbol. We hope you appreciate our efforts to save space in your mailbox and trees in our forest. Summer, after all, is the perfect season to reflect on how lovely the shade of a leafy tree can be and how responsible we all must be for protecting this natural resource.

Indeed, the front cover of the catalogue pictures two American Girls sitting on a rock with a blurred scene of water and trees behind them. They are dressed, along with their American Girl Dolls of Today, in backpacking attire. Whether this message was an appeal to the green consumer or a result of efforts by Mattel to streamline the catalogue is difficult to determine. The Back to School issue which followed it toward the end of the summer was 69 pages, and the Holiday Wishes 1999 was 128 pages.

The covers of the catalogues present “model” American girls typically holding an American Girl doll. The models and dolls often resemble each other physically, and many of girls and dolls are dressed in identical outfits, which are, of course, sold in the catalogue. Some of the issues feature dolls only—either one doll and her accessories or a combination of dolls. Rarely, an American girl with no doll will appear. Backdrops vary—holiday ones being primarily Christmas trees or candle lit mantles, summer issues featuring outdoor scenes. The girls are most often reading and sometimes sleeping. The beautiful photographs suggest happiness and innocence. Almost all the girls, unless they are reading, are smiling, showing perfect unbraced teeth. The back covers are typically devoted to new items being promoted, often from the Bitty Baby collection, the Amelia collection, or AG Gear.

The catalogues often contain personal messages from Pleasant Rowland, which usually appear on the inside cover, occasionally on the back cover, and sometimes on some other inside page.⁷ A double spread typically introduces all of the historical dolls, some spreads providing more details than others. Testimonials from parents are often included in this spread. Each doll in the historical collection is featured, along with her introductory book and accessories, placed vertically on a double spread. The dolls have identical sub-sections and are presented in historical order unless the catalogue is introducing a new doll in the historical collection, as in the Fall 2000 catalogue when the Kit section comes first. Most catalogues devote at least a page, and sometimes two, to each book and matching outfit, furniture, and accessories. A page (or two) is devoted to

⁷ Since Rowland’s retirement, “A Message to Parents” is signed “American Girl.” Rowland is still mentioned from time to time as the founder of the company. See, for example, “A Daughter is a wonderful gift-and a bigger challenge than ever” in Holiday, 2002 catalogue, p. 3. Much of the catalogue text is unsigned.

each doll's school story, Christmas story, birthday story, summer story, and winter story. A "Sweet Dreams" section is not connected to a particular book, and features doll bedroom furniture—a bed, a night stand, a chest, and other accessories. Extra sections may highlight wardrobe additions, some of which are made to go along with small short story books that have been written about the character. Some outfits are offered for a limited time only, so collectors must purchase while the item is available. New items are highlighted, and all are accompanied by copy that contextualizes the items in relation to the stories or era of history they are representing.

The description, for example, of Josefina's "Heirloom Accessories" reads: "Drape the embroidered gold shawl, or *manton*, around Josefina's shoulders and slip the delicate black *fan* into her hand. Both were treasures of Mama's that Josefina and her sisters saved for special days. Fasten the elegant *choker* around her neck as a final fashionable flourish. **JBOA \$12.**" The bold-faced and italicized words identify the actual items for sale, and the description is followed by the code for ordering and the price. A page or more at the end of the historical collection section highlights "extras" such as doll care items, stationery sets, calendars, and pattern portfolios. Artisan Craft kits, cookbooks, theater kits, paper dolls may also be included. Matching outfits are featured in some of the catalogues enabling real girls to dress identically to their dolls. American Girl Mini dolls, which are tiny versions of the "real thing" are advertised for \$20 each. These enable the Girl of Today doll to have her own historical American Girl doll collection.

One of the ways that the catalogues have been condensed in recent issues is that not all of the collection is pictured. In the Summer 2001 issue, the dolls are not pictured on a double-spread, nor is the entire collection featured for every doll. In fact, for Addy and Felicity, only a small part of the collection is featured. The catalogue directs customers to view the entire collection at americangirl.com. This is a major change from more traditional catalogues that give identical space and treatment to each doll and typically present the entire collections. Since the buyout by Mattel, the catalogue has had

more and more products to present that are unrelated to the American Girl dolls. Though Bitty Baby, a doll marketed for younger girls, has been with the company since 1990, Angelina Ballerina and Amelia are new. One of the strengths of the older catalogues was their integrity to the theme—adhered to with meticulous attention to every detail. Since the buy-out, the inclusion of a mouse with clothes and furniture and a boisterous Amelia whose look has a pop culture, cartoon-like appearance is disconcerting.

The American Girl of Today always has a separate section, with a layout of the twenty combinations a girl can choose from before placing her order for the one that best suits her taste. Again, this section has been condensed in more recent issues, picturing a sampling of the choices and directing the reader to see the other faces at the web site. More and more pages have been added to this section in the past years as the American Girl of Today has continued at a steady pace to acquire new activities and wardrobes. It is also in this section that *American Girl* magazine is advertised. In fact, the American Girl of Today doll now comes not only with a blank book (a reduction from the six blank books that initially accompanied her) so that the new owner can write her own story, but also a writing guide and special issue of *American Girl* magazine. The 1998 Holiday Catalogue features the magazine as “the story” of the American Girl of Today. Some catalogues feature American Girl Gear, and most have pages that advertise American Girl Library products, including a new history mystery series for girls ages 10 and up as well as AG fiction for older girls. These books are not written by Pleasant Company’s team of writers. Writers may send manuscripts to the company and can get copies of guidelines through Pleasant Company’s web page.

The Bitty Baby Collection section appears in every catalogue I have reviewed, often as the last section. Other sections—those on Amelia or Angelina Ballerina—appear in some catalogues and not in others. The Bitty Baby Collection section is smaller than the historical collection section and the American Girl of Today section. It has been successful in keeping the Pleasant Company from succumbing to what Gunter and

Furnham (1998) have cited as a “cardinal sin” in the toy industry, positioning a product towards anyone younger than the oldest of the target market. Because toys frequently spiral downward quickly (Barbie’s primary age group is now 3-5 year olds), Rowland’s creation of Bitty Baby to take care of “younger sisters” was a smart marketing move. She openly urges parents, in a message which appears in multiple catalogues, to withstand their temptation to offer The American Girls Collection to their daughters before they are ready. Rowland’s best estimate of this time is when they are old enough to read independently, which she says is usually around second grade. She advises:

While a younger girl will love to have the stories read aloud to her and to play with the dolls, I strongly urge you to wait. Save The American Girls Collection for that day when she is truly ready and able to understand its historical lessons and to embrace the important values that the books teach and the doll play reinforces. (Fall 1998, p.1)

In the meantime, younger girls can be satisfied with collecting Bitty Baby and her accessories. Their having to “wait for the collection” will make it all the more special, both for them and for their older siblings. Like the American Girl of Today, Bitty Baby can be ordered according to ethnicity. There are five possibilities for Bitty Baby: African American, Blond Caucasian, Hispanic, Brunette Caucasian, and Asian American. As I have already noted, Pleasant Company has introduced Bitty Baby Twins (a boy and a girl) for 2002 holiday season.

A point I wish to emphasize about the catalogues is that they seek to create a sense of nostalgia and sentimentality that seeks to assuage any qualms a parent might have about investing large sums of money in the products. By contextualizing the products with stories, the products become invested with emotions that arguably have no price tag. The songbird and sweets for Addy, for example, aren’t just a bird in a cage with fake candy. The sweets are a special gift Addy received from M’dear along with an endearing note, and the yellow canary is the one whose song gave Addy hope of being

free. Kit's necklace—styled after a compass inside a ship's wheel—is there to “remind her that she has to find her own way through hard times!” (Fall 2000, p. 7). Felicity's most precious gift is a guitar given to her by her grandfather that had once belonged to her grandmother. These built-in emotional attachments that connect the products with the books don't resonate with the emotion that we are creating “material girls.” Rather, Rowland would have us believe that we are instilling values, building relationships, and making memories when we purchase these products for our daughters. As Rowland puts it in a message to readers about her accumulation of dolls (she denies being a doll collector), her dolls are “tender reminders of people, places and moments that I love” (Holiday 1998, p. 1). What she has collected, she insists, are memories. In the fast paced world of modern day parenthood, parents are eager that their children have memories they imagine to be similar to those of their mothers and grandmothers in years gone by.

That the products are educational also gives a justification for their expense. In the Summer issue of 1999, Rowland writes another message to parents, this time promoting the six museum programs Pleasant Company has located around the country. The American Girls Living History Programs are vacation destinations for families who want to “give girls a tangible personal way to learn about history” (Catalogue insert, Travel to the past). American Girl fans can visit the museum or in some instances, the restored home, of an American Girl doll character and experience what her life was like. Rowland explains in her message that history is about more than dates and names. “It is the simple details of everyday life—the clothing our ancestors wore, the furniture they sat on, the dishes in their kitchens, and the decorations in their parlors” (Insert, Travel to the past). I would argue that the reduction of history to the simple details of everyday life obscures many important social and political issues children should be aware of. Though it might be interesting and even educational to know that Felicity might have attached *pattens* to her shoes when it was muddy and slushy outside, or that she may have stored

her clothes in the drawers of a clothes press (available in the catalogue for \$155) since there were no closets, such details of everyday life hardly qualify as substantive history.

Moreover, the spotlighting of particular eras in American history, has, as Acosta-Alzuru (1999) argues, the effect of making these eras and not others representative of America's past. As we shall see in Chapter Five, even the eras represented are depicted in highly selective ways. Acosta-Alzuru points out that, except in the case of Josefina, the stories of the dolls' personal dilemmas parallel those of the nation. Felicity, for example, rebels against the social expectations of colonial America just as the colonies are rebelling against the King of England and both Addy and her country learn the importance of freedom (Acosta-Alzuru, p. 90). Though these issues are more clearly delineated in the books than the catalogue, the catalogue hints at them by providing book previews designed to entice girls to read the books.

That the dolls are imbued with certain values is more than apparent with even a casual review of the catalogue. Descriptive adjectives connote positive qualities and attributes. Felicity is "spunky" and "spritely," Addy is "courageous," and Kit is "clever and resourceful." Josefina is a "girl of heart and hope," Kirsten, a "girl of strength and spirit." Samantha is a "bright Victorian beauty," and Molly a "lovable schemer and dreamer." The girl-characters are depicted as strong-willed and principled, unafraid to stand up for their beliefs. But neither do they risk "stepping on anyone's toes." They problem-solve in ways that make everyone come out a winner. Del Vecchio (1997) states that for a brand to attract girls, it must help the girl be "powerful in a girl-accepting way" (p. 52). Pleasant Company's carefully chosen words illustrate this. Kit is "clever" instead of smart, Molly is a "dreamer" not a doer, Felicity is "spunky" not aggressive. Molly "looks smart for school" in her plaid jumper and blouse, but she hates "Miss Campbell's horrible multiplication bees." A sentence from the copy of her schoolbag and supplies accessories speaks directly to the girl who owns Molly: "If Molly works hard, you can give her an A on her report card." This suggestion that Molly should earn an A for effort

and hard work as opposed to earning an A due to her brainpower and natural talent supports a stereotype about girls commonly highlighted in gender educational research (see Sadker and Sadker, p. 94).

Perhaps the most controversial area surrounding values promoted in The American Girls Collection is the extent to which girls are given messages of genuine empowerment. Acosta-Alzuru (1999) argues that the focus on American girls (to the exclusion of boys) is, in itself, empowering. Though there may be some merit to this argument, an equally compelling notion is that separating and essentializing gender operates from the same ideology of patriarchy that sets up inequalities in the first place. To create a moment for girls in history risks assuming that one never existed. One way to read the oft-repeated phrase in the American Girl of Today section, “you’re a part of history too!” is to sense a condescending rather than a celebrating tone. That a girl would feel the need to wear a tee-shirt that reads “Proud to be an American Girl,” the 10th anniversary T-shirt introduced in the Fall 1996 catalogue, is, from this perspective, a bit disheartening. Finally, Acosta-Alzuru also concludes that when girls are given a sense of belonging to a special group—“American Girls”—this sense of belonging is empowering. For some, perhaps. But for as many or more, that others belong merely points to their own exclusion. In the case of “American Girls,” those who are excluded are likely those whose financial resources simply can’t pay for their entry into the group. These girls may be precisely those who need empowering the most.

One of the most troubling components of Pleasant Company’s messages to girls through its catalogue and products is the reinforcement of the importance of appearance to a girl’s well-being. Dressing for the part is all-important and even activities as generalized as going on a picnic or painting a picture have “outfits.” Girls show “spirit” by wearing a classic varsity jacket with an American Girl logo on the front, and they are “confident and comfortable” in school hallways and city sidewalks when they are sporting an “urban outfit.” Though the catalogue copy (July 1997) reminds girls that “A

kind heart will always beat a closetful of clothes” (p. 3), the catalogue also suggests that one’s creativity is demonstrated by mixing and matching fashions that express “who you are” (p. 3). Strong links are established between clothes and friends, with but one of many illustrative examples appearing in the Fall 1998 American Girl Gear catalogue. On a double spread entitled “New Friends,” two girls dressed in American Girl denim are study partners sitting on opposite sides of a school desk. The copy reads “These true-blue denims are friendly and familiar. They feel just right—like the start of a great friendship!” (p. 3). It is in this way that one’s appearance, signified by fashion, is conflated with values and/or positive attributes.

I have sought in this discussion to highlight the synergistic relationship between the catalogues and the books of historical fiction, books that Rowland insists lie at the very core of the product line. Marketing strategies that attempt to create a solid and enduring identification with the child consumers and American Girls have been identified, as have characteristics of that identity including ethnicity, class, and gender. Attention has been directed to the ideology of wholesome and traditional values, a nostalgic sense of return to an idealized past, and a depiction of history that privileges the small details of everyday life at the risk of obscuring significant social and political issues. Some of the ways Pleasant Company constructs a girl as consumer, including its emphasis on fashion and appearance, have been noted.

If any one statement could adequately account for Pleasant Company’s phenomenal success it would be that the company sells much more than products: It sells emotions, memories, and experiences, all with a personal touch that set it apart as being distinctive and special. Retail analyst Sid Doolittle has commented upon the “cult-like” following of American Girl customers, remarking that “there’s a connection between the merchandise and the buyers that goes beyond the purchase” (quoted in Ammenheuser, 2000, online). As we have seen, establishing that connection has been a priority for founder Pleasant Rowland. As a former school teacher, Rowland recognizes the

importance to learning of having “hands-on” experiences. She also understands the power of emotions, and the strong connection people have with products that are linked to memories. American Girl Place provides all of this and more, as we shall see.

American Girl Place

Kotlowitz (1999), an author whose work focuses on issues of race, class, and children who grow up in what he calls the “other America,” has drawn attention to the painful connections ghetto kids in Chicago seek to make with mainstream America through consumption. The descriptive first paragraph of that article is worth quoting in its entirety:

A drive down Chicago’s Madison Street, moving west from the lake, is a short lesson in America’s fault lines of race and class. The first mile runs through the city’s downtown—or the Loop, as it’s called locally—past high-rises that house banks and law firms, advertising agencies and investment funds. The second mile, once lined by flophouses and greasy diners, has hitched onto its neighbor street to the east, becoming a mecca for artists and new, hip restaurants, a more affordable appendage to the Loop. And west from there, past the United Center, home to the Chicago Bulls, the boulevard descends into the abyssal lows of neighborhoods where work has disappeared. Buildings lean like punch-drunk boxers. Makers of plywood do big business here, patching those same buildings’ open wounds. At dusk, the gangs claim ownership to the corners and hawk their wares, whatever is the craze of the moment, crack or smack or reefer. It’s all for sale. Along one stretch, young women, their long, bare legs shimmering under the lamplight, smile and beckon and mumble short, pithy descriptions of pleasures they promise to deliver. (pp.65-66)

The experiences he goes on to describe in the article stand in stark contrast to another description I had recently read about Chicago in Pleasant Company’s 1998 Holiday catalogue entitled “A Day to Remember.” The piece describes Pleasant Rowland’s childhood memory, the one she says inspired her to open Pleasant Company’s

first (and, at present only) retail store in Chicago. Rowland's memory—of a day almost fifty years ago—recalls a special outing with her mother to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She remembers first a lunch with “delicious, warm cinnamon buns” and then the “pale blue ceiling, frosted in gold” of the orchestra hall where “tuxedoed musicians” invited the audience to sing along as it played “Beautiful Dreamer.” Descending out into the wintry evening when the concert was over, she and her mother walked down Michigan avenue, “white-gloved hand in white-gloved hand, squeezing our secret code: three squeezes from Mom meant ‘I love you’; four squeezes from me meant ‘I love you, too’” (Holiday 1998, p. 1).

The nostalgic tone of the piece intensifies when Rowland writes: “White gloves have gone the way of all-male orchestras, and I can't imagine where one would hear ‘Beautiful Dreamer’ today. But at American Girl Place you can create your own special memory with your American girl” (p.1). The new experience, she assures parents, contains the important features of the old, right down to the cinnamon buns served in the American Girl Café and the orchestra invitation to sing along in the American Girl Revue, housed on the third floor of the complex. Her parting words to parents is not to forget the “secret code” when they bring in their daughters for this special experience.

All too often the code for entry into the side of Chicago (and by extension, of America) that Rowland describes is secret, hidden, indecipherable to certain segments whose “cultural capital” as we have seen, simply does not measure up. Being served Samantha's petit four on powder blue heart-shaped plates at the \$16 per person tea in the American Girl Café must seem a bit far-fetched to girls on the West side who are nevertheless much closer to what some have called Chicago's hottest attraction than are those who travel there from all over the country.

Indeed, Pleasant Company could have not found a more suitable location than the city whose “Magnificent Mile” of shopping is of world-wide fame. According to *Visual Merchandising and Store Design* magazine, after selecting Chicago as the city for the

site, six months was devoted to finding the perfect location. Rowland reportedly felt that the store should not be in the located in the center of the hubbub on Michigan Avenue. “Just off” seemed more appropriate to its core customers, and the site’s proximity to the historic Water Tower added to its appeal (Winters, 1998).

The store, which opened on November 19, 1998, just in time for the holiday rush, is located on East Chicago Avenue. It is a 35,000 square foot complex with annual sales of about 25 million. According to Crain’s Chicago Business report (George, 1999), the store grosses an amount equivalent to 19 McDonald’s Corporation restaurants. The upper level of American Girl Place houses an A.G. Gear clothing boutique, and collections and displays of American Girl of Today and Bitty Baby. Also upstairs is the café, serving lunch, teas, and dinners at a price of \$16 for lunch or tea and \$18 for dinner. The lower level is home to The American Girls Collection of historical dolls, a bookstore featuring the entire line of American Girl books, the 150 seat theater which hosts the \$25 per seat American Girl Revue, and a photo studio, where for \$20 a girl can have her picture made and displayed on the cover of an *American Girl* souvenir magazine. American Girl Place also has a doll hospital, where a white-coated sales associate makes American Girl dolls as good as new. *The Wisconsin State Journal* reports that since its opening, 4 million people have visited the store, 450,000 meals have been served in the café, and 230,000 people have attended theater performances (Mattel unit American girl to announce New York city venue, 2002). Indeed, the complex is an example of what authors Pine & Gilmore (1999) have called “experience economy,” reflecting the fairly new trend of businesses that sell interesting experiences along with traditional goods and services.

Experiences are, in fact, what American Girl Place is all about. The store hosts after-school programs including seminars on manners for girls and spring decorating parties. There are parties to attend for the individual birthdays of each of the American girl dolls in the historical collection. Birthday parties for real American girls are also regularly booked. It hosts author visits and readings from American Girl authors like

Valerie Tripp and Connie Porter. More than half a million visitors have enjoyed these experiences, many of them traveling to Chicago with American Girl Place as their primary destination. During a visit in 1999 to Chicago, I visited the store and attended the American Girl Revue.

The store has a definite upscale, museum-type feel and look. More than 2, 400 American Girl accessories are displayed, along with dolls and historical settings, in glass showcases. Customers study and view the showcases, marking their wish lists for items they wish to purchase. The “passports” as they are called, can then be taken to a special desk so that purchases can be made. The store boasts that it is the only place where all American Girl products can be directly viewed. The experience can be a bit overwhelming, though the decor and lay-out do not crowd the merchandise. As one retail analyst observed, it is a subtle and soft sell. Burklow (1998) says one of the visitors described the feeling of being transported into the glossy pages of the catalogue when she walked through the door. Elegant upholstered furniture provides comfortable seating for mostly Dads. Even though the store may be crowded, the atmosphere is not loud or boisterous. I observed parents videoing their daughters as they oohed and aahhed over the merchandise and peered through the glass showcases. The store definitely bestows upon its products the status of historic collectibles. The showcase room of The American Girls Collection reminded me of the Smithsonian and the boutique that sold books and other souvenirs from America Girl was like a museum gift shop. The message communicated is clear: we are history, we are heirlooms, we are collectable, and we are unique. Most importantly, this gigantic advertisement for all American Girl products says, albeit discreetly, “we are for sale.”

Since I was traveling alone, I did not dine in the café, though I observed those who were dining from a distance. My observations, as well as written accounts I have read in reviews of American Girl Place, more than qualify this experience as one which creates, as Rowland suggests, an unforgettable memory. The black and white polka dot

and stripes decor, accented in pink, gives the dining room a look the Pleasant Company catalogue describes as having an “all-girl” flavor. Pink cloth daisies provide table centerpieces, and white linen cloths and silver give an elegant ambience. Food is served from trolley carts, and dolls are given place settings as well as sassy seats so that they can comfortably dine with their owners. Food items are based on the food items served during the historical eras the dolls depict. Chocolate pudding, for example, is served in Molly’s Victory garden flower pot and diners can choose to order Addy’s sweet potato pie or Felicity’s tea sandwich. Meals begin with warm and gooey cina-minis. Sodas are not an option for beverages. Girls may choose hot cocoa, hot tea, pink lemonade, or milk. Adults have the option of wine or champagne for \$6 a glass.

The crowning event for many visitors was, until it was recently discontinued, the American Girl Revue, written by Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford. Cryer wrote the book and lyrics for the Broadway musical *I’m Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road*, and Ford wrote the music for that as well as a number of other off-Broadway shows. The *Revue* is based on the books in the historical fiction series. The setting is a meeting of an American Girls fan club, and eight girls and four adults make up the cast. In the Revue, each girl brings her favorite story to life and in so doing, learns something about herself. The music, which is still available on a CD, includes titles such as “Imagine,” “Hold On to Your Dreams,” and “Goin’ to Freedom.” The grand finale is “The American Girls Anthem.”

American Girl Place reinforces Pleasant Company’s mission and gives a collective home for the thousands of girls who identify themselves as American Girls. Perhaps more than any other facet of the company, it clearly marks American Girls as residing in an upscale and opulent environment. Both literally and figuratively, it’s only a short walk to Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue. Pleasant Company may be empowering girls in numerous ways, but it is unquestionably paving the way for their futures as consumers whose distinctive tastes may help secure their social standing.

Raising Funds for Charities: Fashion Shows and Ice Cream Socials

One of the most innovative and fascinating marketing and public relations tools Pleasant Company has are special events that it co-hosts with nonprofit organizations across the United States to raise money for children's charities. In 1992, it launched the first of such efforts by targeting Junior Leagues across the United States urging them to host American Girls Fashion Shows. The idea was to make American Girl products more visible, entertain the consumer, and raise money for children's charities. The typical arrangement for such an event is that Pleasant Company provides the organization with clothing, a script, a music and training video, an operations manual, tickets, invitations, advertising samples, and a list of catalogue buyers. The sponsoring organization pays Pleasant Company a lump sum (approximately \$5,000) for the rights to produce the show. Proceeds from the event go directly to charity, along with 5 percent of sales resulting from catalogue distribution during the event. An alternative to the Fashion Shows are Pastimes Parties based on activities that were popular during the eras of the dolls in the Historical Collection.

Pleasant Company estimates that it gives more than 2 million dollars each year to children's charities through cash, product donations, and partnerships like those described above (Pleasant Company, 2001). While this kind of giving is significant and praiseworthy, events like fashion shows and ice cream socials, typically hosted by the affluent to serve those "less fortunate," should not be immune to critique. These activities signify both gender and class markers that limit rather than expand girls' perceptions of themselves. Fashion shows are not many steps removed from beauty pageants that call undue attention to girls' appearance. Further, a rather homogenous picture of girls emerged from the Pastimes Party I attended in my hometown: white girls dressed in party dresses identical to their American Girl dolls smiled and posed for pictures with groups of friends, similarly dressed. They participated in domestic crafts from girls of yesteryears and chatted about what accessories they wanted to buy for their American

Girl dolls next. That a small portion of their \$25 dollar ticket went to abused children doesn't erase that image.

Chapter Five will draw examples from each of the historical American Girls in my study to illustrate points directly relevant to the research questions. In addition, it will provide a more in-depth analysis of the books of historical fiction in the Molly series with the goal of investigating how these texts participate in the construction of a girl's identity as well as how they construct a particular version of the past.

CHAPTER 5
AN ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL FICTION AND SELECTED
RELATED TEXTS IN THE AMERICAN GIRL COLLECTION

The AG Historical Fiction Books and Selected Related Texts: A Feminist Post-structural Approach

In the analysis which follows, I employ a feminist poststructural framework, informed by neo-Marxist insights, to guide my reading of the historical fiction books in The American Girls Collection. My understanding of poststructuralist reading does not preclude conventional strategies of textual analysis, though it does preclude an authoritative reliance on them as being fixed or universal. I have attempted to view theory, not as a “kind of conceptual gobbledygook” but rather as a “set of thinking tools” (Bourdieu, quoted in Jenkins, 1991, p. 67). As a critical reader, I select a tool that seems suitable for my purposes and ask of it: To what use can this be put?

I use data from all of The American Girl series (with the exception of Kaya) to support the themes I identify. The chapter concludes with a more in-depth discussion of the books about Molly, one that reiterates the themes in the first sections of the chapter and includes discussion of some of the auxiliary texts that are spin-offs of the American Girls historical books.

Before beginning an analysis of episodes and passages in the selected texts, I want to comment generally on the highly gendered world of the series as a whole and its depiction of an essentialized girlhood common to girls of the past and the present. The company’s logo, a silhouette of a girl reading a book, accompanied by her doll sitting beside her, clearly targets girl consumers. The trade name American Girl names an

identity that is readily apparent in the historical fiction books. Regardless of their particular personalities or places in history, the characters in the books are first and foremost *girls*. The explicit mission of Pleasant Company, appearing on the front page in numerous catalogues as an introductory message signed by Pleasant Rowland, is to forefront girls and highlight their moments in history. That the world these girls inhabit is patriarchal is never masked in the series, nor should it be. Feminists have fought tirelessly to make the unfairness of this ideology a political issue, both as it existed in the past and as it continues in the present. Indeed, if our present world did not emphasize gender and, in many significant ways, privilege males, there would be no need for the feminist stance. The books do establish a male/female binary, but a contention of this study is that these terms are seldom dislodged or reconfigured. The privileged status of the male remains unchecked. While it could be argued that the very focus on girls is one way of reversing the binary, this simple reversal duplicates instead of transforming the kind of thinking that created the original binary.

The importance of this discussion for the present study is that readers of the series may be tempted to dismiss the patriarchal world of American Girls as accurately reflecting the way things were. On the other hand, as Adkins (1998) has shown, to assume that the dominant values were the only values of a past era is to present a past that is simply not authentic. She argues that authors who present the dissonant voices of the past enable us to grasp a more complete and complex picture of it. It should be noted that The American Girls Collection books do make some attempts to depict girls displaying non-traditional behaviors with regard to gender. The extent to which these attempts offer a compelling alternative for girls is a debate this study addresses, especially given both the layer of consumptive activity that overshadows or diminishes their intent and the careful containment of feminist gestures so that they never disrupt the patriarchal order.

Even the most adamant feminist would acknowledge that steps have been taken in the last several decades to further the cause of gender equity. Hence, there is some justification for viewing the past (1940s and earlier) as a time when gender stereotypes were more pronounced than they are today. As Macleod (1998) observes, historical fiction must not ignore the social strictures of the time. But her point must be considered along with a recognition of the fallacy that women and girls of today are somewhat more enlightened than were their predecessors, a position that contradicts abundant evidence to the contrary (Adkins, 1998). Indeed, Lehr (2000) advises that “authors should not invent or reinvent history, but there is adequate primary documentation to suggest that some women did not submit willingly to male hierarchies throughout history, perhaps more than a few” (p. 200). Aside from Samantha’s young aunt, who participates in a women’s suffrage rally, and Josefina’s aunt, Tia Dolores, who initiates a family business, there is little evidence in the series that women questioned their domestic and submissive roles. The girl-characters may question them, (see the discussion, for example, of Felicity below) but they are eventually reconciled to positions which are not threatening to the status quo.

One question, then, that must necessarily concern the writer of historical fiction about girls, is to what extent the heroines of these books would have either been given the opportunity to resist the gender expectations of their time or would have created for themselves such opportunities. Further, if it were *possible* for girls who lived in circumscribed environments to resist behaviors and attitudes deemed proper for the female sex, how *probable* was it? In the case of Pleasant Company, who seeks to present “representatives” of *the* American girl, would choosing an *atypical* example of a girl who defies gender norms be prudent?

Responses to these questions continue to be subjects of debate, and this study does not lay to rest these important issues. While recognizing that the social mores of the past cannot be ignored, this study also contends that the presentation of how girls

performed as girls, even in an historical context, does not erase the effects of that performance on girls of the present, especially when contemporary girls are encouraged to reenact through play, dress, and craft activities the lives of the fictional characters. According to Evans' (1991) account of the colonial tea held in Williamsburg to celebrate Felicity's debut as an American Girl, close to 6,000 girl attendees learned to sew mock-caps, sip tea gracefully, and curtsy like a lady. Boynton (1995) writes of an elementary school teacher who conducts craft classes as a part of her school curriculum using American Girl books. The teacher reported teaching the girls to make drawstring bags, hobby horses, shadow puppets, trinket boxes, and hooked rugs. These gendered activities seem likely to reinforce rather than challenge stereotypical behaviors associated with girls.

Further, Pleasant Company's oft-repeated message to girls, that they will be able to see, by looking at the everyday lives of girls, that "although some things have changed, some things have remained the same" serves to blur differences between girls of the past and girls of today, leaving the girl-reader with the difficult task of discerning what traditions of girlhood she will embrace and which ones she will reject. Moreover, the statement implies that girls of today and girls of the past constitute definable groups who share certain values and behaviors. This suggestion supports an essentialist view of gender that runs counter to the feminist post-structural view of the category of girls/women as being multiple, varied, and socially constructed .

It is to the construction of gender in the series that I wish to begin the analysis in this chapter. Butler's (1990 a & b, 1993) conceptualizing of gender as performativity provides a method of seeing how girls are positioned throughout the American Girls series by discourses that naturalize certain behaviors and performances that mark girlhood. As the next section will demonstrate, girls in the series frequently find themselves on stage—both literally and figuratively—where their conformity to gender norms receives reinforcement and their efforts to resist them are met with disapproval.

The metaphor of the stage lends itself to deconstructive insights. It helps to shape and defend the ideology, on the one hand, of girls as objects of gaze, performers on stage who have written scripts to utter, choreographed motions to repeat and certain gestures to take up. It helps us to conceptualize that we are in some ways scripted by the discourse around us; but it also opens up a possibility for resistance, for rewriting the script, for subverting the role, for refusing to participate in the performance as written. Read in this way, the play, to borrow Hamlet's word's, doesn't necessarily become "the thing," but is instead immersed in multiple and contradictory possibilities. This is among the many insights Butler (1990a) contributes to feminist thinking in *Gender Trouble*, a title whose words might be used to describe Felicity's situation in the scene which follows. Though Butler uses the word trouble in her book as a verb suggesting a dismantling of our traditional concept of gender, the word retains (as her title suggests) its noun use suggesting that gender can also be a source of trouble for those who feel hampered by it.

Staging Girlhood: Platforms for Performance

The positioning of Felicity, in Book Two of her series, on an October day atop the roof of her house, both literally and figuratively allows her temporary escape from the kitchen beneath it, where her mother and other female relatives are busy making apple butter. A predominant theme of the book is the quest for freedom. The setting, it may be recalled, is the American Revolution, and Felicity's efforts to free an abused horse, Penny, from her master parallel the country's own fight for freedom from the abuse of the King. Moreover, Felicity is seeking her own individual freedom.

Felicity has rationalized her decision to climb on the roof by convincing herself that the best apples are at the very top of the tree and can be reached from where she is sitting. This need for rationalization on Felicity's part highlights her guilt for disengaging herself from the women's work taking place below her. The binary of public/private is suggested when Felicity tries to whistle on the rooftop so that everyone in Williamsburg can see her in this position of power and prestige. She admires a red cardinal nearby and envies its ability to fly wherever it wishes with no one to stop it.

When Felicity's mother discovers her absence from the kitchen, her stern words align her with the domestic private world: "Felicity Merriman, I will not shout for all the world to hear. Come down from that roof immediately" (*Felicity learns a lesson*, p. 4).

Explaining to Felicity that she has no more sense than a "giddy goose" (p. 5), Mrs. Merriman sighs. She has perhaps missed the irony of her own metaphor. The giddy goose suggests both the abandoning of decorum and the wings of flight that Felicity intuitively desires. Felicity's mother continues: "And let us hope no one saw you on the roof with your petticoats blowing above your knees, barelegged as a newborn babe. 'Tis wrong and unseemly for a girl your age" (p. 5). Minutes later, Felicity is no longer in public view. She has retreated to the private world of the kitchen where she is stirring apples in the pot, listening to her mother's warning not to scorch her petticoat by the fire. The dangers of the kitchen pale when compared to the dangers of the roof however. Scorching Felicity's petticoat by fire in the kitchen is preferable to the wind's blowing it above her knees on the rooftop where her bare legs will be in clear view of the public. If the best apples are indeed at the top of the tree, Felicity will have few opportunities to pick them.

When Felicity returns to the kitchen, Felicity's mother begins to lecture her. "Caring for a family is a responsibility and a pleasure. It will be your most important task, and one that you must learn to do well...A notable housewife runs her household smoothly, so that everyone in it is happy and healthy. Her life is private and quiet. She is content doing things for her family" (*Felicity learns a lesson*, p. 7). Mrs. Merriman, as her name connotes, devotes most of her time to making the men and children in her life merry—and in so doing, the text suggests, she is merry herself. As a climax to her lesson to Felicity, she cuts an apple in half and shows her the flower hidden inside every apple, her point being that lovely things are private and hidden, and women don't have to be noticed publicly to realize their inner beauty. Mrs. Merriman's homily suggests that she has no desire to reverse or reconfigure the public/private binary.

One method of deconstructive reading, as articulated by Spivak (1976) in her preface to Derrida's work, is that readers become alert to words that work first in one way, then in another. All words do this, in a sense, but thinking deconstructively heightens our awareness of the slippery nature of words and metaphors. Spivak encourages the reader to catch such slippery words, not by holding on to them, but by pursuing their adventures through the text. It is this way that we can reveal the way words often transgress themselves and belie any single definition.

The extension of the Felicity story provides a telling example of a slipping word. The red cardinal symbol is used again at the very end of *Felicity Learns a Lesson*. This time, instead of Felicity's admiring the bird's freedom from the rooftop, she has stitched a red cardinal at the top of the sampler she is making. It turns out that Felicity's retreat from the rooftop led her not just to the kitchen, stirring apples, but to private lessons in manners given at the home of Miss Manderly.

Moving from its earlier associations with freedom, the bird has accrued additional connotations, since it now becomes a way for Felicity and her friend Elizabeth to come together in spite of their differences as Patriots and Loyalists respectively. Readers discover at this point that the red cardinal is the official songbird of Virginia. After an argument the girls have over the tea tax, they are hardly speaking at the weekly manners lessons they both take at Miss Manderly's. Elizabeth finally breaks the silence when she asks if Felicity would mind her stitching a red cardinal on her sampler, too. When Felicity hears Elizabeth's request, she "felt her spirits rise like a bird. *Elizabeth is still my friend*, she thought. She smiled at Elizabeth" (*Felicity Learns a Lesson*, p. 60). The bird has shifted from its association with freedom and flight to one of compromise—both girls can take pride in their state, regardless of how they feel about the tea tax. Felicity expresses her freedom of choice when, as a proper lady, she gracefully turns her teacup upside down on the saucer when Miss Manderly offers her tea. Felicity is clearly learning

the rules of resistance within the discourse available to her. She has, in fact, stitched the red cardinal upon a sampler that she is making to demonstrate her skills as a proper girl.

One way of framing Felicity's situation would be to see it as a binary opposition: defiance/obedience. Parts of the narrative support Felicity's spunk and independence—her escape from the kitchen—demonstrated by her retreat to the rooftop and her envy of the bird. But this apparent privileging is undermined by Felicity's defiance being reduced to choice only if it is within the parameters of being a proper girl. The only viable identification she can achieve with the bird is that she, too, is figuratively “stitched” or fixed in a form of expression (needlework). The bird's adventures in discourse continue to travel—right to the pages of the American Girl catalogue. Felicity's needlework kit and frame—featuring a colorful bird, vines, flowers, and the words *Faithful Friends Forever* can be purchased for \$22.

Another platform for performance in the *Felicity* series culminates in Felicity's evening at the Governor's Ball when she is at last allowed to parade her femininity and demonstrate the lessons she has learned from Miss Manderly. One recurrent theme in the American Girl books—one that supports the sale of its products as well as underscores the importance of appearance to girls—is that clothing is linked with identity and self-esteem. Felicity, who in book one of her series has viewed gowns and petticoats as bothersome and laments that being a girl is sometimes “tiresome” (*Meet Felicity*, p. 15), has by Book Three generated enthusiasm about the wonderful gown she must have to attend the Governor's Ball. “If I had a beautiful new gown I wouldn't be nervous...Then I would dance well. I would not make any mistakes. If I had a new gown, everything would be perfect” (*Felicity's surprise*, p. 21).

Felicity's mother suggests refurbishing an old gown to save money. Felicity's father's general store has not been selling at its usual level (he has refused to sell tea because of the tea tax and has incurred the wrath of some of his customers, a far cry from Felicity's own mode of resistance which was to gracefully turn her teacup upside down

and to engage in a method of compromise with her Loyalist friend). Felicity worries. Even with the new trim for her brown dress, she fears she will look like “a little brown field mouse!” (*Felicity’s surprise*, p. 25). While she and her mother are shopping for items to dress up her old gown, Felicity stops still in her tracks. She sees the doll, “standing on a shelf, holding a bouquet of tiny silk flowers...The doll’s gown was made of blue silk. It was the bluest blue there ever was—bluer than the sky, bluer than the sea—a blue so bright it lit up the shop. The neck and sleeves of the gown were trimmed with a frill of lace as white and delicate as snowflakes” (*Felicity’s surprise*, p. 25).

Learning that the doll’s gown has been inspired by the very latest style in England, Felicity and her mother are delighted to learn that the milliner just happens to have a bolt of the same fabric, and Felicity’s mother, demonstrating the impulsiveness often associated with women, splurges and decides to purchase the fabric, assuaging her guilt by vowing to make the gown for Felicity herself.

A major part of the narrative from this point on concerns itself with whether Felicity’s mother, who becomes ill, can regain her health in time to finish the dress. Though Mrs. Merriman’s health is restored the very day of the ball, it is Felicity’s friend Elizabeth and her mother who have finished the dress. It is, in fact, the dress that is the surprise alluded to in the title of the book, *Felicity’s Surprise*. After a dressing ritual that lasts several paragraphs, Felicity departs with Ben, the apprentice, her escort to the Governor’s ball.

When Felicity arrives at the ball, she thinks to herself in fairytale fashion that her own gown is the loveliest of them all. As the narrator explains, “the beautiful blue gown worked its magic. As the dance lesson went on, Felicity felt more and more at ease” (*Felicity’s surprise*, p. 57). Felicity’s “brilliant taffeta gown,” complete with its pink stomacher, pearl necklace, satin ribbon, and pinner cap sells for \$24 as a doll outfit; the gown for the girl-reader is \$98. The invitation to the Governor’s Ball and the fashion doll who inspired the dress (the doll was given to Felicity by her father) can be purchased

for \$18. The catalogue text accompanying the dress reads: “Imagine yourself in the same exquisite party dress Felicity wore to the palace” (Holiday 1996, p. 61).

Simple dress descriptions invite deconstructive readings. The taffeta material, with its slight sheen, is used especially for women’s garments. The word resonates with “taffy”—a sweet chewy candy made of molasses or brown sugar, and then pulled with the hands until it is glossy and holds its shape. The sheen and gloss that give the gown its brilliance make Felicity shine. But the brilliance is not associated with impressive mental acuteness and both sheen and gloss are surface effects, gloss suggesting superficiality or deception. The associations of brilliance in this context are akin to the brilliance of a precious gem, an object to be treasured and showcased. It is in this sense that Felicity may be viewed as being shaped by discourse—a literal pink stomacher, and a figurative, repetitive pulling and molding process that has shaped her from resistance to gender expectations in the earlier books to a proper young woman whose self-esteem is intertwined with a taffeta gown.

The third platform of performance I wish to discuss takes place in Kit’s living room. Though there are numerous examples in her series that illustrate the importance of clothing to a girl’s well-being, I have chosen an episode in book six of her series to illustrate an example of what might be called the transforming power of clothing. Kit’s story takes place, it may be recalled, in the Depression era, a time when even families who were accustomed to economic stability were experiencing hardships. Amidst this general atmosphere of despair, the suspense of the first chapter is that “something wonderful was going to happen” (*Changes for Kit*, p.1). The reader surmises that everyone is “in the know” except Kit—even Kit’s dog Gracie is wearing a “goofy, drooly, doggy grin.” The presentation of a “new” coat for Kit takes place with an assembly of friends and relatives in the family’s living room, one of the few rooms in the house that has not been converted to a room for boarders. With beaming pride, Kit’s mother explains that she and Mrs. Howard, a boarder the family is housing during the

Depression, have taken Kit's father's old coat apart, and using the material inside out, have made a new coat for Kit. Kit is delighted, convinced that her mother is the "cleverest mother in the world" (*Changes for Kit*, p. 3). Kit grins and confesses that she likes the coat even more knowing that it is not exactly new.

Upon hearing this, one of the nurses and Kit's friend, Ruthie, present Kit with another surprise they have made: red, white, and blue mittens and a hat that have been fashioned from an old sweater they have unraveled and blue yarn from a cap that the dog had chewed. Kit tries on her newly acquired clothes with considerable fanfare. Her mother tilts her hat "*just so*," and Kit spins around, giving her audience a chance, as her mother has requested, to see the whole effect. The audience eagerly responds: Charlie, her brother, whistles; Stirling, her friend, claps; and "all the ladies *oohed and aahed*" (*Changes for Kit*, p. 4). Such responses to Kit's modeling behaviors help to ensure that the behaviors will be repeated or taken up on future occasions.

The coat and accessories have a double purpose in Kit's narrative. They make her feel stylish, grown-up, important, and secure. The clothes themselves, as is typical in the series, are described as giving sensual pleasure: "Kit held the collar to her nose and took a deep, delicious breath of the clean-smelling, wooly material. She felt warm and cozy" (*Changes for Kit*, p.5). The clothes become more than mere items. They are emblematic of sacrifice and friendship. They have been made from the materials that once belonged to people Kit loves. That people who know and love the American Girl reader can purchase this outfit for her Kit doll, \$20 for the winter coat, and additional \$16 for the beret and mittens (Holiday 2001, p.13) is a powerful marketing strategy, but surely something is lost when sentiment and emotion become a part of the price for a mass-manufactured outfit, advertised in a glossy, up-scale catalogue that is worlds removed from Dad's old coat and sacrifices made during the Depression. It is this kind of transformation that readers of The American Girls Collection need to be conscious of. It is this kind of multiple layering that deconstructive reading strategies seek to uncover.

Looking beneath the layer of the glossy catalogue photo of Kit's coat, one finds a mass-produced coat of new material, covering a pieced together coat of old materials, produced by the individual efforts of Kits' friends, all because there was no money to afford a new coat. This coat is now being sold only to individuals who are affluent enough to afford it, having been designed to begin with for that purpose. The women's daughters in the factory who are producing the coat may be among those who would be hard pressed to purchase it.

The way that clothing drives the plot of Kit's series does not stop in Kit's living room; in fact, it is in the living room that Kit gets a new idea. She decides to give her old coat to one of the children she has seen in the hobo jungle near the train station or in soup kitchen lines. The scene shifts from the living room to the soup kitchen. Kit and her friends set out on this mission and have no difficulty locating a girl whose own skimpy coat is stained and torn. The narrator describes the child as having tangled hair, dull eyes, and seeming as "lifeless and colorless as a shadow" (*Changes for Kit*, p. 13). When the young girl shyly takes the coat from Kit and puts it on over her ragged one, the narrator tells us that, at that very instant, "something wonderful happened. The little girl was *transformed* [italics added] from a ghost to a real girl. She hugged herself, and her pale cheeks glowed" (p. 13).

Kit continues her efforts to help by writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, accompanied with photos of the children, outlining their dire situation. This publicity initiates a clothing and food drive in Kit's community and helps Kit to see that she can make a difference. When Pleasant Company announced Kit's debut in 2000, it did so by sponsoring a national "Kit's Can-do Challenge," urging girls across America to give canned goods and clothing to their communities.

On the positive side, Kit's role model of helping others less fortunate than herself is praiseworthy. Few would argue that giving food to the poor—at any time of year—is a useless endeavor. Also encouraging is her devotion to a cause that results in a response

of social activism. But the *transforming* power of a used coat for a poor girl or even a national food drive for hungry and homeless people at Thanksgiving is wishful thinking and offers what appears to be a simple solution to a problem of great complexity that has structural dimensions. Further, equating the situation of homeless people today with hoboes of the Depression flattens differences which are worthy of careful analysis.

Kit does stand out as an example of a girl who defies gender expectations. She uses the decor of her room as a means of expressing her individuality. Kit's mother has recently redecorated her room, making it, as her friend Ruthie says, "as pretty as a princess's room" (*Meet Kit*, p. 4). But Kit, who is not a frilly girl, thinks the room is too pink for her. Kit realizes that the room her mother has decorated is a girl's dream—but it is not *her* dream. When Kit has to give up her room to boarders, she is able to express her own individuality in the room she sets up for herself in the attic. In this temporary getaway (reminiscent of Felicity's temporary getaway on the rooftop) Kit designs her own newspaper office alcove, her baseball alcove, her reading alcove, and her tree house alcove. Though Kit acknowledges that this new room is "a far cry from Mother's ideal of what a girl's room should look like, "her mother, thankful that she can use Kit's room for boarders, tells her she is proud of her for making this attic her room. It is interesting to note here that soon after the Kit stories were published, Pleasant Company began a new line of bedroom decor for girls and AG mini rooms to decorate.

That Kit is not a "typical" girl is highlighted by her contrast with Ruthie, who is. Kit reads *Robin Hood and His Adventures* instead of *Beauty and the Beast*, her friend Ruthie's choice. One of the first things Kit wants Stirling, the young boy who comes to live with Kit's family as a boarder, to know is that "she was interested in books and baseball and was not the type of girl who only cared about things like dusting and baking and dresses" (*Meet Kit*, p. 19). In fact, Kit's hero is Ernie Lombardi, catcher for the Cincinnati Reds. Kit's brother Charlie brags to his co-workers that his kid sister is the

best catcher in Cincinnati, but despite this supposed love of baseball, Kit is never shown playing the game in the historical fiction books.

Time and again, Kit does step outside the traditional roles of girls, but when she does, her actions are highlighted in the text and marked as exceptional or atypical. They draw attention. Ruthie's world of princesses, frills, and movie stars is clearly the more typical world of girls and is never presented with any sense of disdain. It is against this world that Kit becomes all the more remarkable. In Book Five of her series, *Kit Saves the Day*, her adventures include feats that would be unusual for any ten year old child—she hops a train, is put in a jail cell, escapes through a bathroom window, wrenches her shoulder from the grasp of a guard who catches her, and crosses a railroad trestle bridge over a river, clinging to the catwalk when the train passes with monstrous force. Once across the bridge, she makes her way past dusk through the city streets and finally home.

These dangerous activities, beyond the range of experience of most youngsters, take away from the perception of Kit as a realistic character and therefore make her resistance to gender expectations have less force. Moreover, the discourse within which Kit is able to resist gender expectations is removed from the every day world of reality and likely events. Her performance of gender in this episode is unlikely to be repeated, a point crucial to Butler's (1990a) notion of gender as a "*stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 140). How often do children anywhere find themselves clinging to catwalks when a train rushes by with gargantuan force? Further, her actions are not those that receive reinforcement from adults, as did her earlier spinning around in the parlor to model her new coat. Kit's Dad reminds her on her safe return that her actions were both "foolish and dangerous" (*Kit saves the day*, p. 60) and that he is disappointed in her. Kit feels ashamed.

The Molly series also positions girls as subjects who perform and take on discourses that encourage them to behave in certain ways and not in others. Book One of

the Molly series begins as Molly is daydreaming about who she will be for Halloween trick-or-treating. This very activity suggests what Butler (1990a) and others have seen as a possibility for us to subvert gender, try on new costumes, pose in playful ways as we participate in a kind of masquerade. Molly fantasizes about dressing as Cinderella, but she is worried that the glass slippers and material like angora and silk will be difficult to get during the war. Molly wants to team up with her friends and dress in a group theme, but she knows that no one will want to be Cinderella's ugly stepsisters. The girls finally settle on being hula dancers, at Molly's mom's suggestion. They spend long and happy hours making their grass skirts and paper flowers for their hair. The Halloween story suggests that the girls enjoy their masquerade as hula dancers. When they go trick-or-treating, two families ask them to perform the hula dance and sing the Hawaiian songs they have learned in school. Their performance is such a success that one of the families breaks out in applause and makes the girls two cups of cider each. This episode is one of many in the books that demonstrate an audience approval of gendered behavior, reinforcing the gendered acts girls learn to repeat, and arguably making them more difficult for girls to resist. Molly and her friends consider being angels, acrobats, Alice in Wonderlands, or ice skating stars for Halloween, but they scorn the teasing suggestions of Molly's younger brother that they be the Three Little Pigs, the Three Bears, the Three Stooges, or the Three Kings of Orient. The girls are learning through their discourses which choices are socially acceptable for them.

Molly's stage performance becomes quite literal when she auditions for a part in the Victory Rally. Once again, appearance is an all-consuming theme. In *Changes for Molly* the community is planning a show at the Veteran's hospital to benefit the soldiers in World War Two. Molly decides to try out for the special tap dance performed by Miss Victory. The motivating factor for Molly seems to be her love of the costume, "a shiny blue and red satin and sparkly silver material" with a silver star on the shoulder and a star crown for Miss Victory to wear. Though Molly and her friends are fairly confident that

she is the best dancer, they know that “a lot depends on how a person looks, not just how she sings or dances” (p. 5). They decide the crown will only look good on a girl with curls. Molly’s problem for the book becomes how to make her hair fit the part.

When Molly discovers that her Dad will be returning from the war in time to see the show, she has an added motive: She wants Dad to see how beautiful, grown-up, and sophisticated she has become while he has been overseas taking care of wounded soldiers. Molly and her friends rehearse familiar rituals of girlhood. They try permanent waves, lotions, sleeping in curlers, and any number of tricks to make Molly, as her friend Susan tells her, “the New You” (*Changes for Molly*, p. 23). Molly even endures physical pain in order to get the desired effect: “Sleeping on pin curls was like sleeping on thorns. Molly tried putting her face in the pillow, but then she couldn’t breathe. She tried wadding up her pillow under her neck instead of her head, but that made her neck hurt. The pins seemed to find a way to dig into her scalp no matter what she did” (*Changes for Molly*, p. 34). In spite of these efforts, her hair refuses to hold the curl. After all else fails, the girls try the ‘wet method’ of twisting Molly’s wet hair in tight pin curls, then wetting it again. Doing girlhood in this episode is the equivalent of hard work—truly a body project-- and one that requires considerable resources including peer workers and multiple beauty products.

Molly is finally pleased with the results of her make-over, especially after she removes her eye glasses even though she cannot see well without them. Never missing an opportunity to sell a product, Pleasant Company has three different styles of Molly’s eye glasses in the catalogue for \$6 each (Holiday, 2001, p. 70). Molly auditions for the part, looking her best and therefore giving her best performance. When she is told she has been selected to be Miss Victory, Molly describes the announcement as being the most perfect moment in her life so far. Her happiness is short-lived, however, because she ends up with an ear infection (caused, it is implied, from sleeping with wet hair) and is unable to perform at all.

Molly's dad returns, but instead of seeing her dancing on stage in her shiny costume, he finds her at home, wearing pajamas, having been put to bed. His first words to her are about her looks: "Gosh and golly, olly Molly! You look exactly as I remembered you, just as I've pictured you for two long years. You look perfect!" (*Changes for Molly*, p. 58). Though Molly's grin suggests that she realizes her father accepts her without the curls, Molly has still learned that an important part of what a girl must do is to look good for the part. Had it not been for her bad luck of getting sick, Molly's efforts would have been successful. Molly is beginning to absorb a lesson her older sister Jill has learned well. In an earlier episode, when Russ Campbell, the senior football star drives up, the first question Jill frantically asks her friend is "Oh, how do I look?" Her friend assures her that she looks good, then adds, "Gosh, I'm glad we curled our hair last night!" (*Meet Molly*, p. 45). If Molly continues to accept the discourses that are shaping her, her desire to look good for her Dad will soon transfer to potential mates.

It is important to note here that hair for women is wrought with potent symbolism. The fashioning of hair contains within it a whole language of design. Curled hair has associations with femininity, long hair with seduction, and pinned and contained hair with the domestic sphere of a chaste woman (Colman, 2001). The American Girls Collection emphasizes the importance of hair and includes a Hair Care Kit (Holiday, 2001, p. 71) that comes with a hairbrush, a styling cape, a misting bottle, a packet of end papers, and even a little booklet of styling tips for \$12. If a doll needs more assistance—after all, Molly's curls did not come easily—a Hairdo Helper Hardware Kit in a handy carrying case can be purchased for \$14 (Holiday, 2001, p. 57). The tools for girls to fashion hair include pony-O's, butterfly clips, a piggy flip, twisty rollers, sparklettes, and a pony-D. Hair accessories such as these, as well as other kinds of accessories—handbags, jewelry, scarfs, etc.—all suggest the notion that women or girls require adornment.

This kind of embellishment is but one of many gendered rituals girls learn as they move through the discourses which constitute them. The power of recitation is particularly powerful here since, to use Butler's (1990a) terms, the "deed" becomes so entrenched in everyday happenings that it becomes the enabling source of the "doer." It is this aspect of performativity--its capacity to produce what it names--that girls must become aware of in order to resist the subjectivities that constrain them.

Frost (2001) points out that western consumer capitalism needs women and girls to feel that their bodies are inadequate so that the market can generate products like the accessories just mentioned, and women and girls will buy them to help alleviate this sense. The positioning of girls and women as consumers also puts them in the least favored term of the production/consumption binary. These are among the considerations explored in the next section.

Shaped by Desire: Positioning Subjects as Consumers in the Historical Fiction Books

The reader's first introduction to Felicity, in Book One of her series, is as a "fine lady customer (*Meet Felicity*, p. 1) in her father's store. Her father is playing a favorite game with Felicity: He pretends she is a customer and offers her assistance in deciding what merchandise she will buy. The offerings in Chapter One are a new feather, new ribbon, or straw flowers for her hat, all of which Felicity has no trouble resisting, even in play, since she boldly claims that she wears a hat only to please her mother. But Felicity is drawn to other merchandise in the store. Though her errand is to bring home some ginger for her mother, she would rather linger in the store, daydreaming about "aprons, nightcaps, combs, spices, sponges, rakes, fishing hooks, tin whistles, and books" (*Meet Felicity*, p. 3).

Before Felicity leaves, a bona fide "fine lady customer" arrives, sporting a hat that is adorned with ribbons and feathers. She is elated to observe that Felicity has grown tall and pretty, and she tells her that with hair as "bright as a marigold" (p. 6) she is bound to have the young men come courting soon. Though at this point in her life Felicity can still resist buying ribbons and feathers for her own hair, Mrs. Fitchett's hat

can be read as a foreshadowing of the kind of hat, both literally and figuratively, Felicity can expect to wear in the future as a fine lady customer.

In the next scene, Felicity, highly excited that she has been allowed to make a delivery with Ben, the apprentice, forgets her hat entirely and appears to be running from everything the hat symbolizes. Later in the book she experiences temporary freedom from the frills and petticoats she normally must wear when she dresses in Ben's breeches without anyone's knowing for a month. On the sly, she wears the breeches to visit Penny, an abused horse she is plotting to set free. Ben finally discovers her breach of decorum—she has borrowed without permission and even worse, has worn boy clothing. As an act of friendship, he promises not to tell.

Later, after she has successfully saved Penny, she decides to give the horse to her father so that he can ride her while delivering war supplies. Felicity longs to take an active part in the Patriot's cause as well. She can't accompany the men, of course, but her father does allow her to work in the store while the men are away. It is clear that this new position of relative independence is only interim. Felicity's situation is similar to that of women in Molly's world whose job positions, for the most part, were taken back by men when they returned from fighting in World War Two (Colman, 2000).

Felicity's new job is presumably one of the "changes" of the book's title, *Changes for Felicity*. Another change is that she is no longer the girl who could never understand how anyone could love dresses more than horses. Her new perspective is illustrated well when on Christmas she hears carolers at her window, singing the refrain from "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen" about "tidings of comfort and joy! (*Felicity's surprise*, p. 36). She immediately appropriates the words of the carol to her own circumstances. Now that Christmas is over, she thinks that her "great comfort" and "great joy" will be that her mother will have time to finish the gown she wants to wear to the Governor's ball.

Felicity's quest for freedom—one that conveniently coincides with the country's quest for it—is a pattern Taxel identified in his 1984 study as being a central metaphor in children's fiction about the American Revolution. Her quest culminates in the last book of the series with an illustration that depicts Felicity behind the counter of her father's store, a contrast from the opening image of the series in book one when she is pretending to be a fine lady customer in a game she plays with her father. Felicity's new position is one that she knows will be short-lived. The men will soon return and Felicity will in all likelihood return to her role as customer. As if to underscore this likelihood, the book ends when Felicity looks up and sees that her first customer is "Miss Cole," Felicity's friend Elizabeth Cole, who has come to purchase a product to help her household run more smoothly.

Kirsten, the pioneer girl in the series, learns a hard lesson about her place as a girl. She learns that she is more fitted to bake treats using the honey than she is to complete the complex task of removing the honey bees' nests. This is a task that can only be done by her dad and brother, with Kirsten as a bystander rather than a participant in the action. Kirsten, who has been in the woods fishing with her little brother, is the first to discover the bee tree packed full of honeycombs. She knows what this tree could mean financially to her family. Hoping to be the provider of this rich resource, she muses: "If we could bring Papa a whole tree of honeycombs, he won't have to worry about money! I bet he'll be able to buy everything!" (*Kirsten saves the day*, p. 9). Kirsten plans to secure the tree for her family in time to sell the honey in town at the July 4th celebration. Her efforts are thwarted when a Mama Bear protecting her cubs causes trouble. Kirsten and her younger brother narrowly escape being attacked by the bear and are saved in the nick of time by their father, who lets Kirsten know that her behavior has been far too risky. Later, when Papa and Kirsten's older brother prepare to move the colony of bees to the farm, Kirsten begs to go. Her father finally consents, but only if she

will do as he says. A full page illustration shows Kirsten, at a safe distance from her father and brother, standing on a mark her father has drawn for her to stay behind.

Kirsten returns home feeling dejected. She confesses to her mother that she has nothing to be proud of: “It had taken Papa and Lars to get the honey” (*Kirsten saves the day*, p. 47). She had wanted to do it herself. Kirsten’s mother comforts her by reminding her that she was the one who found the tree, and she can help to get the honey ready to sell. Kirsten’s reaction indicates that she is reluctantly learning to accept that her role is in the safe confines of the home as opposed to the outdoor world of adventure, which is approved only for Papa and Lars. “Kirsten blinked at Mama through her tears. She wanted to be just like Mama when she grew up” (p. 47). Perhaps Kirsten’s reaction expresses her sense of defeat—the only option she sees as available to her is to become like her mother, who appears to accept such inequity as the way things are.

When the family journeys into town to sell the honey during the July 4th holiday, the ladies convince the store owner, Mr. Berkhoff, that beeswax will be a good seller. “This beeswax will sell for candles and for furniture polish, too. The town is growing you know. Some fine ladies who have time to polish their furniture are moving here” (*Kirsten saves the day*, p. 55). Mr. Berkhoff inspects the pure basswood honey they have brought and then urges them to go inside the store and look over the new calico while the men finish up outside and settle the accounts. The women are effectively silenced and resume their roles as shoppers. Kirsten, who is with the ladies, walks around the store, taking in its mouth-watering scents. She runs her fingers along a length of pink ribbon (the color of femininity) and looks above the spools and ribbons and spots a straw hat. “*If only I could have anything in the store, I’d pick this straw hat*, she thought. *It would be so cool and so pretty on these hot summer days*” (*Kirsten saves the day*, p. 57).

Before she realizes it, Papa tells her the hat is her special treat and settles in on her head. Mama quickly adds to the surprise by suggesting a nice ribbon for the hat to add a little decoration. At the very moment Mama finishes tying the ribbon and bright

red cherries around the hat, the drum roll begins. The parade is about to begin, and Kirsten steps outside to join the crowd, hoping to be admired as a young lady rather than an adventurer in the woods. Kirsten's straw hat with berries, along with her cool summer dress, sells for \$22 in Pleasant Company's catalogue (Holiday 2001, p. 33).

The theme that runs through this discourse is that women and girls should be more interested in calico and straw hats than in settling accounts, conducting business, or participating in risky adventures. When they cross the line (one that a few pages earlier had literally been drawn for Kirsten) and move in positions of power—finding the tree, preparing the honey for sale—they are acknowledged (and contained) by rewarding them with opportunities to shop or giving them “special treats” or products that will enhance their appearance.

Josefina's story does feature a rather bold business venture on the part of Josefina's aunt, Tia Dolores, who comes to live with the family after Josefina's mother dies and eventually marries Josefina's father. When a tornado destroys Papa's sheep on the rancho, Tia Dolores suggests that she and her nieces begin a weaving business so that they can sell blankets in Santa Fe and collect enough money to replace the sheep. The girls are at first shocked that a woman would even attempt to discuss business with a man. Francisca accuses Dolores of thinking that she is a patrona and of putting herself in charge of the weaving business. Dolores even keeps the books for the weaving business, and Papa gives her quiet support. She is ultimately successful in her endeavors, thanks to her hard work and the combined efforts of the girls and Dolores's servant, who is an excellent weaver. The family eagerly awaits the arrival of the wagon train that will carry goods to trade from the americanos.

Since Josefina's story takes place before New Mexico was a part of the United States, Josefina's family understandably is suspicious of the American traders, but given the patriotic ideology of the series, it is not surprising that Patrick, the American scout who deals with Josefina's family, turns out to be honest and true. In chapter two of

Book Five, entitled “Heart’s Desire,” Josefina is positioned as a consumer who buys out of her love for others, whether the gift she is purchasing is for herself or for a loved one. The excitement and thrill Josefina feels as she looks at the wagons filled with a never-ending variety of things—veils, brightly colored cottons, wools, silks, shawls, sashes, ribbons, shoes, hats, boots, stocking, combs, brushes, toothbrushes and silver tooth picks, to name but a few—resembles the excitement many girls feel when they open a Pleasant Company catalogue. Acosta-Alzuru (1999) reports that some of the girls she interviewed circled the items they wanted to have in the catalogue. One participant said she would read the Samantha section in the catalogue until she had “memorized it by heart”(p. 118).

One toy catches Josefina’s eye. It is a toy farm carved out of wood. When Patrick says that it reminds him of farms in Missouri, Josefina likes the farm even more. She is curious about what a different look this has from her own familiar rancho and she experiences what amounts to a school- girl crush on Patrick. When her sister points out that she should not waste her purchase on a toy (each girl has been allowed to sell one of her blankets for spending money), Josefina rationalizes her desire: “She was sure it would be fun to play with the pink pig! And knowing that the little farm reminded Patrick of his home made Josefina like it even more” (*Josefina saves the day*, pp. 24-25). Papa gives her advice that Pleasant Company no doubt would like modern-day parents to give their daughters: “If that’s what you want, then that’s what you should get....Don’t let anyone talk you out of your heart’s desire” (p. 25).

Josefina postpones making her decision until she can be absolutely certain that is what she wants. Later when Patrick allows Papa to play his violin, Josefina becomes certain of her heart’s desire. It will be to purchase Patrick’s violin so her father can play as he had when her mother was alive. She finally convinces her sisters to join her in the plan since she will need at least three blankets to suggest the trade. Though they have difficulty sacrificing the individual items each of them has selected, they are able at last

to put their selfish desires aside to make Papa happy. Patrick reminds them that they have chosen items for themselves they wanted to purchase, but they soon convince him too that they would rather pool their resources for the purchase of the violin. Patrick agrees to the trade. The girls give Patrick the blankets and he promises to bring them the violin the next day. It appears at first that he has taken the blankets and will not hold up his end of the bargain, but this appearance turns out to be false. Instead, Patrick arranges for the girls to get not only the violin, but the items they had chosen for themselves as well. Josefina's toy farm, a present from Patrick, can be purchased in the catalogue for \$18 (Holiday Wishes, 2000, p. 24).

American Girls in the historical fiction books usually end up getting the special objects of their desires because someone loves them enough to make a sacrifice. The girl-consumer may selfishly desire a dress or prized toy, but she also unselfishly gives to others and sometimes puts the desires of another before her own. In both scenarios, girls are preparing themselves for their future role as mothers and wives who put their family's needs before their own. Any compunction to purchase is mitigated by sentiment and emotion that associates material objects with special people and memories. When consumers purchase the toy farm that was Josefina's heart's desire, or buy her memory box, containing such treasures as her mother's thimble or a piece of her favorite lavender-scented soap, transferring the ownership of these things from Josefina to the girl-owner may transfer a sense of identity as well.

Finally, one of the treasured objects that each girl in the American Girls Collection must own is a doll. Although dolls are important in every girl's story, according to Formanek-Brunell's (1993) book length study of dolls in American girlhood, both the popularity of dolls with girls and the use to which dolls have been put varies significantly according to the historical eras in American history. Much of the play with dolls has also been subversive, though there are no examples of this in the American Girls series. Formanek-Brunell describes invigorating activities girls engaged

in with their dolls, including behavior that was not always instinctively maternal and was likely to express anger and aggression almost as frequently as love and affection.

Each doll owned by an American Girl doll is infused with sentiment and emotion. The dolls are often used in the series as ways for girls to rehearse maternal behavior. When Kirsten is aboard a ship in 1854, she has her doll Sari tucked under her arm. Though food is in short supply, Kirsten and her friend Marta “feed” their dolls before they chew the bread themselves. Kirsten ends up having to leave her doll in a trunk along with the rest of the possessions so that the family can walk to Uncle Olav’s pioneer farm. The major suspense of Book Three *Kirsten’s Surprise*, involves whether or not Kirsten will be able to get her prized doll and the white dress in the trunk she needs for the Saint Lucia celebration for Christmas. The crowning moment in the story is the one that reunites Kirsten with her beloved Sari. Sari can be purchased in the catalogue for \$16 (Holiday 2001, p. 18).

A full page illustration in *Samantha’s Surprise* shows Samantha and her friend peering through a toy store window, admiring a particular doll. Later when Samantha’s uncle’s fiancée gives the doll to Samantha for Christmas, another full page color illustration shows a smiling Samantha and her new doll, in front of the Christmas tree, wearing beautiful white pajamas and a white hair bow. The caption reads: “Samantha hugged the doll as if she’d never let go” (*Samantha’s surprise*, p. 58). Samantha’s doll, holding a tiny nutcracker, is \$16 (Holiday 2001, p. 26).

Molly’s doll is dressed as a Red Cross Nurse and is a gift her Dad sends her from England, where as a doctor, he is taking care of wounded soldiers in World War Two. While he has been away, Molly’s mother has worked at the Red Cross. Molly’s story of life on the home front alludes to mothers who like the well-known Rosie the Riveter headed to work in various war-related industries while the men were away. Molly’s first thought about a doll for Christmas are ones of guilt: She should expect practical gifts, not dolls for Christmas, during wartime. But as she hugs her knees to her chest and sits on

her window seat dreaming, the narrator records her thoughts: “She didn’t *need* the present she wanted more than anything else: a doll. Not a baby doll, but a doll she could have adventures with...Molly knew it was certainly unrealistic to hope for a doll. But she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t stop hoping that by some magic, some Christmas magic, a new doll would be under the tree for her on Christmas morning” (*Molly’s surprise*, pp. 8-9). At least for the fictional characters in *The American Girls Collection*, the magic always works.

Much later in the book, Molly is wondering what Christmas would be like for her Dad and the other doctors and nurses who work in the hospital. Then she begins to envision herself as a Red Cross nurse, and her first thought is of how she would *look*: “She’d wear a uniform as white as this morning’s snow and a cap with a red cross on it. ‘Nurse McIntire,’ that’s what the soldiers would call her. She’d ride in the ambulance out to the battlefields and rescue the poor wounded soldiers while guns fired around her. Nothing would scare her” (*Molly’s surprise*, pp. 33-34). The dream of owning a doll and of being a Red Cross nurse merges for Molly when Dad sends her a doll dressed in a uniform identical to the one she has dreamed of wearing herself. The doll, accompanied by a miniature snow globe, sells for \$16 (Holiday 2001, p. 34).

It is interesting to note that Molly does not seem to identify the Red Cross nurse with her mother. Perhaps that is because the reader is never told exactly what her mother does there. More importantly, the reader, and presumably Molly herself, never sees Mrs. McIntire (whose first name is never given) at work. Her only performance outside the traditional role of being a mother and a wife is that she delivers a speech requesting people to donate blood at the Victory rally.

This section illustrates that Pleasant Company plots promote the shaping of girl-subjects as consumers who desire items invested with emotional sentiment, clothing that will enhance their appearance, and dolls with whom their identities are closely linked. The story plots are intended to ignite the desire for the products Pleasant Company is

selling. As Winner (1998) has observed, Pleasant Company's financial success depends upon an association of women with consumerism that dates back at least to Felicity's time.

Innocence vs. Experience: The Pleasant World of Pleasant Company

The poet William Blake (1757-1817) recognized and sought to dismantle the binary he referred to as "contrary states of the human soul." In a volume he entitled *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he explores the complex relationship between the lamb and the tyger, symbols he uses to represent these states of being. An overriding ideology of The American Girls Collection is its promotion of an innocent and pleasant world view, not just of every day happenings, but of important social and historical issues. Such a view often ignores lived experiences and understates the complexities and contradictions that characterize the competing discourses through which we must maneuver. As Blake's poems suggest, the tyger and lamb depend on each other for their respective vitalities. They must be viewed as both/and creations, not either/or ones.

Indeed, one of the most striking impressions of American Girls and their situations is that, even in the midst of hardships, they remain optimistic and hopeful. The world they inhabit is basically a safe world, assuredly knowable, and though situations may seem dire, even hopeless, things work out for the best—theirs is truly a *pleasant* world. Such happy and innocent endings might be explained by viewing these books as formula fiction—predictable stories, peopled by stereotypical characters, intended to entertain the reader seeking escape from "real world" situations. But to write formula fiction that is intended to teach history becomes quite problematical. The ideology of the pleasant world of childhood is at cross-purposes with the actual experiences of girls who have lived through abuse, war, poverty, and racial and/or gender discrimination. Unfortunately, theirs is a world that is frequently anything but pleasant.

One example of the "all's well that ends well" ideology of the books is the depiction of Nellie, a factory girl from the working classes, in the Samantha series. Nellie's father works in a factory and her mother does washing. When Nellie moves in

with Samantha's wealthy next door neighbors to work for them for a dollar a week, Samantha befriends her. Thanks to Grandmary, Samantha's rich and influential grandmother, Nellie is able to attend public schools. Samantha tutors her friend after she gets home from her private academy. Samantha is ridiculed by her friends and their parents for associating with a servant girl, but Grandmary justifies Samantha's relationship with Nellie based on philanthropic principles: "You are *helping* Nellie," said Grandmary, "not playing with her. There is a difference" (*Samantha learns a lesson*, p. 34). Perhaps this is why Nellie is not a guest at Samantha's birthday party, nor does she appear in Book Five of the series, when Samantha takes two of her friends to Grandmary's summer home.

Nellie does reappear in Book Six, the final book of the series. By this time, Grandmary has remarried and is traveling in a yacht around the world. Samantha is living with her uncle and his new wife in New York. She receives a letter from Nellie explaining that her parents have both died from the flu, and she and her two sisters are being sent to live with a relative in New York. Nellie's situation throughout the series is wrought with hardships. She develops an irritating cough, cannot afford food and coal, lives in one room, is sent to live with an alcoholic uncle who steals what little money she has and flees, and finally ends up, along with her sisters, in an orphanage where children are abused. But Nellie never gives up, and Samantha continues to make efforts to contact her. After Samantha has gone to great lengths in attempts to rescue Nellie, all is solved when she brings Nellie and her sisters home to her aunt and uncle. After a short discussion in a separate room, they decide to adopt the three children in a better than fairy-tale ending.

One way of viewing Nellie's situation is to see it as an example of the binary opposition individualism/collectivism. If we assume that an American ideology that is privileged is the belief that failure (or success) in life is determined by individual qualities rather than social circumstances, we may see Nellie's successful departure from

poverty and the orphanage as being a result of her own fortitude and Samantha's willingness to reach out to her. The mythology in America that *anyone* can be President is another example of this mind set. What this ideology draws attention away from are the unjust social conditions that contribute to poverty or wealth and it blames (or praises) people for circumstances that, as individuals, they do not create. Nellie's story is a version of the popular *Annie* Broadway musical. With a great deal of pluck and a little bit of luck, all is solved by a rich family's willingness to take her in. I wonder how many girls who read Nellie's story envision the thousands of children, many of whom also have determination and a willingness to work hard, whose individual saviors never emerge.

Romanticizing the past and presenting history from the viewpoint of the winners is commonplace in the series. The depiction of Native Americans in the Kirsten series provides a good example of both tendencies. A primary struggle for Kirsten, a pioneer girl who comes with her family from Sweden to start a new life in Minnesota, is whether or not she can make this new land her home, with "home" being defined as a place where one is happy and belongs. Kirsten finds a needed escape from the demands of her new school that she learn English in Singing Bird, a Native American girl who communicates with Kirsten primarily through body language and signs. Though Kirsten has heard much talk, both at school and at home, regarding "savage" Indians, she is nonetheless attracted to the quiet and gentle manner of Singing Bird.

Lisbeth, Kirsten's cousin, tells Kirsten that her father worries about the Indians because he knows that if crops are planted on their hunting ground, they will eventually have no food and will surely be angry. She ends this explanation with these words, the ellipsis being part of the actual text: "I don't know." Her voice trailed off and she looked at Kirsten with gray eyes. "Papa says we need the land, too." (*Kirsten learns a lesson*, p. 18). When Kirsten continues to ask her curious questions about the Indians, Lisbeth loses patience and insists that they stop talking and "just play school" (p. 18).

Kirsten's curiosity about her Indian friend turns into enchantment and romantic fantasy. When Singing Bird takes Kirsten to her village, Kirsten finds herself longing to live in the warm tent and be as free as she perceives Singing Bird (who mysteriously appears and disappears) to be. She dreams of wearing soft moccasins and a deerskin dress and of scampering in the fields and woods. So it is with sadness but presumably not surprise that Kirsten receives the news from Singing Bird that her people must leave because they have no food. Kirsten is tempted to go with her friend. She once again imagines herself being Brave Elk's yellow-haired daughter and sleeping by Singing Bird's side. Then Kirsten remembers her own home and family and realizes she cannot leave them. She trudges slowly back to school, thinking of how she will truly miss her friend. But the real epiphany for Kirsten comes when she reenters the school room, filled with busy children learning their lessons: "She wasn't sure when this place had become her own, but she belonged here now" (*Kirsten learns a lesson*, p. 60).

As at least one other critic has pointed out, this version of history omits mentioning the fraudulent United States treaties with various Indian bands that led to the displacement of most of the Native people, treating it instead as a "sad twist of fate" (Peters, 1998). There is no hinting that had Kirsten followed Singing Bird in her flight, she would not have spent much time scampering through the woods in her soft moccasins or sitting comfortably on a pile of animal skins. She would more than likely have suffered from disease, economic warfare, and bloody battles. Kirsten's clear sense of entitlement to the land is never questioned and it is clearly she, not Singing Bird, who is the true American girl. Although arguably Kirsten may not have been able to articulate the ideology of manifest destiny, the Looking Back section, a non-fictional historical essay that concludes each book would have been an appropriate place to discuss this issue but fails to do so.

That the land belongs to Kirsten and her family in all of the richness of its natural resources and wildlife is demonstrated in the story of Old Jack, a legendary fur

hunter/hermit who lives in a cave and is known among other hunters as being the best at his trade. Old Jack, who has no family of his own, traps any furry animal whose skin is valuable and hoards piles and piles of fur skins for no justifiable purpose. No one questions why he has accumulated such a collection, but it turns out to be a lucky happenstance for Kirsten and her family. When Kirsten and her brother get trapped in the forest in a winter storm, they somehow make their way to the old man's cave, and discover, to their surprise, and as it turns out, good fortune, that Old Jack is dead. Since Old Jack has no family, they simply confiscate all the furs he has stockpiled and return home with the jubilation of a lottery winner. The family uses the money from the sale of the furs to purchase a home of their own.

Peters' (1998) comment about this episode is that it demonstrates that exploiting nature and hoarding wealth are important American values that need no further explanation. I would add that the episode also shows the human penchant for capitalizing on another's misfortune. The only thing Kirsten and her brother believe they must do to salve their consciences is give poor Jack a proper burial, which they vow to do in the spring when the ground is thawed. For now, they cover his body with an Indian blanket and head home to tell Mama the good news. Rising at dawn to load the toboggan with the furs, Lars awakens Kirsten: "' Get yourself up!...We've got to take these furs home to Mama'"(*Changes for Kirsten*, p. 47).

As with all versions of history, the process of selection shapes the story told. In the Felicity series, for example, slaves are never called slaves. Marcus is described as "the man who helps Mr. Merriman at home and at the store" and Rose is the cook. That white people were instituting slavery while fighting the Revolutionary War for their own freedom from tyranny is never mentioned. (Taxel, 1984). In the Molly series, whose purpose is to teach the history of World War Two from the perspective of the home front, the internment of Japanese men, women, and children, is completely ignored. When Emily, a young British girl Molly's age, comes to stay with the McIntires during the

Blitz, her worst war story is that her beloved dog was killed when he ran under a building that was bombed. True to the romantic good endings of these books, Emily gets another dog for her birthday, whom she names Yank as an indicator of her good will toward Americans.

Pleasant Company seeks to promote a secure and safe comfort zone for American girls. While it makes some efforts to highlight and even endorse diversity, it often encourages readers to minimize differences in ideas and beliefs that may be specific to a particular time, place, or social group. *Shared* values and beliefs are privileged. One striking example of this bias is that if we based our view of American girls on the ones Pleasant Company has chosen as representatives, we would assume (except in the case of Kaya) that all American girls celebrate Christmas. Each of the girls discussed in this study has her own Christmas story, and most of the stories have references to Christianity, most notably the Addy and Josefina series. Goodman (1999) argues that Pleasant Company had plenty of opportunities to introduce a Jewish character, pointing out that Samantha's story takes place in 1904, the height of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States. Goodman further notes that the *Molly* stories feature an English girl who lost her dog in the bombing rather than a Jewish girl who lost her family, commenting on the total absence of Jewish history in the books. Pleasant Company has responded to this criticism by including a Hanukkah outfit and Hanukkah gifts in its contemporary line for American Girls of Today. Lindsey, a doll-character introduced in the Girl of Today series, is Jewish. But attempts to present girls of different faiths in the present does not compensate for their absence in the historical fiction books.

While recognizing that both fiction and non-fiction books for children are always "slanted or partial versions of the truth," Nodelman (1996) points out that making the claim to be *historical* endows them with authority. If this is the case, we must guard against sanitizing history and glossing over or ignoring painful parts of the past, and we

must penetrate the boundaries created by privileging shared values and beliefs. Pleasant Company does attempt to provide a more “factual” account of history in an essay at the end of each book called *Looking Back*, the subject of the next section.

Looking Back: A Domestic History

It should be acknowledged that more information about the historical periods is available to girl readers in a short essay (usually about six pages, including pictures and illustrations) at the end of each book called *Looking Back: A Peek into the Past*. Acosta-Alzuru (1999) found that mothers of girls who owned American Girl dolls considered this section of the books important, but only a few of the girls she interviewed read this section. The *Looking Back* sections are the same for each series. In Book One of the Addy series, for instance, the section is called “America in 1864;” in Book Two, “School in 1864,” in Book Three, “Christmas in 1864,” in Book Four, “Growing Up in 1864,” in Book Five, “America Outdoors in 1864,” and in Book Six, “Changes for America.” Each series follows this pattern, and each section highlights additional information that relates to the content of the book.

As with the books, the emphasis is on domestic life. There is an attempt to “correct” for content that is not explicit in the books. For example, in the *Looking Back* section for the Felicity series of book one, a caption beside a black and white sketching of slaves chopping wood reads: “White landowners purchased Africans to work and live as their slaves in the colonies” (*Meet Felicity*, p. 69). One paragraph addresses the fact that not everyone in Williamsburg lived fashionably with the elegance Felicity experienced in her lessons with Mrs. Manderly. “Half the people who lived in the town were African-American slaves, such as Marcus. They were forced to work long and hard for the person who owned them. They got little in return except basic food, clothing, and shelter” (*Meet Felicity*, p. 69). This kind of information is never even hinted at in the story itself.

A significant portion of the *Looking Back* essay, a generalization which holds true in the other essays of the series as well, concerns the clothes rich people wore, the elegant

homes they built, and the sumptuous dinners they served. Sometimes the essay justifies an unusual feature of the historical fictional book, or provides documentation that certain objects sold in the catalogue actually existed. In the case of Felicity, for example, the essay points out that a gift like Felicity's doll would have been a very special gift indeed during this time period. A picture of a carved set of Noah's Ark figures that belonged to a Pennsylvania family in the 1700s appears in the essay, demonstrating the kind of research that the writers of the series did. The reader will recall that Felicity's family stored such a set away to bring out only at Christmas time. The ark and its accompanying figure sells for \$22 in the catalogue.

Given the fact that most of Pleasant Company's business is done through catalogue orders, it is not surprising that some of the essays mention the catalogue industry in the historical eras. In the essay that accompanies Book Five of the Samantha series, for example, the trips that wealthy people took during summers are described with a tone that approaches condescension. The text points out that these wealthy travelers fancied they were living like the rugged pioneers when they vacationed in their mountain homes, but the truth was that they lived much as they did in their city homes. They displayed collections of stones and shells, they kept albums of pressed wildflowers, and they painted or sketched the beautiful outdoor scenery. More importantly, "they read outdoor magazines and catalogues so that they would have the proper outfits and equipment for hiking, hunting, and fishing" (*Samantha saves the day*, p. 63). One wonders if the writer of this essay failed to see the irony of this description of the rich Victorian who is trying to pose as "the real" back-to-nature individual. The description might aptly be applied to the consumer that Pleasant Company is targeting: No American Girl is ever short on outfits, accessories, or equipment when she goes on an adventure. When Kirsten goes fishing, for example, the accessories she needs include a straw hat, red boots, a bait basket with three grasshoppers and a tiny green frog, a fishing pole, a

wicker basket for lunch, a bird whistle, and two handmade stoneware crocks packed in a homemade crate she can pack her honey in.

Even during the Depression, Kit's *Looking Back* essay tells us, children enjoyed poring through catalogues and dreaming of special toys. The essay lists all kinds of toys children might see in the catalogue, and even explains a special offer that one catalogue offered free with any purchase. The offer, "a genuine leather aviator helmet" (*Kit's surprise*, p. 71) is one that, according to the essay, a girl like Kit would have loved. By constantly referring to characters in the series, the *Looking Back* essays encourage readers to think of these characters as people they know.

The final *Looking Back* essay in Book Six always projects the future, referring to the main character as if she were real. In the Kit series, for example, the essay projects Kit's life into the future: "Kit would have been 18 years old when America entered World War Two. She might have become a nurse or a factory worker. Or with her talent for writing, she might have become a war correspondent, covering the war and writing stories about what she saw" (*Changes for Kit*, p. 67). Finally, the essays always end on a hopeful note, a characteristic that supports the ideology of the series as a whole: The world of American Girls is safe and essentially good. The end of this essay, for example, is reassuring: "By the time the Great Depression and World War Two ended, Americans were ready for peace, prosperity, and stability" (*Changes for Kit*, p. 67).

The sections above have attempted to present an overview of the series of American Girl historical fiction books, providing examples from them that identify certain values and ideologies they legitimize. The last section will look in more depth at the Molly series and the ideologies it promotes, especially those relating to history and family. It will also show, using the Molly series as an example, how the texts of the American Girls historical fiction books are extended by other texts Pleasant Company publishes.

The Molly Series: An In-Depth Look

Molly McIntire, it should be recalled, is the nine-year-old girl whose stories depict life on the home front in the fictional town of Jefferson, Illinois, during World War II. The first book in the series, *Meet Molly*, takes place in October and November of 1943. The second, *Molly Learns a Lesson*, takes place in November of 1943, and *Molly's Surprise: A Christmas Story*, takes place in December of 1943. Molly turns ten in the fourth book, *Happy Birthday, Molly!*, whose setting is in April of 1944. *Molly Saves the Day*, the fifth book, takes place at a summer camp in June and July of 1944. The last book in the series, *Changes for Molly*, takes place in March, 1945. Given this chronology, Molly would have been seven years old in December of 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Her story begins just after the Allies had begun to invade southern Europe in September of 1943. She would have been at summer camp on D-Day, June 6, 1944. The series is over before Roosevelt died in April of 1945 and before the United States dropped the atomic bombs on August 6 and August 9 to end the war. The discussion that follows will make some observations about how the Molly books and their extensions present the history of this time period.

The purpose of this study is not to deny entirely the historical legitimacy of information offered to readers in The American Girls Collection. On the contrary, Pleasant Company, as we have seen, does not hesitate to draw from experts in various fields whose credentials are impressive. But any close analysis of the Molly books, particularly because they claim to be teaching history as a part of their purpose, cannot neglect to consider the particular version of history the texts present, paying attention to the social class and ethnicity of the characters as well as the texts' emphasis on particular events and perspectives. Deconstructive reading strategies point to what the texts fail to include as being equally as important as focusing on what they do include. In conducting this kind of analysis, I make no claims to be an historian and limit my discussion here to observations that are general and based on ideological critique informed by the perspectives I have outlined earlier.

It is interesting to note, for example, that Pleasant Company frequently combines references to Molly with real life events and people, thus giving additional credence to the ideology that Molly's life does indeed represent "the way things were." This naturalizing of the day to day life of the characters helps to encourage an unquestioned acceptance of the particular version of "reality" that the books promote. In an ancillary publication, *Welcome to Molly's World: 1944*, written by Catherine Gourley (1999), the authenticity of Molly's story is again validated: "Molly McIntire is a fictional character. But the place and time of her story are real. In fact, all the characters in Molly's world are drawn from memories, letters, and diaries of real girls and women, soldiers and civilians from the 1940s" (Gourley, p. 1). Interspersed throughout the book alongside real photographs are illustrations from the Molly books. The "Welcome to the World" books—one for each character—have recently been launched as the American Girl catalogue explains, to "explore the past as it really was." The books tell "the true stories of American girls through words and pictures, letters and diaries" (Winter Fun, 2000, p. 45). The *World* books may also represent Pleasant Company's efforts to respond to some of the criticism of the historical fiction books being used to teach history because they add information excluded from the series books.

For example, unlike the Molly stories themselves, *Welcome to Molly's World* does include information on the persecution of Jews in chapter five, entitled "Horror and Hope." The opening paragraph explains how few people believed the reports that millions of people, including Jews, were being killed by the Nazis and put in prisons called concentration camps. There is even a photograph of children behind a barbed wire fence in a concentration camp as well as a photograph of Ann Frank. Though the *Molly* series ends before the American planes drop bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Molly's World* includes a drawing of the mushroom cloud, a photograph of a clock that stopped at the moment of the explosion, and figures of a woman and child who survived the blast. *Molly's World* ends with the story of Sadako Sasaki, who was only two years old when

the bomb struck her city but later died from the harmful radiation caused from the explosion.

The book then explains the Japanese legend of the cranes who live for one thousand years and the way Sadako combined the hope this legend gave her of life and peace with the Japanese art of origami. Sadako began to fold paper to make the beautiful cranes, and children around the world completed her project when she died. The section on the atomic bombs ends on a note of hope, with a color photograph of the monument in her honor erected in Hiroshima. The last pages of the book show families in the United States, eagerly greeting their loved ones returning home from the war. The final page shows Molly with her mother at the kitchen table. It explains that Molly learned during the war that she could make a difference. It imagines that Molly would very likely have folded paper cranes for peace and sent them to the Children's Monument in Hiroshima. Echoing the last words of book six in the *Molly* series, "Absolutely perfect," and following the sentence about Molly's sending the paper cranes for peace to Japan, the text reads: "In her heart she would know that it was the perfect thing to do" (Gourley, p. 58). This happy ending fits the overall optimistic and happy ideology of the metanarrative that informs what Pleasant Company is all about. Certainly all people, and most especially children, need to cling to the hope of peace and the belief that one person can make a difference. But children also need to understand that not all stories of pain are resolved with happy endings.

It is hard, for example, to reconcile the fact that the book devotes two-page spreads to "Dogs for Defense," war dogs who performed heroically in battle, and "Play Ball," an entertaining and informative presentation of women in baseball, but includes only a few sentences about the Japanese Americans who were so unjustly treated during the war. The sentences, written in a small font, and one of ten legends to a map entitled "Hometown, USA." read: "Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes and sell their businesses after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They were kept in special camps

away from the public. People feared they might side with the enemy” (Gourley, p. 21). These few words constitute the only coverage I can find of the Japanese Internment in The American Girls Collection. In contrast, Krull’s *V is for Victory: America Remembers World War II* (1995) is a book written for children that includes a seven page chapter entitled “Hatred at Home: The Japanese Internment Camps.” The chapter includes photographs of children being evacuated, classified as “enemies of the state.” One young boy who is being sent to an internment camp still wears a “Remember Pearl Harbor” hat (p. 56).

Tuttle, in his book *“Daddy’s Gone to War” : The Second World War in the Lives of American Children* (1993), found that children during the war were not immune to developing a generalized hatred of children in the United States who were of German, Italian, or Japanese descent. He also reports that the 30,000 school children who were Japanese American and thereby sent to internment camps became “sensitized... to violations of democracy” (p. 118). One participant in Tuttle’s study observed that when his class at the Manzanar camp discussed democracy, they had to skip the chapter on civil liberties. Such awkward moments did not prevent educators from attempting to instill tenets of democracy and patriotism in these children as they were being incarcerated. Weiner (2002) points out that no pictures of Japanese children show up in major online archives before 1941. But after that, Office on War Information photographers took “a slew of images” (p. 35). Reprinted in Weiner’s magazine article is a photograph of Japanese American children pledging the United States flag as they stand in front of one of the buildings of their camp. The caption that accompanied this picture pointed out that these children *were* able to continue their education. That the school stories of the Japanese American children are completely ignored in the *Molly* series or its ancillary materials is especially hard to defend given the collection’s emphasis on school life in Book Two.

Finally, a consideration of how the Molly books deal with the Nazi regime and its persecution of Jews and other minorities belongs in an analysis of whose history is highlighted in the series. There are occasional references to the “Nazis” as the enemy who bombs houses in England and in book one a radio announcer the children hear says that it is up to the American “Yanks” to save England and the world from Hitler. Molly and Emily, the young girl from England, have strong words over Emily’s perspective, which the announcer lends support to, that Americans think they know everything, are all-important, and are basically determined to have things their own way. This conversation is one of the few actual critiques of Americans in the series. In Book Six of the series, the “*Looking Back*” essay explains that millions of people were murdered in Nazi concentration camps—women, children, and old people included. Specific ethnic and/or minority groups are not mentioned.

That the references do not occur in the Molly stories themselves can be defended historically, though the fate of the Jews of Europe was known by 1942. Novick (1999), who studied extensively the understandings and perceptions of the Jewish holocaust in American life, gives a number of reasons for the lack of knowledge and/or prioritizing of the Jewish atrocities in concentration camps. Reports were often contradictory and considered by many to be propaganda, by others to be so evil that they were simply not credible. Further, Novick points out that for most Americans, the Pacific conflict was a matter of more concern than the war in Europe. The term “holocaust,” when used at all, was not used to refer specifically to the treatment of the Jews until well after the war had ended. Novick argues that the attention paid to the Holocaust today is a complex and contradictory evolution that involves a number of political, cultural, and economic considerations. But even granting that making the Jewish persecution a central part of Molly’s story may have been improbable, the omission of *any* Jewish presence in the series is difficult to defend.

Molly at the movies: A pleasant world

Judging from the cover of *Welcome to Molly's World*, which depicts a number of people in front of a movie theater, Molly's world is white, middle class, and all-smiles. Molly and her friends are enjoying ice cream cones in front of the theater. A man is standing in a corner reading a newspaper, a small boy is gleefully playing with a toy airplane, and a uniformed soldier, carrying a briefcase in one hand, has his other arm around a young lady in a blue suit. An older lady is collecting scrap metal from a red-haired girl in a booth someone has set up for that purpose. A Red Cross nurse is holding the handlebars of her bike as a boy tries to sell her a newspaper. One woman is purchasing a ticket from an older gentleman in the ticket booth. Every single face is wearing a smile.

Tuttle (1993) paints a different picture of movie life, reporting instead children being frightened and troubled after viewing newsreels in the movies. One of the participants in his study recalled her trips to the movies: "I don't remember the movies showing—I just remember the newsreels...the bombed homes, the sick and dying people—children with no homes and no families. I cried" (p. 11). Another girl reported seeing on newsreels scenes of rooms full of eye glasses, pictures of gas chambers, and of skeletal people (pp.153-154). Tuttle documents common nightmares that children during the war recounted, based, at least in part, upon the horrors they had witnessed on screen. Molly's experience with movies is quite different from those recounted in Tuttle's book.

In another spin-off from the historical novels, Pleasant Company has issued four small hardcover short story books about Molly. These are also written by Valerie Tripp. In "Molly and the Movie Star," Molly turns down her mother's suggestion that she use her movie money to buy a war bond. She decides to do chores instead because "Molly loved everything about going to the movies. She and Linda and Susan like to get to the theater early, buy their tickets, and then walk slowly around the lobby, studying the posters of coming attractions.... Molly always ended up getting popcorn, but Linda and Susan tried something new each week--candy bars or licorice twists, caramels or taffy"

(pp. 5-6). When the movie begins and Molly sees the lead actress wearing a Red Cross nurse's uniform, she "shivers" with pleasure. Molly is swept up by the movie star Melody Moore and finds herself thinking of her when she later does housework. Looking at her reflection in the mirror of the toaster and holding the mop as a microphone, Molly sings the feature song of the film: "I'm a soldier in the army of love" (p.12). The plot of this short story centers on Molly's being selected to present war bond money to movie star Melody Moore, who is to appear at a big rally in Molly's town.

Like the historical fiction books, the short story books have a short "Looking Back: A Peek Into the Past" essay. For "Molly and the Movie Star," the essay is about movies in the 40s. Acknowledging that the world was a scary place during the war, the essay mentions the newsreels that reported on the progress of the war, which would change the mood of the audience: "Some people would begin to cry. Others shouted at the images of German and Japanese soldiers. And some people were scared" (pp. 38-39). One girl, according to the essay, felt that she was actually there when the newsreels would show the battle action; another would always time going to the bathroom so she would miss seeing the newsreels. The final sections of the short story book suggest that the reader set up a Saturday matinee with her friends and watch a movie Molly might have seen in 1944. Then, "movie picks" are listed: *Lassie Come Home*, *Since You Went Away*, (a Shirley Temple movie), *National Velvet*, or *Cinderella*. Finally, an illustrated recipe shows girls how to make popcorn, with a reminder that Molly couldn't add butter or other toppings to her popcorn because of war shortages, but listing nonetheless possibilities of toppings that girls of today can enjoy.

"Molly and the Movie Star" first appeared in Pleasant Company's *American Girl* magazine's premier issue in 1992. Immediately following the story, a feature "Saturday Afternoon at the Movies" (pp. 17-21) depicts how Saturdays in the life of many children was "the best day of the week" (p. 17) because it was movie day. A double spread shows children (all white, girls in dresses and boys in long pants) lined up to get tickets for the

feature movie, Tom Drake's *Courage of Lassie*. A ticket for *Superman* is shown on the collage, along with a movie poster that depicts scenes from *National Velvet*. A newsreel clipping is also pictured with film footage of army tanks and military airplanes. A photograph with young girls in candy bar costumes is labeled "a special candy display" (p. 18). Finally, the candy counter advertising buttered popcorn and Hershey kisses appears in a photograph featuring a smiling clerk behind the counter.

The copy for the page describes the delectable scents of the theater lobby, adding that the cost of candy and popcorn is only five cents. For ten cents, moviegoers can see, the copy explains, cartoons, serial episodes which leave the viewer hanging until next week, a short Western with plenty of horses and cowboys, a regular movie, and a newsreel about the war that tells stories of brave soldiers.

The next double page features glamour shots of Betty Grable, Veronica Lake, Maureen O'Hara, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner, and Hedy Lemarr. Also shown is a copy of *Modern Screen*, a magazine that gives girls the inside story of their favorite glamour queens. The cartoon that happens to be showing on stage is *Cinderella*, and she is gazing in the eyes of her Prince Charming, mouth open in awe. The label, written on a ticket stub, states that "*Cinderella* was as popular 50 years ago as it is today" (p. 21).

Side stage is a paper doll replica of Carmen Miranda, an actress whose fame, the label tells us, was due to the fake fruit she wore on her head. A book is shown also on the collage which has been issued based on the western motion picture *Terror Trail*, its label explaining that favorite movies were sometimes made into books. At the bottom right-hand corner is a picture of a grand theater, with red and gold gleaming from its velvet seats and stage. Here is the copy under the picture:

In many towns, the theater was like a palace, with high ceilings and sparkling chandeliers. It was grand and exciting, and made everything inside seem that way too, especially movie stars. At the end of the day, girls went home with lots to dream about and talk over with their friends. Best of all, they had another

Saturday at the movies to look forward to next week! (*American Girl* magazine, Premier Issue, p. 21)

While illustrating yet another textual connection between the Molly books and other Pleasant Company products, this magazine coverage of Molly and her movie world is also a telling example of Pleasant Company's presentation of a domestic history seen through middle-class lenses that filter out much that is unpleasant. That rural, minority, and poor children may not have considered Saturday the best day of the week and would not likely be among the moviegoers is not considered. The newsreels that depicted war atrocities are not discussed or highlighted. That the glamour world of Hollywood is not always glamorous is ignored.

Had the company wanted to give a more in-depth coverage of Carmen Miranda, the paper doll replica on its collage, girl-readers might have learned more about her than her fake fruit hats reveal. This Brazilian star, whose own country was dismayed by their perception of her having sold out to Hollywood, died at the age of 46, a depressed victim of Hollywood's merciless stereotyping of her as a woman whose "tropical delicacies" were in high demand by men and whose extravagant dress and outlandish hats attracted more attention than her talented singing voice. Miranda had been undergoing electric shock treatment for depression and receiving therapy for substance abuse when, while holding her mirror and putting on her make-up in her Hollywood mansion, she fell off her dressing stool and suffered a fatal heart attack. When her body was taken back to Brazil, a priest refused to give her last rites because he objected to her heavy facial make-up (Gilman, 1996). This story might have been instructive to American girls, giving them something to talk over with their friends.

The *Molly* series, like the other American Girls series, has numerous other text extensions apart from articles in *American Girl* or the *Molly's World* book discussed earlier. These extensions are a marketing effort to generate continued interest in the historical doll characters, as well as introduce new products associated with them. For

Molly, in addition to the previously discussed movie story, there are other short story publications: one about Molly at camp, one about her visit to her grandparents' home where she discovers that her Aunt Eleanor has joined the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, and one about her and her friend completing a project on General George Washington at school.

Molly's camp story gives Pleasant Company an opportunity to teach girls a few tidbits about Sacagawea, the Shoshone Indian woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their expedition. Inspired by her, Molly decides to forge her own trail during a camp hike, ignoring Miss Butternut's rule that they hike as a group. Alone on an untrodden path, Molly finds a beautiful little pond, but she misses out on a surprise for the camp girls at the end of their hike. When Molly is found at last by the other campers and Miss Butternut, she apologizes for her disobedience. The story could be read as an act of independence on Molly's part, a refusal to follow the crowd, and an indicator that she will "walk to the beat of her own drummer," marching on, as the title of the short story, "Molly Marches On" suggests. But Molly pays a price for her retreat. She is never told (nor is the reader) of the big surprise the other girls have enjoyed at the end of the marked trail. The storyline suggests that spunky girls like Molly may have to "miss out" if they insist on following the unmarked trail. Reinforcing the moral of the story, the craft activity for the book, following the *Looking Back* section (a parallel to the historical fiction books), is a lesson and craft on marking trails correctly and being able to follow the signs.

Other *Molly* extension texts include a play, *War on the Homefront* (Tripp, 1994) based on a Halloween story in Book One of the *Molly* series. True to its mission to be educational, the Director's Guide (Thieme, 1990b) teaches the children performing the play about staging, making playbills and programs, acting convincingly, blocking action, providing props, and so on. There are detailed instructions for making hula skirts from crepe paper and newspaper, just as Molly and her friends had done. Historical tidbits are

sprinkled throughout the pages, including information on musical variety shows to raise money for the war effort, music from the 1940s, and a profile of child star Shirley Temple.

Finally, as a part of the emphasis on domestic history, Pleasant Company works to ensure that a woman's place in the kitchen remains a tradition. *The American Girls Cookbook* (Thieme, 1990a) has a seventeen page chapter on Molly's lunches. Illustrated with beautiful color photographs, the book has a Martha Stewart mentality with Betty Crocker instructions. Molly's Basic Seven food groups are explained in detail, the text emphasizing dishes that used peanut butter for protein and spread butter very thin. The pages are dotted with poems and sayings that inspired home front cooks. Today's girls are encouraged to try the recipes American Girls of the past enjoyed. The introduction to the cookbook mentions that today men and boys also cook, but the concluding sentence of the same essay makes clear that the kitchen is a woman's domain. Warning girls not to work alone in the kitchen, the text reads: "Cooking together is a tradition American girls and their mothers have always shared. Keep it alive today!" (p. 3).

Focus on Family and Gender

We have seen that the *Molly* series fits the mold of the entire American Girls Collection in its innocent, romanticized, and selective version of history, examined through the perspective of whose story is told and what events are included or omitted. Another aspect of this history worthy of analysis is Pleasant Company's choice—not just in the case of Molly, but with all of the series books—to privilege a *domestic* history in its presentation of American *girls*. As with the other series books, Molly's story is centered in the home, and women, especially, are seldom seen outside the home setting for any length of time. Molly does attend school, and she does have a camp experience away from home, but the all-girls camp is presented as an extended home, complete with the motherly figure Miss Butternut who tells the girls that Camp Gowonagin is their "home sweet home" (*Molly saves the day*, p. 3) for the next two weeks. Molly's mother works

for the Red Cross, but she is never seen on its premises. Her primary role in the book is to nurture her children at home and soften their reactions to the grumpy housekeeper, Mrs. Gilford. The choice to center the text on the individual, home and domestic life means that public issues and events are marginalized or even ignored. While it might be argued that Pleasant Company has attempted to reverse the well-established binary of privileging the public sphere as opposed to the private sphere, a simple reversal is equally problematic. To associate women and girls with the private sphere, even if it is privileged, is to limit the arenas available to them.

Coontz, argues in her 1992 book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* that American individualism has relied historically on the subordination of women's individuality. She notes that in western tradition, caring for others became the distinct arena of women while personal autonomy was reserved for men. A primary thesis of Coontz's book is that family morality and the demand to return to wholesome values associated with family has dire consequences even for those it purports to save, as its ultimate result is to detach people from political responsibility, social activism, and collective obligation. Coontz goes so far as to say that using family as a model for public life results in the breakdown of community; people find themselves choosing between familial intimacy or complete isolation.

Coontz's arguments have relevance to the pro-family political climate of the eighties and nineties, one which, as we have seen, made possible the popularity of The American Girls Collection, with its emphasis on family and prolonging childhood. Coontz's points are also germane to a consideration of the *Molly* series when we consider that Molly and her family respond to the war in ways that are primarily personal. Molly is interested in sending blankets to warm wounded soldiers, or saving scrap metals at home so that ammunition can be manufactured to win the war. She and her family make personal sacrifices for the war—they conserve materials needed for the war effort and they eat food from their Victory Garden. Though these sacrifices were real and an important

part of homefront America, the domestic history that American Girls books privilege shapes the issues that are discussed. Larger social issues—the plight of the Japanese Americans, for example, the ethical considerations of atomic warfare, the disgrace of migrant housing, the race riots in forty-seven states, or the threat of polio which was very real during the forties—are never even subjects of discussion. Tuttle reports that children and their parents were as frightened of polio as they were of the Germans and Japanese. According to Tuttle, polio—rampant in 1943—was even worse in 1944 and the first half of 1945. It may be recalled that the Molly books are set from 1943-1945.

The focus is on family in each of the series books, and at least some of the characters are familiar stereotypes. In the Molly books, for example, Mrs. Gilford is much like the popular star of the *Hazel* television series of the 1960s, a woman whose life is centered on taking care of people not related to her and whose abrupt manner is sometimes abrasive with occasional surprise moments of affection. Molly lives in a world where little brothers are pests and big brothers are even more bothersome. Big sisters are moody and interested in looking good and attracting boys. Mothers smooth or brush the bangs of their daughters and rumple the heads of their sons. Fathers smoke pipes, tease and swap jokes. School girls daydream about weddings and fantasize about their teachers' love interests. They giggle a lot and share secrets. School boys jump out of school lines, call girls "triple dips" (*Meet Molly*, p. 51) and hurl other insults at them. Girls "munch" and "nibble;" Molly takes "ladylike bites" of turnips and "quiet sips" of water (*Meet Molly*, p. 4). Boys "gulp" their food down. Ricky shovels a forkful of turnips in his mouth and devours them "quick as a wink" (*Meet Molly*, p. 4). Molly has a morbid fear of multiplication bees; Howie, a rambunctious schoolboy, views the multiplication bee as if it were a "big treat, like cupcakes for lunch" (*Molly learns a lesson*, p. 3). Molly hides her hands, crosses her fingers, and prays during the bee. Howie's confidence is demonstrated by his statement: "I know 'em all! Just ask me

anything!” (*Molly learns a lesson*, p. 4). Before the bee has even begun, he raises his clenched fists above his head like a prize fighter.

An analysis of the verbs used when girls speak as opposed to when boys speak shows that girls are less active and not nearly as aggressive or confident as boys. In the Molly series, for example, girls “daydream,” “whisper,” “mumble,” “sigh,” “tiptoe,” and “waddle.” Boys “yell,” “pipe up,” “insist,” “command,” and “march.” Girls or women are the ones who do domestic chores. They heat up the stove, bake bread, iron shirts, spoon turnips, pour milk, serve up pot roast, count stitches, sew squares together, tie bows, make sticky buns, wash dishes, and sweep kitchen floors. Boys or men help hang Christmas wreaths, put on Christmas lights, move furniture, rake the yard and paint garages. Girls are associated through similes or metaphors with princesses, angels, nurses, dancers, polar bears, wet hens, Cinderella, housekeepers, ladies, crows, ducks, pirates, snowmen, rosy little elves, guards, babies, crocuses, chatterboxes, movie stars, soldiers, generals, prisoners, hawks, worms, bees, crabs, captains, showstoppers, French poodles, jumping beans. The images that stand out in this list as being more related to masculine ones—soldiers, generals, prisoners, guards, captains—are used in book five of the series, when Molly attends the all-girl camp and they divide into teams for the game of Color War, a game that uses military imagery and teaches Molly that even war games can be unpleasant and victory has a price. Boys are associated through similes or metaphors with rats, soldiers, pirates, gentlemen, prize fighters, radio announcers, pilots, and basketball stars. These images reinforce traditional stereotypes and encourage girls and boys to see themselves in gender-specific ways.

Much of the language used to describe girls relates to their appearance and/or clothes. Clothes that girls wear seem to have a life of their own: they rustle, float, swirl, shine, swish, ripple, sparkle, shimmer and sway. Even Molly’s comfortable clothes make her respond in certain ways: In Book Three, Molly rolls out of bed and puts on some old corduroys and a flannel shirt. The clothes are further described: “They had a nice, soft,

easy, vacation-y feeling. In them, Molly was ready for something unusual to happen” (*Molly’s surprise*, p. 13). Clothes for girls, their dolls, or for women are often described in sumptuous detail-- Mom wears “buttery-smooth leather gloves,” or the clothes are personified-- Molly’s doll wears “a smart red cape covering her starched dress and tied under her chin” (*Molly’s surprise*, p. 54). Attention to clothing for boys is typically both scant and negative--dirty socks, a stained shirt, or a jacket that is hard to button. One positive association of boys with clothing is the silk scarf Ricky gets on Christmas from his father that is made from a genuine parachute and is the kind real pilots wear. Another is the time Molly’s younger brother, Brad, dresses up in his only good suit on a special occasion--his Dad is coming home from the war. Mrs. McIntire immediately makes him put a napkin in his collar so that he doesn’t risk spilling food on it.

While it is the case that language does not dictate response, it nevertheless may help to shape it. The diction associated with characters in the books is seldom gender neutral. In one sense, this is understandable, especially if we accept the premise that the characters did live in an environment characterized by sexism. Even that premise must be questioned when we consider the argument Adkins (1998) makes that we cannot and must not assume that the dominant values were the only values of an era. When these representations are seldom troubled or exposed as being anything other than the way things were or are supposed to be, we get a version of history that is selective and myopic and ignores complexities and contradictions of the past.

The intent of this chapter has been to provide readings from a feminist post-structural perspective of the historical books of The American Girls Collection and to look more closely at the Molly series, attempting to explore how the multiple texts offer girls a way of viewing American girlhood as it is both now and has been in the past. The final chapter will summarize the findings as they relate to the research questions and point to the limitations of this study as well as to areas for future research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

My study of The American Girls Collection has given me the opportunity to discuss this project with numerous parents, educators, and young girls. Invariably, a significant number of them who are already familiar with the Collection express shock or dismay that my findings include a serious critique of Pleasant Company's empire, including findings that suggest that the effects of the historical books of fiction and the many products and texts associated with them may not be as empowering, as liberating, or as educational in teaching history as they first appear. I have consciously sought to question and trouble the empowerment-for-girls message that Pleasant Company appears to endorse in its mission statement.

Although I cannot discount the fact that Pleasant Company is primarily about making a profit (as are other businesses), I do not doubt the sincerity of its efforts to forefront girls and give them a sense of pride in their accomplishments, both past and present. The company has created characters who are strong, resourceful, and have solid values such as honesty, courage, and compassion, leading many reviewers and consumers of the products to laud them as wholesome and healthy role models for girls. I have attempted to discover the "holes" in these wholesome images with a purpose of questioning dominant readings rather than discrediting them entirely. I have employed deconstructive reading strategies, along with other more conventional ones, to analyze the texts. The theoretical frameworks for the study draw from a number of disciplines, but I have endeavored to approach them from a feminist perspective, informed by neo-Marxist insights that the discourses we shape and are shaped by have material

dimensions. While it is true that historical information can be gleaned from these texts, I have pointed out that the history recounted is selective. I do not deny that the dolls, the six books which accompany each one, and the numerous products and experiences that Pleasant Company offers have been sources of pleasure and entertainment to girls who can afford them. I have also acknowledged the company's generous charity donations and its support of numerous worthwhile causes for children. It is, in a sense, for these very reasons that I see both the value and the necessity of this study.

It is much easier, and certainly more likely, for parents and educators to critique and question lyrics to rock music that are filled with offensive language than it is for us to critique and question a company whose name, logo, and promotional materials resonate with images and language depicting an assuredly knowable world that is safe, pleasant, and innocuous. Indeed, we may find ourselves drawn to such a world. Yorks (1989) quotes a marketing and product development executive from Pleasant Company, Tamara Hauck, whose words suggest a rationale for purchasing these products that is tempting for parents and educators to adopt as well. Contrasting American Girl dolls with fashion dolls like Barbie, Hauck says that American Girl doll-characters stand for "solid American values such as courage, determination, familial love and the rewards of friendship. They [fashion dolls like Barbie] have sports cars, dream houses, and other material things" (E p. 18). Others have bemoaned Barbie's spiked heels and flashy wardrobe. Such views have prompted some to refer to the dolls in The American Girl Collection as "anti-Barbies" and have salved the consciences of many parents who convince themselves that the money they spend on Pleasant Company's products is worth disassociating themselves and their daughters from crass materialism and a trailer park mentality. Interestingly, few of the parents I have spoken with had any idea that the company is owned by Mattel, whose number one doll in sales is still Barbie (with American Girl dolls coming in second to her).

The next section will attempt to summarize the findings of the study, organizing them around the research questions presented in Chapter One.

Revisiting the Questions

One contention of this study is that texts do not exist in a vacuum. They are at least partially shaped by production decisions, distribution patterns, and marketing techniques, all of which are shaped in part by the political environment. This study has sought to identify the dynamics set up as Pleasant Company's complex package of products and concepts has made its way into the homes of American girls. Though the study addresses multiple "texts" that have arisen as a part of the company's large domain of products, its focus is the six historical fiction books that accompany the dolls, books that founder Pleasant Rowland has insisted lie at the very heart of the company and its mission.

That these material concerns should be considered in any analysis of texts has been demonstrated by Apple (1989), Christian-Smith (1984), Taxel (1995, 2002), and others. The study has highlighted Pleasant Company's mission of presenting *the American Girl* with the accompanying assumption that American girls can be represented by carefully selected characters who the company forthrightly maintains are more alike than different, sharing timeless traditions of all American girls. It has noted both the dangers of essentialism and the omissions inherent in every selection of *the American girl*.

Though some have praised Pleasant Company for its attempts to present multi-cultural girls, this study points out that product development decisions are informed by marketing strategies which are sophisticated and sensitive to demographics and revenues, especially of minority groups. The impact of these marketing practices is evident in the non-chronological order in which the dolls have been introduced. It has taken the company sixteen years, for example, to produce its first Native American girl-doll, a doll that arguably should have initiated a collection that sought to present the historical eras in American history. The study also notes the hiring of advisory boards for ethnic dolls and

the highlighting in the catalogue and media of the careful research that takes place to ensure consumers that Pleasant Company has “gotten it right,” a move that seeks to build consumer confidence in the products and justify their expense.

Drawing on studies by Combs (1993) and White (1998), my findings demonstrate that the launching of the company in 1986 (the Reagan-Bush era), coincided with a political climate that heralded conservative family values, focused on the individual, and expressed a longing to return to the nostalgic past. The company’s inception can also be seen in the context of the backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991) that resulted, among other things, in a trend to adopt a veneer of feminism that glossed over a deeply entrenched, traditional, and conservative view of women’s roles.

Following Englehardt (1992) and Taxel (2002), whose work in the political economy of publishing in children’s literature has sought to uncover the influences on a text often considered to be “outside” it, I have suggested that the books tapped the market of chain book stores and children’s books targeted for the consumer child. The company was able to capitalize on the disproportionate growth of the rich in the 80s and 90s who could afford the high prices of its products. Its educational bent was enticing to parents who had been recently alarmed by the *Nation at Risk* (1983) report bemoaning the poor reading habits and lack of knowledge and skills of America’s youth. Further concern for girls in particular came from Gilligan’s (1983/ 1993) study emphasizing that the “different voice” of girls needs to be heard and valued. That girls’ voices had been silenced was highlighted by the Sadker and Sadker (1994) report that girls were being shortchanged at school, and that their self-esteem about the time they reached adolescence was dropping significantly. The timing was right for a product that could capitalize on this kind of political climate.

The company’s decision to market its products primarily through distribution of catalogues reflects Pleasant Rowland’s desire to target affluent customers who value education and who are willing to pay for what they perceive to be unique and high

quality products, set apart from the mass-produced “toys” that end up in garage sales. By positioning girls not only as consumers, but also as collectors, the company encourages them to view themselves as having discriminating tastes, a characteristic Bourdieu (1984) links to identity.

Though it might be recalled that my initial plan for the study had been to examine the historical fiction books that accompany the American Girls doll collection, I soon discovered that the books can not be divorced from the complex packaging that gives them much of their force. My second question concerns the interplay between the books and other Pleasant Company texts, and my focus includes the AG Catalogue and its depiction of the dolls, their owners, their wardrobes and accessories, and other selected spin-offs. I wanted to know what ideological messages these multiple texts offered readers. Using insights from deconstructive theory, (Derrida, 1978; Butler, 1990, 1993; Davies, 1993; Weedon, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000, and others), discussions of ideology and the power of discourse, (Foucault, 1970/1971, 1969/1972; Williams, 1977; Taxel, 1984, 1995; Ebert, 1988; Eagleton, 1991) and studies in consumption, (Mackay, 1997; Edwards, 2000), I have argued that the binary of producers/consumers merges with gender associations to view boys and men as active producers and girls and women as passive consumers. I demonstrate that Pleasant Company positions girls as consumers, careful to point out that this positioning does not necessitate a girl’s passive consumption but may arguably limit her range of choices. Further, my review of consumption theory leads me to acknowledge that consumption practices may shape identity (Dittmar, 1992; McCracken, 1988) and reflect the social status of consumers.

The study demonstrates how Pleasant Company’s marketing strategies seek to set it apart from the “run of the mill” products, giving it an elite status and bestowing a sense of distinction to its consumers (Veblen, 1899; Bourdieu, 1984). I highlight the constant traffic between the historical fiction books and the catalogue, with items in the stories reproduced as treasured keepsakes for sale in the catalogue. I note that the attention

given in the books to looks and appearance as defining features of a girl find counterparts in the catalogue. Though the company supplies an overwhelming number of choices for a girl to make in regard to a particular look, the menu for the look is established on the pages of the catalogue, and consumers are dictated, at least to some extent, by the menu prices. In short, Rowland has developed what Susina (1999) has described as “a network of intertextuality constructed around an individual or group of figures from popular culture” (p. 133), advertised as a progressive educational endeavor but actualized as commodity fetishism.

In spite of what appears to be an effort to promote multiculturalism, my analysis of the front cover of 57 sample catalogues finds that, judging from its images, the catalogues depict the American Girl as predominately white. The catalogue also portrays race and ethnicity as a “pick and choose” game of skin tones, hair color, and eye color. My study supports Gillespie’s (1998) claim that when we ask ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?’ the images of America’s mirror scream back objects of beauty that are overwhelmingly white. Pleasant Company attends to minority groups by featuring a Hanukkah outfit, and Kwanzaa buba, or a wheelchair one can purchase for her American Girl Doll. In privileging American values and beliefs girls *share*, it ignores or dismisses significant differences.

My analysis of the American Girl catalogue concludes that it is used as a vehicle to sell not only the products, but also the Pleasant Company’s mission. Photographs of girls in the catalogue often depict them reading, dreaming, or modeling beautiful dresses that match the girl/doll characters. Strong links are established between what a girl wears and the friends she has. The language of the catalogue, often presented as a message from Pleasant Rowland to girls and/or their parents, is scripted to suggest the magical glow of childhood and to downplay the material side of spending. The constant commerce between the historical fiction books and the catalogue ensure that the products will be invested with emotions that arguably have no price tag. While girls are presented

as being strong and resourceful, my study demonstrates that they are, to use Del Vecchio's (1997) words about girls' brands in general, "powerful in a girl-accepting way" (p. 61).

The American Girl spin-offs—including craft and activity books, fashion shows, teas, and ice cream socials—appear, this study suggests, to be educating girls about the past and helping them to discover their moment in history while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender roles and defining girlhood in limiting and restrictive ways. The study has argued that this "sense of return" (White, 1998) to a supposedly wholesome and innocent past, (Coontz, 1992) may be counterproductive in moving girls beyond traditional notions of gender. Finally, the American Girl Place can be viewed as a kind of collective home for American Girls. At present the company's only retail store, its location on Chicago's Magnificent Mile and its ambiance mark it as an elite store creating an environment that Pine and Gilmore (1999) have called experience economy. The products mentioned in the historical fiction book stories are displayed as if they were museum pieces and artifacts in the Smithsonian. Moreover, dining and theater entertainment, based on The American Girl Collection dolls and their stories, make the American Girl Place a favorite vacation destination for girls and their parents who can afford to visit.

The positioning of girls as consumers has been viewed in this study as reinforcing the age-old association of women with consumption as opposed to production (Winner, 1998). It has also noted that although all consumers do not participate in the same way, consumer culture does affect the construction of identity. Important to this argument is McCracken's (1988) work linking consumer goods to ritual processes (collecting, gift-giving) which in turn help to shape identity and concepts of self. The whole notion of collecting, as it finds expression in Pleasant Company, suggests imbuing objects with the stamp of the personal and encourages girls to view themselves as "keepers" (McCracken's term) rather than possessors, guardians of special treasures they can one

day pass on to their daughters. Gift-giving, especially on birthdays and at Christmas, is highlighted both in the catalogues and in the historical fiction books. It may be recalled that two of the six books that accompany each doll (with the exception of Kaya) are centered around the character's birthday and Christmas celebration, a move which both encourages gift-giving, necessitates party clothes, and makes the clothes and gifts more memorable and sentimental.

Finally, the case is made, drawing from work by Bourdieu (1984) and Schor (1998) that individuals seek distinction through collecting as well as social distance. American girls who identify themselves with Pleasant Company's product do so by purchasing a wide array of products: book bags, jackets, tee-shirts, jewelry, and clothes they wear to match their doll's. They may subscribe to *American Girl* magazine, host an American Girl party, regularly visit The American Girl web site, participate in American Girls Clubs, or even decorate their bedrooms with American Girl accessories. The effect of these activities may be to set oneself apart from those who do not belong and to see oneself as a part of an elite group. Given Schor's (1998) finding that the higher the brand's status, the more closely consumers associate self image with it, the present study's focus on the ideological messages these texts offer girls is important.

I have been guided in my analysis by multiple theoretical positions, their common thread being that they engage in critical inquiry. I began my literature review probing feminist theory, believing that my feminist stance was the position from which I desired to speak. With insights gained from the work of cultural critics and educational scholars (Kelly, 1974; Williams, 1977; Eagleton, 1979; Taxel, 1986; Davis, 1987; Hollindale, 1988; Giroux, 1999) who recognized that texts are inscribed with the ideologies that have the potential of shaping the desires and identities of reading subjects, a guiding concern of mine was to look for how subjects were positioned in ways that reinforced prevailing gender notions rather than disrupting them. It was through my understanding of poststructural theory that I discovered a way of approaching discourse that was and is

ultimately liberating. The post-structuralists' understanding of the subject as both constituted and constitutive means that readers who are empowered to make visible the multiple and conflicting discourses which "speak us into existence" can thereby "undo" these discourses, disrupting binaries and discovering how language may trap us by what is present and absent in a text. One method of the study, then, has been for me to "read against the grain" of the text to unfold its contradictions. I am also indebted to studies by Radway (1984) and Christian-Smith (1990) whose analyses of popular fiction (romance) for women and adolescents lay the groundwork for this study both by looking at how texts position readers with regard to gender and how they must be analyzed within their material context.

Guided by these theoretical perspectives and related studies, I have attempted in question three to examine how the historical fiction books that accompany Felicity, Josefina, Kirsten, Addy, Samantha, Kit, and Molly position girls as subjects, offering frameworks and ideologies that encourage girls to see themselves in particular ways. Using specific support from these texts, I find that girls are positioned to see themselves as American girls who are consumers, are very concerned about their looks, wardrobes, and appearance, are strong and resourceful but also traditional and non-threatening to the status quo, and reside in a world that is pleasant and positive.

My analysis demonstrates that girls in the historical fiction books can be viewed, following Butler (1990a; 1993), as performing gender as they move through discourses that name and produce ways of being a girl, calling attention to those which are perceived as "doing gender" right. Girls do not lose agency through this process, but they may find that forms of resistance are difficult to access and maintain.

Their favorite possession is their doll, and they are presented as being naturally maternal and nurturing—they love caring for their dolls and taking care of others. Pleasant Company's American Girls know that family is important; every day details of home and hearth underscore the emphasis on the domestic. True to the American value

of the importance of the individual, American Girls' stories focus on individual choices girls make, though their choices are often restricted. They know that while looking good is important-how one looks may be as important as what one does- it is not always easy; it requires commitment and hard work. Clothes play an important role in how a girl feels about herself-whether she feels stylish, grown-up, important, or secure. Clothes can even provide sensual pleasure, and are, in some of the stories, emblematic of friendship and sacrifice. Clothing often drives the plot of the stories, and it may even have transforming powers.

When girls are resourceful and independent, their freedom is often temporary or restricted. When they step out of traditional roles, their courage is marked as atypical or unusual. An in-depth study of the Molly series in the study reveals that the diction in the books is seldom gender neutral and often engages in traditional stereotyping. I use the Molly series to demonstrate how spin-offs of the books serve to reinforce the ideologies of the texts.

In responding to question four, I have attempted to pay attention to the social groups represented and omitted in the series and to consider the historical lenses used to depict the events and everyday practices of a given historical era. I found that ideologies also operate to privilege certain social values and social groups that are related not only to gender, but also to issues of class, race, nationality, and ethnicity. Noteworthy in this regard is the depiction in the *Felicity* stories of black workers who are never identified as slaves as well as a failure of the books to acknowledge that the fight for freedom during the American Revolution coincided with the enslavement of African Americans, a point Taxel (1984) found to be the case in his study of historical fiction books of the American Revolution. Singing Bird, the Native American friend of Kirsten's, is presented by making her way of life seem fascinating and almost magical. Though her tribe must flee from the land they occupied because the white settlers have cleared the land and destroyed their food supply, their displacement is treated as an unfortunate twist of fate.

The fraudulent U.S. treaties with various bands that led to their displacement is not mentioned.

Nellie's plight as a poor working class girl in the Samantha stories is solved by a combination of Samantha's compassion and Nellie's fortitude and determination to survive, all happily resolved when Samantha's rich aunt and uncle decide suddenly over dinner to adopt Nellie and her two siblings. Stories of Molly's life on the home front during World War Two never mention the thousands of Japanese Americans who were sent to internment camps, and scant attention is paid to the plight of the Jews and other oppressed groups overseas. Finally, the fact that every American Girl (until the most recent Kaya) has a Christmas story promotes a Christian ideology that omits American girls of other religions or those who profess to embracing none. These and other examples point to a selective and short-sighted view of history.

Implications of the Study

This dissertation underscores the problematic nature of a corporate construction of girlhood. When the bottom line is profit and the mission is to articulate the identity of the American Girl and educate readers regarding her collective history, the privileging of dominant ideologies with a nod to dissenting voices makes good business sense but is highly unlikely to be in the best interest of children. Educators and parents have reason to be concerned when products designed for profit influence which books are to be written, what stories and whose stories are to be told, and who the readers of the books will be. Books written as advertisements for products is a trend in children's books publishing that does not appear to be abating.

A case in point is that since Mattel's buyout of Pleasant Company, it is now publishing accompanying books with the match-box car series for boys. A number of recent articles (e.g., Taxel, 2002) have attempted to direct the attention of parents and educators to the pressures on authors and publishers to commodify children's literature, calling for a more aggressive approach to promoting the best books and teaching children to analyze critically the books they read. Taxel has pointed to the increasing hegemony

of giant corporations (like Mattel) that contribute to fast capitalism, a term used by Agger (1989) to describe an economic change to practices that stresses competition, quality, and distinctive niches (Taxel, 2002), all of which are flexible enough to change to the demands of the market quickly. Seen in this context, the proliferation of Pleasant Company's products can be seen as participating in what Taxel refers to as "commodification...in the transformation of all things, be they friendships, knowledge, or literature...commodities that no longer have intrinsic worth but are valued extrinsically in terms of money" (p.149).

That Pleasant Company hires its own team of writers for the historical books ensures that they will conform to the demands of the marketplace and shape products that are in line with corporate guidelines. The implications for this trend are obvious: there are fewer spots and opportunities for writers and illustrators to be creative or to speak from a minority stance, one considered to be outside the mainstream of American culture (Taxel, 2002).

Given these concerns, one implication of this study is that parents and educators must adopt strategies to enable children who read popular texts such as *The American Girls Collection* to question and challenge the texts. Readers of historical fiction books and their related texts must be encouraged to be active subjects, open to multiple and contradictory readings and sensitive to the way language and structure work to privilege certain readings over others. It is this kind of liberating reading that poststructural theory makes possible. Davies (1989, 1993, 2000) has demonstrated in her research that with guidance, children can be equipped with the tools of critical reading within a feminist pedagogy. Referring to the web of discourses within which we must learn to negotiate our paths to a sense of selfhood(s), Davies (2000) writes:

We are both the weaver and the web. And that web is not one in/through which we are simply determined (though we are that), nor is it fixed. It is a web in which we can come to see the knots (our discursive practices

our ways of knowing, our selving, our embeddedness in relations of power), and we can also come to see how to untie some of the knots or tie up different ones—or to actually spin/become new threads. (pp. 168-169)

Children can be encouraged to see images and metaphors and storylines as tentative discourses subject to undoing, revising, and rewriting. Children who learn to read texts from a poststructural stance can view them as an ensemble of discourses that offer contradictory and competing messages about what it means to be a girl. They can be challenged to write new storylines that disrupt the binary of male/female (or female/male) so that girls (and boys) can gain freedom from restrictions of traditional gender expectations and can operate from a sense of wholeness as humans, recognizing, in Davies' (2000) words, "the multiple nature of the self and its capacity to enter into a range of contradictory discourses" (p. 40). I agree with Davies when she argues that this positioning is helpful for feminists who find themselves wanting to embrace both liberal feminism, with its desire for access into the male symbolic order, and radical feminism, which celebrates femaleness with a desire to separate it from the male order. Davies sees that each of these positions may have merit for the feminist speaking subject who is free to select discourses that offer the most help in her circumstances. Following this line of thought, girls can be empowered to celebrate that their way of doing things has value (an idea that Pleasant Company promotes) and they can also engage in the struggle for equity with males. Citing Kristeva (1986/1981), Davies argues that the ability to combine these perspectives is to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of being and that multiplicity need not be organized around male/female dualism but may be viewed in the sense of wholeness.

A pedagogy that has relevance to the implications of this study is one advanced by Freire (1998), who argues that educators must be cultural workers who encourage students to view the world in political and ethical terms with a recognition of the interplay between power and knowledge. Freire's pedagogical methods require students

to ask the questions of who speaks, for whom, under what conditions—questions that this study has asked. Drawing upon Freire’s work, Brady (1995) argues for a feminist pedagogy of multiculturalism, noting that one of its necessary principles is a language of critique and possibility. She urges teachers to focus on “language as an active force in the construction of gender identities” (p. 95), and to place literacy “within the realm of viewing social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions” so as to better understand how discourse empowers and/or disempowers. Brady further notes that texts of popular culture offer educators (and I would add parents and children) the opportunity to question the restrictive range of identities these texts offer. The American Girls Collection texts could be used productively by educators in the classroom or parents at home to engage children in these kinds of critical discussions.

Limitations of the Research and Suggestions for Further Research

This study makes no claim to be a definitive reading of The American Girls Collection and the texts that comprise it. To the contrary, I wish to emphasize that it is one reading by one person who has approached the texts from a feminist perspective with the stated mission of dismantling them, interrogating them, and pointing out contradictions and disruptions that surface during the reading. To accomplish this resistant reading, I have also endeavored to read the texts from a subject position in consonance with the perceived authorial intent. I acknowledge that other readings are both possible and probable. I am fully aware that my reading may not be similar to the reading of children between the ages of seven and twelve, the intended audience for these texts. Child-readers might engage in the kinds of reading strategies I have used, though I would argue that unless they are encouraged to develop the skills and use the tools of critical analysis, they are more likely to read these texts as closed texts (with a more or less prescribed meaning) rather than as open texts (which allow and even encourage multiple readings).

Another limitation of this research, particularly in its analysis of production, is its reliance on observation and media reports rather than any genuine insider sources, other

than published articles. Insider sources could have, no doubt, provided additional insights. Limitations of time, funding, and accessibility prevented me from interviewing advisory board members or employees, executives, or authors of Pleasant Company, or from touring the corporate headquarters in Wisconsin to make first-hand observations. Researchers who could gain access to discussions regarding production decisions and product development would be able to contribute much to our understanding of how these processes have shaped the version of American girlhood Pleasant Company presents.

Given that this study is, as noted earlier, based on the researcher's reading and analysis of Pleasant Company's texts, a productive area for further research would be to gather data on how girls read the texts and make meanings from them. Although Acosta-Alzuru (1999) conducted interviews with mothers and their daughters, asking them a variety of questions about their interactions with The American Girls Collection, her sample was small, homogeneous, and localized. She acknowledges that other studies that include actual consumers of American Girl products are needed. I agree with her suggestion that the bimonthly *American Girl* magazine be analyzed. The magazine is, according to the Fall 2002 catalogue, the largest publication exclusively for girls, and it features articles and activities of both girls of the past and the present.

The ever-expanding products of Pleasant Company offer numerous other areas for research. A study of the recently launched "Dolls from Many Lands" that moves the focus on girls and their history to an international one is worthy of critique. A study of ethnicity and Pleasant Company's efforts to embrace diversity might focus on Addy, Josefina, and Kaya, while also looking at other texts that address multicultural issues, including the images in the catalogues, *American Girl* magazine, and the web site. Finally, comparisons and contrasts between the American Girls Collection and the *Dear America* series and other similar off-shoots might yield additional insights.

An ethnographic study of a classroom in the United States that has actually adopted the *America at School* curriculum would be instructive, as would an in-depth study of the fashion shows, museum programs, doll debuts, and other “events” and “experiences” that Pleasant Company offers. A study of the next retail store, opening at some point in the near future in New York, might be conducted. As Inness (1998) argues, scholarly work on girls’ culture has been inadequate and insufficient, and it has only recently begun to change as new studies are emerging, acknowledging the importance of understanding the construction of gender roles and particularly how it is that girls are shaped into “properly” gendered young women.

The American Girls Collection has other compelling dimensions that warrant scrutiny because of its emphasis on history and education, as well as the opportunity these texts afford to examine further the impact of consumerism and capitalism on the construction of girlhood. It would be worthwhile to trace and examine the impact of Mattel’s buyout of Pleasant Company with an eye for discerning the ideological consequences of economic decisions made within a large conglomerate. These and other studies are imperative if we are to understand our society and the various subject positions that are made available to girls and women, situated as they are in an intricate web of possibilities and foreclosures.

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APPENDIX A
PRIMARY RESOURCES

PRIMARY RESOURCES

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APPENDIX B
GIRL MODELS ON FRONT COVERS OF MAGAZINES

YEAR & SEASON		FRONT COVER	BACK COVER
1.	1994 Special Edition Addy, Holiday 13 pp.	Black girl and Addy reading on stairway	Message to Parents
2.	1994 Holiday 65 pp.	White girl with Addy, White girl with Samantha sitting on sofa reading Sam. Surprise	Message to Parents
3.	1994 Holiday 65 pp.	White girl with Kirsten, Christmas tree, stars, reading	Message to Parents
4.	1995 Spring 61 pp.	White girl with Samantha, old book background reading	Message to Parents
5.	1995 Summer 59 pp.	White girl with Kirsten, reading lying down under apple tree wearing sunbonnet	Message to Parents
6.	1995 Holiday	Huge smiling face of white brunette, brown-eyed girl	Four ethnic girls-Asian, 2 blonde whites, one light black New message to parents
7.	1995 Holiday 77 pp.	White girl in pajamas with Samantha and white girl (w/pencil) with Girl of Today. Girls looking at each other's books	Same new message as #6, on a Christmas tree background
8.	1995 Holiday 77 pp.	White girl with Kirsten in winter outfits... look very much alike. Candles, reading, chair	Same new message as #6, on chair background
9.	1996 Spring 85 pp.	Introducing American Girls Club with two white girls, holding club booklets, smiling	Welcome to the Club! Same girls, looking at club memberships, a new message
10.	1996 Spring 77 pp.	White girl with Samantha, lying in bed reading, not smiling	New Mini American Girls! New message, instructing give your Girl of Today a doll of her own. Girl of Today pictured with all 5 mini dolls and books
11.	1996 Spring 77 pp.	Asian girl with Asian Girl of Today, holding book	Same as above #10
12.	1996 Summer 85 pp.	White girl with Kirsten sitting on a beach with grass, showing book to doll	Back-to-School Gear! Black girl with AG backpack and jacket
13.	1996 Fall 85 pp.	White girl with Girl of Today, looking out school bus, window, holding book	Same as above #12
14.	1996 Fall 89 pp.	White girl wearing "Proud to be an American Girl!" t-shirt	Join The Club Today! White girl wearing The American Girl Club baseball cap

15.	1996 Holiday 89 pp.	White girl with Girl of Today, Christmas lights wearing Addy's Christmas dress	New Holiday Treasures! The Girl of Today, five of them with different seasonal outfits, (Kwanzaa, Holiday violinist, Hanukkah, Sugar Plum Fairy, and Chinese New Year outfit)
16.	1996 Holiday 89 pp.	Kirsten in front of New Scenes and Settings, holiday-winter outfit	White girl with Girl of Today. "New Soft & Shiny Gear!", Pages and Pockets American Girl Library book
17.	1997 Spring 89 pp.	White girl with Doll of Today, reading Advice book on Best Friends, from AG Library	Hoppy Easter! With white Bitty Baby
18.	1997 Spring 97 pp.	All five historical dolls, with new outfits, sitting in front of window with flowering shrub	Great Summer Gear for American Girl! Two white girls in hula hoops with AG gear, in front of pink house with picket fence
19.	1997 Spring 89 pp.	White girl with Felicity, hair blowing in wind holding doll, looking away from camera, has no books	Same as #17 Bitty Baby
20.	1997 Spring 97 pp.	White girl with baseball athletic gear. Blue sky, yellow and blue outfit	Samantha Edition, shows doll with Special Edition, limited availability swimsuit, by lake
21.	1997 Spring 97 pp.	White blonde girl nibbling watermelon	Felicity Edition, shows doll with Special Edition, limited availability "walking dress" with windmill background
22.	1997 July 113 pp.	White girl with Girl of Today, AG cheerleading outfit, pom poms.	Play Day! American Girl of Today with white in-line gear and Asian soccer player
23.	1997 Fall 113 pp.	White girl with Girl of Today, wearing fall new gear, holding Friends book from AG library	Study Time AG school supplies
24.	1997 Holiday 121 pp.	Hispanic girl with Josefina reading book. Dressed identical (new message inside)	Holiday Time. White girl dressed in red overalls wrapping a package
25.	1997 Holiday 121 pp.	White girl with blonde hair (red overalls) and Molly (green holiday dress) Molly wearing glasses	Time to Dream Holiday PJ's and a Miss AG Pajama Bear. Asian girl in forefront, two white girls in background
26.	1997 Holiday 121 pp.	Josefina and her doll in Christmas stocking, holiday mantle	Time to Star! White girl with Girl of Today, in matching ice skating outfits
27.	1997 Holiday 53 pp.	White girl with Samantha, holiday dresses, reading her Christmas Story, sitting in chair, background tree	Message to Parents and Bundle up Bitty Baby
28.	1997 Holiday Fun! 121 pp.	5 AG of Today, 4 white skinned, one black. All wearing winter gear in snow	Bundle Up! White Bitty Baby, no message

29.	1998 Winter 85 pp.	Samantha skating on frozen pond	Be My Valentine! White Bitty Baby
30.	1998 Spring 85 pp.	Girl of Today, 5 girls with new Outdoor outfits. 3 whites, 2 dark skinned. One on horse, one wading in creek, picnic, backpacking	Bitty Baby in Bloom! White Bitty Baby spring outfit
31.	1998 Spring 85 pp.	White girl sitting in wheelchair reading to Kirsten...dressed in separate Kirsten outfits	Be My Valentine! White Bitty Baby
32.	1998 Spring 85 pp.	White girl with Samantha in sailor suits, blurry canoe in background, reading "Samantha Saves the Day"	Be a STAR in Your Own BACKYARD! American Girl Theater Kits
33.	1998 Spring 85 pp.	Felicity in green dress with new horse and lamb, wood fence and trees in background	Hoppy Easter! White Bitty Baby
34.	1998 Fall 89 pp.	Black girl with Addy, girl dressed in AG gear, reading Addy learns a lesson, with AG book bag and library bench, books in back.	School Tools , white girl sitting on school books, with AG school supplies, saddle bag backpack
35.	1998 Fall 89 pp.	Girl of Today Halloween costumes. Three girls, one black, two white. Flower Child, Black Cat, and Cowgirl Dark, spooky houses	Peek-a-BOO! Bitty Baby bear costume
36.	1998 Fall AG GEAR catalogue 33 pp.	White girl with fall leaves in background, red hair and freckles	Two white girls with AG jackets, and soccer ball Team Spirit
37.	1998 Fall AG GEAR catalogue 33 pp.	White girl holding math book on top of head wearing AG gear	School Tools Same as #34
38.	1998 Holiday	4 Girls of Today, around holiday tree that is sold in catalogue. One black girl, three white	Molly with bike with Christmas tree background
39.	1998 Holiday 109 pp.	White Girl of Today in holiday stocking, with bear, holiday mantle (inside new message to parents)	True Blues Denim gear for girls, white girl
40.	1998 Holiday AG GEAR catalogue 33 pp.	White girl in AG Gear	Sleepover! White girl in plaid boxers
41.	1998 Holiday 113 pp.	Josefina in kitchen surrounded by Winter Story accessories	Pick Me! White Bitty Baby, apple outfit
42.	1998 Holiday 93 pp.	Molly and Samantha in pajamas in front of Christmas tree, Molly with bike, Samantha with stroller and bear	Take a Holiday Stroll! White Bitty Baby with new stroller
43.	1998 Holiday 129 pp.	Girl of Today in Holiday glittery wear (Trim-a-Tree) both white. Front Cover fold out, 2 nd part adds one black girl and one white girl	Molly in front of tree

44.	1999 Winter New message inside cover 85 pp.	Biracial girl with Girl of Today, wearing pajamas, doll has rollers, holding book, laying on sleeping bag	Be My Valentine, White Bitty Baby
45.	1999 Spring Inside pictures from AG Place, and the American Girls Revue, New Message 85 pp.	WIN! Banner 5 Girl of Todays with new sports outfits. 3 white, 1 Asian, 1 bi-racial	Singin' in the Rain, White Bitty Baby
46.	1999 Summer New Message 49 pp.	Two white girls with two white Girls of toay, on hiking trip, rocky	A Day at the Beach! Asian Bitty Baby
47.	1999 Back To School 69 pp.	Piece of lined note book paper, with photo of two Girls of Today in a school hall. Both white	Big Top Fun! White Bitty Baby
48.	1999 Holiday Wishes Stuff of Dreams From American Girls inside 128 pp.	White girl sleeping with Felicity. Both are asleep in white gowns, Background of dreams of AG accessories, and stars	White Bitty Baby
49.	1999 Holiday Wishes 73 pp.	White girl with Samantha dolls.	Happy 2000! Two blonde white girls with two blonde white Girls of Today, confetti, balloons, glitter new lavender outfits, pink and red balloons
50.	2000 Winter fun Inside: 3 white girls sipping hot chocolate, playing AG game. 73 pp.	Snowy background with photo of two white Girls of Today in winter gear sledding down a snowy hill	Snug as a Bug! White Bitty Baby crib
51.	2000 Fall Introducing Kit 81 pp.	White girl with Kit. Girl dressed in AG clothing. Definite resemblance	Happy Halloween! White Bitty Baby dressed for Halloween as a pumpkin
52.	2000 Holiday Wishes	White girl with Girl of Today, dressed in matching outfits and head bands.	Dress Like Bitty Baby! Two white girls (look like sisters), in matching outfits, the older one holding a white Bitty Baby, dressed the same
53.	2000 Holiday Wishes 74 pp.	White Girl of Today, White Bitty Baby?, and Kit, wrapped up in a santa bag or blanket. All wearing their Christmas outfits. Girl of Today has present, Bitty Baby has a Christmas bear	Your Time To Shine! Girl of Today new Twilight Outfit. White girl, standing with present in a room, Christmas tree in the background
54.	2000 Holiday Wishes Introduces Angelina Ballerina 111 pp.	Kit in Christmas gear in a stocking with doll, background a holiday mantle.	A High Chair for Bitty Baby White Bitty Baby with new highchair
55.	2001 Spring 91 pp.	White girl with Girl of Today, look alike, dressed alike, staring at each other	Bitty Baby Steps into Spring White Bitty Baby

56.	2001 Summer translucent cover with a new message from Pleasant Rowland 79 pp.	White, blond girl, straw hat with Kirsten, girl is lying on stomach on sandy beach, barefoot, holding Kirsten at her shoulder and reading Kirsten Saves the Day. Inside cover has a girl holding AG Girl of Today sitting on a blue car.	Translucent cover. White girl, black hair holding Girl of Today, both have on camping outfits matching. They are sitting on a rock. No books.
57.	The Birthday Book Edition Catalogue, not dated. But must be around 97 or 98. New Message 69 pp.	Has White Girl with dark hair with Samantha at birthday table with accessories. Idea of book is to give an AG birthday party for your American Girl daughter/friend. Has birthday Story page, Birthday Collection page, School Story Page, and Sweet Dreams Page for each doll 4 complete party kits	Take Amelia Back to School. Blonde white girl holding Amelia backpack