Super Girl: Nancy Drew, Girl Detective Essay, Research Paper

Super Girl

Growing up, every child has his/her own personal idols, ranging anywhere from He-man to Barbie to the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. The teenage master sleuth Nancy Drew is one of these prominent figures in the eyes of many young girls. Her stories tell of adventure and mystery, yet they also seem to find a place in there somewhere to reflect the lady-like and proper nature of Miss Drew. Nancy is a paradox, but a paradox that often goes unnoticed. The Nancy Drew stories satisfy two standards, adventure and domesticity, and present them from both sides without once betraying the suspicion that they might contradict each other.

The first thing that we can immediately notice about Nancy is her preference in the color of everything around her, as Bobbie Ann Mason points out (74). Mason notes that Nancy owns a blue car, wears blue clothes, has blue eyes, and even the cover of all the novels about her stories is bright royal blue (74). Our society has tagged the color blue with a strong masculine undertone. A baby boy is given blue rattles, blue toy trucks, and blue blankets. This tells us something about Nancy?s personality; she has an incredibly adventurous attitude, fearlessly encountering life-threatening situations. In The Clue of the Broken Locket, Keene shows one of these instances:

Bess was concerned. ?Why, Nancy, you might have slipped off that roof and been killed!?

Nancy grinned. ?I guess I?m a tough old sleuth,? she answered. (74)

Nancy is, like she said, ?a tough old sleuth,? and she can do more than hold her own in a society that is dominated by men; she excels in it with her superior intellect and keen observational powers. As Mason writes, ?Nancy manages the impossible feat of being wholesomely ?feminine? ? while also proving herself strong, resourceful, and bold, the most independent of the girl sleuths? (74). The reader of a Nancy Drew book never gets to forget the sweetness of our lady-like heroine who wears her blue primly and elegantly (Mason 74).

During the 1930?s and 1940?s, the time period which the original series of Nancy Drew books were written, Nancy?s activities were not always the socially accepted activities of sixteen to eighteen year old girls. So when Miss Drew pulled off stunts like the previously mentioned roof incident on page two, it was shocking to read that a girl of her age would go climbing on a roof and endanger her life in such a way. Then she turns around and acts out the wholesomely feminine expectations of the time with ease, as shown in Keene?s The Clue in the Jewel Box:

As the girls sipped their tea and ate delicious, frosted cakes, their hostess spoke rather sadly of present daily life in her native land so changed from the past. (27-28)

Keene conveys this prim aura that Miss Drew possesses to her readers many times throughout the series of adventures, and the reader usually doesn?t even think twice about excepting this aspect of her character. On the other hand, when Nancy endangers her life almost intentionally, the reader is shocked at first, but then goes on to except the behavior as it is presented and get caught up in the suspense that inevitably follows.

Nancy is also mature well beyond her eighteen years, even for the 1930?s. She has only a shred of childishness in her body, and it only shows itself occasionally. Readers respect Nancy?s seriousness. She rarely loses her cool, and when it does happen, she regains control quickly and easily. Even if she is locked in a room full of spiders, she still acts calmly, unlike almost any stereotypically frightened girl. Instead of getting the ?creeps?, she logically proceeds to find an exit, showing that at all times she possesses infinite amounts of courage and calmness.

Not only is Nancy perfect, but she possesses the ideal qualities of each age and sex: child, teenager, adult, girl, and boy. She has made her stride into adulthood, shown by her incredibly high maturity level and ability to handle most situations calmly and effectively. She passes into male territory smoothly with her amazing boldness and fearless attitude, but she never gives up the conveniences that she has because she is female. According to Mason:

Nancy?s adolescent readers may not know whether to shave their legs and giggle to attract boys they are discovering, or to join the boys? games and emulate them to win their approval, but Nancy does both. (78)

Her child comes out in the occasional giggles that she lets slip every once in a while, usually while she is giddy with relief after a particularly difficult case. Though it is also not often revealed, her teenage side does come forward occasionally, but usually only in the presence of her eternally faithful boyfriend, Ned. In The Secret of the Golden Pavilion, she expresses a rare concern about danger directed toward her boyfriend:

Ned, down on one knee like a football lineman about to charge his opponents, lunged. His shoulder thudded against the masonry.

?Oh, Ned,? Nancy whispered, ?You?ll break a bone.? (172)

These few occurrences put her in better perspective and contribute a touch of realism to her character by showing her acting her actual age.

There are some things in these stories that are subtly more appealing than the car chases, kidnappings and burglaries that tend to take place on in adventurous aspect of the stories. Nancy is constantly at some elegant function, meeting elegant people or hosting a tea party for her friends. In defense of her tea-party scene, Nancy exploits her feminine wiles to the fullest, relying heavily on her instincts, intuition and charm. She knows she has them and therefore uses them to her full advantage. If she didn?t, then she wouldn?t be utilizing all of her given powers. Keene displays her use of these powers well in The Secret in the Old Attic:

?Are you sick?? he asked in a coarse, heavy voice.

Nancy did not want to answer questions. To avoid them she pretended to faint. The act was well timed, for the man, frightened, immediately rushed into the hall for help. The young detective smiled. (67)

Nancy is fully aware of the usefulness of her feminine cunning, therefore makes herself an even stronger sleuth by using it properly. She is not a completely ??male-imagined woman? made up of ?man-made layers?? (Littler 129); she is domestic only to serve the needs of herself and those that she cares about. At the beginning of most of the stories, the reader is told of Nancy?s domestic responsibilities:

Since the death of her mother many years before, Nancy had managed the household. On the whole she had engineered everything so skillfully that father little dreamed of the heavy responsibility which rested upon her shoulders. (Lilac Inn 12)

This lays out an image of Miss Drew that instantly conveys her as domicile. Then the story begins, and the reader discovers that she can be everything but that if she so desires, and switch back at a moments notice.

From the young girls who first read about her initial adventures to those that started with the newer Nancy Drew Files series, she was the super girl of almost every generation of young readers, extinguishing the competition with ease. Nancy Drew, in her entirety, is the picture of what most women long to be, and what most young girls want to be ?when they grow-up.? She is both adventure and domesticity. In the role of the girl sleuth, Nancy escapes time and enjoys the best of all worlds. At the youthful age of eighteen, she gets to be an adult without sacrificing her right to an adventure. With all of this, she still maintains her gracious, tactful, charming and wholly unspoiled personality characteristic of the socially excepted women of the time. Nancy is a product of the women?s rights movement of the early 1900?s, when women were still thought of as in the supportive role of men, but they were beginning to do things by themselves and standing up for what they believe in. Thus developed the popularity of a character like Nancy Drew that is bold, strong, resourceful, independent, and not afraid of anything.

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