Viewing Between the Lines: Representation of Age, Race, Class and Gender in the Illustrations of Dutch-Language Children's Literature (1800-1940)

Van der Eecken, Paavo

Paavo.vandereecken@uantwerpen.be
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Recent debate about what to do with books that present outdated or disfavored views has shown that literary representation is a highly controversial issue. Children's books often depict a fictional world, so one could wonder why the content of those works matters at all. The answer lies in the fact that books for children reflect specific worldviews. This turns the process of reading into a contact zone, where readers engage with different ideas about themselves and the world (Cĕrmáková / Mahlberg 2021). It is a dynamic process, where some social norms are internalized, while others are not (Tatar 2009; Brown 2017). The books thus influence to a significant extent how (young) readers perceive reality, themselves, and others (Van den Bossche / Klomberg 2020).

Despite the significance of representation in books for children, we are still missing key information on how it is given shape exactly. To start with, studies on biased representation are scarce for Dutch-language children's literature. This often causes scholars to revert to research from the Anglo-Saxon world. Furthermore, scholars have focused primarily on the textual elements, with only occasional attention to the visuals (De Bodt / Kapelle 2003), despite research which has shown that visual biases are particularly hard to shed (Joosen 2018; Nel 2017). Thirdly, previous studies have mainly relied on the close reading of a limited number of mostly canonical works. In doing so, they have overlooked the presence of other children's books circulating the literary market. Lastly, the roots of those biased representations have been understudied. One often hears the argument that historical cultural artifacts were "products of their time", but this begs the question: how well do we actually know that time period? As it turns out, we often lack the necessary knowledge to make substantiated claims.

In this study, we strive for a better understanding of the historical evolution of representation along the lines of age, race, class, and gender. We do this by analyzing a diverse corpus of 1,000 illustrated children's books published in Dutch from the period 1800-1940. Taking a digital approach to this question helps us to overcome the disciplinary canon and to fill in the glaring gaps that have been mentioned above. Furthermore, it allows us to analyze how results from a Dutch-speaking context compare to studies based on other language areas. In doing so, this project answers the call by Mansour and Martin for studies situated in different cultures to become conversant with one another (2020). This form of collaborative action can help provide a solid basis for the discussions on representation that are taking place in our current societies.

In the first phase of this research, a team of annotators has drawn bounding boxes around all human characters present in the illustrations and assigned them attributes according to their age, race, class, and gender. At a surface level, this provides us with numbers on the (under)representation of certain social groups in illustrated children's literature. Our preliminary results show, for example, how the gender imbalance in the illustrations, with close to two male characters for every female character, in this period is analogous to the one reported for English books from the start of the 21st century (Hamilton et al. 2006). In line with what Hamilton et al. found, this discrepancy is more pronounced for middle aged characters than it is for younger ones. By the time of the conference, we will complete a statistical analysis of the nominal data, where we will pay close attention to the intersectional nature of those different representations.

Furthermore, we will provide an analysis of the placement of different characters, because representation goes beyond absolute numbers. The positioning of characters in the illustration, for example, plays a big role in what Goffman would call visual stereotyping (1976). By creating heat maps of the annotated bounding boxes, we will analyze how prominent certain characters are in the illustrations. Important elements in this regard are the sizes of the bounding boxes and their centrality in the picture. By analyzing those features, we can establish not only who is often portrayed in children's literature, but also shed light on how this portrayal is given shape.

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