

The Construction of Gender Identities in Greek Children's Graphic Novels

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Abstract: Graphic novels initially emerged as a genre primarily addressed to an adult audience, due to the complexity of their thematic content, extensive textuality, and sophisticated visual narration. However their growing popularity and increasing recognition as a form of high-quality reading have gradually facilitated their expansion into the field of children's publishing. Consequently children's graphic novels have become an established and distinct category within contemporary children's literature. Recent research highlights their potential to engage young readers through the dynamic interaction of image and text, while also supporting literacy development and reading motivation. Apart from their recreational value, graphic novels have been increasingly acknowledged for their pedagogical applications, leading to their incorporation into primary and secondary educational contexts. Similar to literature in general, graphic novels perform an important socializing function, contributing to children's understanding of themselves and the world around them, through identification with fictional characters. In this regard, the fiction that children read can strongly influence the development of their gender identities, as they often internalize gender roles and behaviors depicted in books as socially acceptable. This highlights the need for careful and critical analysis of how gender is represented in children's graphic novels. Building on the above discussion, the present study investigates gender representations in Greek children's graphic novels, focusing on the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed and conveyed. The analysis examines two recent works, *Stone* (2023) and *The Days When There Is No School* (2024), which were selected due to their contemporary publication and relevance within the field of children's graphic literature. A qualitative content analysis was applied in order to identify and interpret patterns of gender representation across textual and visual elements. The findings indicate that although both books reflect a contemporary aesthetic and a modern conceptualization of childhood—consistent with their recent publication—they nonetheless continue, at times, to reproduce implicit stereotypical gender representations. These results indicate the persistence of subtle gender norms even within recent and ostensibly progressive children's books.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Gender, Representation, Children's literature, Stereotypes

1. Graphic Novels for Children

Graphic novel is a relatively recent narrative form that has gained increasing popularity over the past decades. As a genre, it is difficult to be defined within rigid generic boundaries due to the fact that it constantly evolves, both in form and thematic scope. This fluidity is evident through the different terms that have been employed to describe these narratives. Funnies, comics and manga are only some of the terms referring to graphic narrations, with graphic novel emerging as the most widely accepted one in recent decades.

Gallo and Weiner (2004) argue that graphic novel combines verbal and visual modes which require from the reader to decode them at the same time in order to extract the full meaning of the story. Thus, through this simultaneous reading and viewing, graphic novel creates an experience relative to cinematic narration. Although it closely resembles comics in its use of structural features such as panels, frames and speech balloons, it differs in several notable aspects. Firstly, graphic novel typically presents a sequential narration developed at the length of a conventional book (Gorman, 2003). Secondly, it has the binding of a traditional book (Schwartz, 2006) and is commonly distributed through bookstores. Thirdly and most importantly, graphic novel presents a wide thematic range, including historical, social, political and biographical narratives, as well as adaptations of classic literature.

The engagement of the genre with serious and demanding themes such as war, exile and the holocaust, combined with extended narrative length and complex visual design have led graphic novels to be considered unsuitable reading material for children. In addition, the inclusion of sexual or violent scenes in certain occasions reinforced the classification of graphic novels as adult books (Goldsmith, 2010). However, the gradual acceptance of graphic novels as high-quality reading material combined with their growing popularity has led to their expansion within children's publishing. As a result children's graphic novels are now recognized as a distinct category within children's literature, characterized by specific formal and narrative features. While they retain the fundamental technical conventions of adult graphic novels, these books depict characters and storylines in a simpler manner. They tend to feature fewer and larger panels, a shorter overall length and more vivid and pleasant colors, typically found in illustrated children's books. Additionally, their thematic content is generally approachable to younger ages and relevant to children's experiences and interests (Weber, 2010).

Children's graphic novels are considered to be highly beneficial for young readers in different pedagogical aspects, while also promoting engagement with reading (Lopes, 2009). More specifically, graphic novels can assist early readers who have not yet mastered their reading skills, as these children rely heavily on visual cues to extract meaning (Kelley, 2010). Furthermore, the short texts and strong visual elements of graphic novels can function as a transitional medium, helping inexperienced readers move towards text-only books (Gorman, 2003). Graphic novels can also benefit older children, as research indicates that while reading these books, children employ their critical thinking and visual analysis skills in order to fully understand the narrative (Seglem and Witte, 2009). Additionally engagement with graphic novels, as with every fictional narrative, enhances reading skills (Pantaleo and Sipe, 2012) and cultivates empathy in children (Kidd and Castano, 2013). Moreover these books can be used in the classroom as a pedagogical tool, assisting children's understanding of challenging concepts and complex information (Jennings et al., 2014). In addition, when children read graphic novels, they are exposed to the illustrations' styles and aesthetic. This process familiarizes young readers with artistic forms, fostering an appreciation of art in general and through experience, gradually cultivates a more refined aesthetic judgement (Pantaleo, 2014).

2. Gender Socialization and Books

Like all narrative forms, the graphic novel conveys ideology, meaning the system of beliefs through which a society interprets and explains the world. These belief systems penetrate language and social practices, shaping behavior and shared social representations (McCallum and Stephens, 2011). However ideologies are not inherently positive. Their value can be assessed according to the social practices and behaviors they generate (Van Dijk, 2001). Therefore it is essential to examine the ideology of books, especially those addressed to children, as young readers are generally considered more susceptible to the influence of texts due to their limited experience and critical ability (Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey, 2013).

Despite their inexperience, children are found to be highly perceptive, which helps them absorb knowledge from their environment (Larson and Marsh, 2005). Through the stimuli to which they are exposed, they draw new information, incorporating it to previous knowledge, constantly forming new ideas (Elliker, 2005). Thus the texts and pictures of children's literature have the potential to influence children's attitudes and beliefs during these critical years of development (Kramer, 2001 · Alqahtani, 2024). Despite their recreational and educational functions, children's books influence young readers' socialization, as they provide models of socially accepted behaviors. More specifically, when children read or listen to a story they tend to identify with the fictional characters or situations, and through this identification they consider their own feelings and beliefs, during a period in which they are forming their identities (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Essential part of this process is the formation of gender identity which is shaped through gender role socialization and has a significant influence on an individual's self-esteem (Salkind, 2002).

Bem's Gender Schema Theory suggests that children develop the ability to categorize themselves as female or male at an early age and gradually learn to behave in ways that align with socially defined gender norms (Bem, 1983). As they are encouraged to adopt behaviors and roles considered acceptable or desirable for their gender, children internalize cultural expectations, that in turn shape their sense of identity (Hamilton et al., 2006). Children's literature has been found to influence children's perceptions of gender and consequently the formation of their gender schemas, through the ideologies it expresses (Burr, 2003). More specifically, narratives depict gender behaviors, explicitly or implicitly implying what is appropriate for boys and girls, essentially teaching young readers gender roles (Taylor, 2003).

As research indicates, children's literature may affect children's beliefs, attitudes and even self-image, since fictional characters typically function as role models for the reader (Anderson and Hamilton, 2005). This influence may be either positive or negative depending on the gender ideologies conveyed through the narrative. For example books that represent progressive and diverse gender roles can foster empathy, support children's understanding of diversity, while also promote critical thinking and respect for every individual (Sun, 2014 · Gonçalves et al., 2025). On the contrary many children's books have been found to reproduce gender stereotypes through their storylines, language and pictures, transmitting biased notions about genders to young readers (Kittelberger, 2002 · Adam & Harper, 2023). For instance female characters are often depicted indoors, and engaged in caregiving activities, whereas male characters are more likely to be portrayed as working (Hamilton et al., 2006) or displaying aggressive behavior (Paynter, 2011). Such portrayals affect children negatively, as they convey outdated and limiting beliefs about gender. Since the 1970's when gender stereotypes in children's literature were first systematically identified (Weitzman, 1972), numerous studies have extensively analyzed children's books in relation with their gender ideology. However graphic novels for children have not

yet been examined to the same extent, mostly due to their relatively new emergence as a genre. On this basis children's graphic novels is essential to be also examined scholarly, as this narrative form reaches a large audience of young readers and therefore has the potential to play a significant role in shaping their attitudes and beliefs.

The present analysis aims to examine how gender is represented both in texts and pictures of Greek graphic novels for children, in order to determine whether these works convey contemporary ideologies or reproduce outdated ones. For this purpose two books have been selected for analysis: *Stone* (2023) and *The Days When There Is No School* (2024). Both works are explicitly characterized, published and promoted as graphic novels for children, while they are also the most recent publications of the genre in Greece. In order to unravel both the explicit and the implicit ideology of these books, qualitative content analysis was employed. This methodology was selected because it is considered the most effective one to objectively and scientifically examine ideologies within written, verbal or visual materials (Berelson, 1952), allowing the researcher to examine in depth messages that are conveyed through communication – in this case narratives - and unlock their meanings (Krippendorff, 2004).

3. Findings

The Days When There is no School [Οι Μέρες που δεν Έχει Σχολείο] is a graphic novel which consists of one complete story and mostly addresses to primary school children (Asteriou, 2024).

Storyline: The narrative is minimalistic in terms of action as it does not feature great adventures, rather it focuses on conveying the atmosphere of a day at school without lesson. The story begins with Babis, one student who is not the protagonist but one student who likes to sleep. The reader dives in his dreams where he encounters hippos flying over candy mountains and singing fishes. The student finally wakes up really late and rushes to school. When he arrives there, he meets the rest of the children. At this point the narration's focus shifts away from Babis to encompass the whole class's experience of a snowy day. The children gather in the classroom in anticipation of the lesson. However the teacher's late arrival signals that this is not an ordinary school day. The students exchange rumors about extreme weather phenomena until the teacher arrives to inform them that due to heavy snowfall they are required to remain in the classroom until road conditions improve and their parents are able to collect them. As a result, children must spend several hours in the classroom without adult supervision or access to the internet. The students decide to amuse themselves through music, singing and dancing. By doing so, they become more familiar with one another, they recognize and express individual talents and they offer mutual support, strengthening their social bonds. Ultimately, as road conditions improve the teacher returns to the classroom and instructs the children to prepare and gather outside in order to be collected by their parents. During this time Babis falls asleep once again and dives into new imaginary adventures. The narrative concludes with the children departing happy and having gained new experiences, sharing the mutual feeling that the days when there is no school are the best.

Characters: The narrative does not feature a single protagonist, a fact that can be apparent from the paratextual elements of the story, such as the title of the book and the cover illustration, which depicts a group of children. In addition, narrative space and attention are equally distributed among the characters. Notably, prior to the main narration, the book devotes the first pages to introduce the child characters to the reader, presenting their names, their picture and their most defining traits. This paratextual material functions as framework for the narrative as the characteristics provided in these introductory pages are in alignment with the roles and behaviors the children later display within the plot. Of the fourteen characters featured in the story, the majority is depicted in ways that align with contemporary norms while also reproducing recognizable gender stereotypes.

More specifically, three out of the six girls of the class are characterized as beautiful. Penelope, Helen and Cloe are "the pretty girls of the class. They always smile and are in style" (p. 4). The fact that the only information provided about these female characters concerns their physical appearance suggests that their characterization is limited to superficial qualities. This narrative choice implicitly constructs beauty as a sufficient and defining trait for women and girls, excluding other, interesting dimensions of female personality. Furthermore the girls are depicted as attentive to their appearance and interested in contemporary fashion, reinforcing the association between femininity and vanity. As the narrative progresses, the boys of the class are depicted playing music while these girls are portrayed dancing in oriental moves and wearing oriental dance accessories over their clothes, elements also associated with female beauty and attractiveness. The absence of additional traits renders these female characters relatively flat, as their representation is confined in being attractive, fashionable and pleasant.

In addition to beauty, intelligence emerges as a notable trait in the depiction of gender. For example one male character, John, is described as “John is very smart but usually is bored in the classroom and for this he is doing mischiefs” (p.4), whereas a female character, Mara, “is the best student of the class. All children like her” (p.5). From these excerpts it is apparent that only the male character is explicitly identified as intelligent, while the same trait is implied for Mara. Furthermore John’s cleverness is coupled with noncompliance and mischievous behavior, while Mara’s intelligence is associated with organization and conformity to the rules. These contrasted representations reflect stereotypical notions according to which men are more frequently appraised for their intelligence. Additionally boys are more frequently characterized as naughty. For instance apart from John, Chris is also described as “a bit more mischievous than the others” (p.5). These two boys are the only characters of the narrative described with this trait, possibly suggesting that naughtiness is a male characteristic.

Another male character who aligns with conventional gender norms is Marcus, who “is a very cool guy. He likes rock music” (p.5). Marcus is also implied to be popular as three other boys are described to be friends with him, without any further information provided, suggesting that their social significance derives primarily from their association with him. Also, Marcus’s music preferences are typically considered masculine, particularly among “cool” teenage boys. The narrative appears to reproduce gendered biases by depicting most of the male characters engaging in producing music, while no female character is depicted playing an instrument. More specifically, Argyris, who is initially described as “lonely and shy” (p.5) later takes out his electric guitar and is transformed into a rockstar, playing and singing his own songs. Manos, Chris and Tasos follow his lead and accompany him with their instruments, drums, trumpet and percussion. By the end of the day the boys decide to form a music group. Within the narrative, musicality and instrumental performance are exclusively attributed to male characters, who are depicted as actively involved in artistic creation. On the contrary the female characters are presented admiring the male performances or dancing, an activity that traditionally and stereotypically is associated with femininity. Through these depictions the narrative portrays boys as more competent and knowledgeable than girls in relation to music.

Illustration: The illustrations of *The Days* do not overtly reproduce gender bias. More specifically, the pictures of the book employ a wide range of vivid colors that convey a pleasant and inviting atmosphere, aligned with most contemporary picture books for children. All characters are depicted wearing comfortable everyday clothes that children normally wear at school during the winter time like trousers, pullovers, scarves, gloves and beanies in different colors. However the range of colors used in the children’s clothing largely adheres to conventional gender associations. For example boys are mostly dressed in blue, green, red, brown and grey, while girls appear more flexible in their color choices like pink, purple, light blue, green, yellow and red. Additionally the visual depiction of the characters maintains a relative degree of homogeneity. All children are illustrated in the same stylistic manner, with no exaggerations on facial features, such as lips and eyelashes typically found in female depictions. This homogeneity contributes to a more egalitarian representation of the characters.

Stone [Στόουν] is a graphic novel which consists of six episodic stories and is primarily addressed to children in the early years of primary school (Aggelou & Sini, 2023).

Storyline: The narrative unfolds the story of a little male pebble who falls from the surface into the depths of the earth. After the fall, Stone regains consciousness in an unknown place hurt and with no recollection of what has happened to him. Luckily a male centipede named Touk, finds him and takes him under his protection. The first two episodes appear to be introductory. More specifically at the first episode Touk takes Stone to the doctor to attend his wounds and make sure the little pebble is well. At the second episode the two characters search the underground world to find a new home for Stone. The remaining episodes narrate the adventures of the two characters who explore this unknown underground world which is filled with colorful rocks, quicksand, rivers of lava and strange inhabitants. In search of his origins and what has happened to him, Stone embarks on adventurous journeys, navigating with humor through both dangerous and fascinating landscapes. The narrative concludes on a cliffhanger, implying there will be a sequence to Stone’s story.

Characters: *Stone* does not employ third-person narration, therefore there are no explicit descriptions of the characters’ appearance, personality or emotions. Such information is conveyed exclusively through pictures as well as the characters’ actions and dialogues. The main character of the narrative is Stone, a small male pebble who appears to be at the age of a young boy. Stone is likable and easygoing. From the narrative it can be inferred that he is an intelligent pebble as he quickly absorbs complex information about new environments and adapts to them. He also appears to be adventurous, exploring new places in every episode and brave, handling dangerous situations with remarkable calmness. Although he is in danger multiple times, he is depicted crying only twice. Firstly, when he wakes up underground with amnesia, unable to remember anything and secondly,

when a gigantic creature swallows him and captivates him in its dark stomach. However, on both occasions, his friend Touk consoles him and Stone quickly returns to his good mood, ready to find a solution. This depiction of a young 'boy' who occasionally cries aligns with contemporary approaches to masculinity in children's literature, as it challenges stereotypes that associate emotional expression with femininity.

The other main character of the narrative is Touk the centipede. Although Touk does not appear in the book's title or on its cover, like Stone, he is undoubtedly a co-protagonist of the story, since he is equally presented in illustrations and dialogues. Touk appears to be an experienced young adult of unspecified age, who takes on the role of guiding and assisting Stone. Although the two characters develop a close friendship, Touk's instructive and protective behavior often functions as that of a father figure. He is also adventurous and courageous, showing no fear despite the dangers that occur every time. Additionally he is passionate and occasionally angry, especially when someone attempts to mistreat him. Traits such as bravery, anger and adventurousness are typically associated with male representations in literature.

Some of the story's characters perform professions similar to real-life, conveying the atmosphere of an organized underground society. In the first episode, for instance, Touk takes Stone to the doctor to treat his wounds. Interestingly the community's doctor is a female spider, Tina. The choice of a female doctor is a positive representation, as previous research has shown that children's literature often depicts female characters as nurses rather than doctors (Karanikolaou, 2022). However Tina is portrayed as an incompetent doctor, lacking medical knowledge and offering no effective treatment for Stone. In the second episode Touk summons Bloup the plumper, to provide his services. Bloup is a short, male imaginary creature with a thick mustache. His depiction aligns with a stereotypical representation of his profession. Additionally Bloup is portrayed as highly competent. As Touk states: "he is the best plumper!" (p. 24).

Another male character who is presented in a clearly positive manner is Spark, a small flame. Stone accidentally encounters Spark and frees him from the box in which he is imprisoned. Later Spark bravely rescues Stone from an unjust captivity. Despite his courage Spark also stands out for his wit. As he explains to his new friends: the name Spark "does not refer to my appearance" but rather "to my cleverness!" (p.77). Naturally not all characters in the story are portrayed positively. The most negatively depicted character is the ant queen, Tiberiana. She steals the protagonists' personal belongings with the intention to eventually exchange them with food. Stone and Touk pursue her, escape her guards, imprisonment, engage in physical fight and eventually recover their belongings. In this episode Tiberiana is portrayed as greedy and arrogant, constituting a rather unpleasant female character.

Illustration: The illustrations in *Stone* do not overtly reproduce gender stereotypes. Both the landscapes and the characters are mostly depicted in earthy colors and cool tones. This choice of colors probably contributes to a more naturalistic representation of an underground environment, where natural light is absent. However it may also be linked to the fact that the main characters are male. More specifically, Stone is portrayed as a typical young boy. Despite being a little cubic stone, he wears a green jacket, a pair of blue shorts and red sneakers resembling Converse All Stars. Touk wears no clothes except a green pair of gloves, a purple hat and glasses. The female characters Tina and Tiberiana are distinguished by their short bobs and occasionally their full, colored lips. Additionally it is worth mentioning that during their adventures, Stone and Touk accidentally intrude into a house where a female ant is illustrated sweeping the floor while wearing an apron. This visual depiction is perhaps the only one that can be clearly linked with gender bias.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Both analyzed books employ contemporary stylistic practices, approachable to both female and male child readers. With regard to their illustrations, genders are depicted in a relatively neutral manner. In *The Days*, boys and girls appear with similar features, body built and clothing, providing a more realistic depiction of childhood. Similarly in *Stone* the characters are animals and creatures of an underground world, distinguished primarily by their imaginary, gender neutral features. However, the full colored lips of the only two acting female characters, Tina and Tiberiana, are providing a rather confined representation of femininity, associated with stereotypical notions. Additionally, the female ant illustrated sweeping the floor while wearing an apron, constitutes a biased representation aligned with the sexist belief that domestic chores are women's responsibility.

Regarding their textual ideology, neither book explicitly expresses biased beliefs. However, both texts subtly reproduce stereotypical gender depictions. More specifically in *The Days*, beauty and preoccupation with appearance are attributed exclusively to female characters. Additionally girls are depicted as engaging only in dancing while most of the boys in the class are interested in music. The boys write songs, compose music and

play musical instruments while the text explicitly describes them as talented in those activities. Through this representation it is implied that boys are more knowledgeable and competent in music than girls, thus presenting a more interesting profile. By contrast the girls play a secondary part, framing the boys' performance with their dance. In *Stone*, the main characters are depicted as adventurous, brave and intelligent. Although these traits are desirable for protagonists, they are also aligned with traditional male representations in literature. Moreover, the seemingly progressive choice of portraying the story's doctor as female is undermined from her depiction as incompetent. In general both books avoid explicit references to sexist beliefs, however they appear to carefully stay within traditional gender frameworks, without challenging them through diverse or liberated representations.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the current analysis

AI Declaration: AI tools were not used for the creation of this paper

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