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The Genders of our Heroes

As our class made our lists of heroes, it was interesting to see some of the patterns that arose. To begin with, there were generally more male than female heroes. That fact was interesting enough, but then looking deeper into it, the reasons they were considered heroic differed drastically, too. Specifically, males were considered heroic for their leadership or for being inventors/innovators while most women were considered heroic for being nurturing, promoting peace, or for going against the grain and doing something that is considered something a man would do. I believe the reason these definitions of male and female heroes exist is due to the limitations females used to have, such as education, resources, and support. Additionally, now, as women begin to gain these resources, they may more easily be defined as heroes simply for catching up to what men have already accomplished.

Women have only recently begun to be treated similarly to men. Back even 100 years ago, women did not have the basic rights they do today. Women never had the same educational opportunities that men did, especially because their job in the family was to do housework and take care of the young and the ill. This inadequacy in education not only limited their resources, but also kept them from thinking that they should do anything different. Those who are not presented with new ideas often do not come to question social norms. Even if women did try to gain some position of power, it is likely they did not even receive support from other females,

because at the time, a woman having power was a bizarre concept that was not accepted by the general population.

The extent of these limitations were not present for males. Even better stated, they were not present for the white male. Most all white males had the access to education and were consequently able to acquire new and important skills that made it a lot easier for them to invent new things and to earn positions of power. With their education, they had the opportunity to gain leadership skills and were given the tools to think outside of the box, therefore inventing new things. This could be why many of our class's heroes were men. Just until recently, women were not provided these tools that are essential for being considered heroic. But, now that they have some of these necessary resources, they are quickly catching up to those male heroes before them.

Many of the heroes that appeared on our list were either presidents of the United States or rulers of other nations. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodor Roosevelt; all educated males. They each had the opportunity to go to school to receive an education, and a very high-quality one at that. Without this opportunity, not one of them would have been able to succeed in winning the presidency and they probably would not have had the proper tools to run the nation. Since women lacked the proper education, they did not have the necessary resources, let alone a strong support group to achieve such a ranking as president. Even today, where women have most of the same resources and education as men, no woman has gathered a strong enough support system to win the presidency.

No person, male or female, reaches any position of power without people backing them up and supporting them. Much of gaining a position of power includes convincing others to trust you because you are well educated, and thus the best person to hold the power. Unfortunately,

women did not have the proper education, and therefore did not have a strong group of supporters. If a woman even tried to be in a position of power, no one would find them credible. It is a difficult idea to grasp, considering there are no specific records to validate the argument. On the other hand, how could there be? None of these women were educated enough to consider doing anything different than what they were used to and anyone that did rebel was deemed as incompetent and crazy. They would also be considered unladylike, and would likely be shunned by other females because they weren't in their "proper" place. Since these were the ones that would try to get the world to think differently, they would have little to no support and therefore would not accomplish anything. This could, in fact, be the reason why it took women so long to gain the right to vote.

The declaration of independence was signed in 1776 and women did not have the right to vote until the 1920s. It took just under 150 years for women to become educated enough and to gain sufficient support to even get a say about the way our country is run. But with this change in our country, we began to see a new era of women heroes. Women began to accomplish things that men had done before, but were recognized for doing these things because women were never able to do them before. Being miraculously good at something was not the standard set for these women, instead they were known for catching up to men's achievements. In *Heroes for my Daughter*, Meltzer writes a story about Sally Ride, the first American woman in space. She was smart, having earned her PHD in physics, but it was also good timing. She saw an ad in the student newspaper, and jumped at the opportunity (*HFMD, Meltzer, pg. 105*). Nothing set her aside from all of the male astronauts before her, she had no spectacular space knowledge and she was not the best at anything. She simply had the opportunity and was able to take it, and will now forever be known as a hero for being the first woman in space. Another spectacular

example of this is Amelia Earhart. “She wasn’t a natural. She wasn’t the best pilot (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 15.*)” Amelia was never considered an outstanding pilot; many often thought she was not good at all. But being good is not what she is known for. Instead, she is known as the first *woman* to fly across the Atlantic. Even more interesting about her heroism, I noticed that as we made our hero list in class, Amelia made the list for being the first female to fly across the Atlantic, yet the first male, who was also the first person *ever* to fly across the Atlantic, did not make the cut. In fact, I had to Google his name because I honestly did not know who it was. Charles Lindbergh was the *first* person *ever* to fly solo nonstop across the Atlantic in 1927. This achievement was huge at the time, yet when Amelia Earhart did the same exact thing in 1932, many people seemed to have forgotten Charles. With the introduction to women education and rights, schools actually began teaching about women heroes in the 1930s, which put Amelia in the spotlight over Charles. At the time, being the first woman to fly across the Atlantic was defined as being more heroic than being the first male. But this leads to the question, are these women really that heroic? Amelia Earhart proved nothing more than she could do just as much as a man could. She died on her mission to become even better. Why is it that men are only known for being the first, overall to do something, whereas women can simply do the same thing a man does and be considered a hero. This brings up many social implications, as women are often thought of as second to men. This is shown in our definitions of heroes, as well as everyday life. Women are never expected to be the absolute best at anything. Instead, they are awarded for being just as good.

It is interesting to think about the things that define our heroes. One may argue that males have always had more resources than women, and therefore had a much easier time being considered a hero. On the other hand, as we saw with Charles Lindbergh and his being

outshined by Amelia Earhart, women have similar resources now, and are quickly playing catch-up to their male predecessors, so it can now be even harder for males to be considered heroes than females. Nowadays, the definition of a woman hero is very broad. It can range from what defined a woman hero in the past (caregiver, nurturer), to being an activist for gender and racial equality, to catching up to men's accomplishments now that they have more of the tools to do so. This change, though, is not the case for males. Our definition of a male hero is still generally based on his leadership, power, and his ability to invent new things. The reason the definition for our male heroes has not changed is because they still have the same resources they did in the past. They have always had a strong support system and have always been relatively well-educated, but now that women are being introduced to the same education, our selection of male heroes tends to be a lot more exclusive.

But just because there seems to be a more narrow definition of male heroes now does not mean there are fewer of them out there. Reading through *Heroes for my Son*, there are many more male than female heroes listed. This could merely be because the book was written for his sons, but even so, the women he did include in the book were defined as heroes for very different reasons than the male heroes. The Wright brothers were listed for inventing the airplane (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 3*), Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel were mentioned for inventing the first superhero (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 7*), Albert Einstein was included for being a genius (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 33*), and presidents including George H.W. Bush, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln were listed as being leaders of our country (*HFMS, Meltzer pgs. 51, 55, and 79.*) These were all men that fit the criteria of being well-educated, innovative, and powerful men.

On the other hand, the women included in Meltzer's book were not necessarily there for their leadership and their education. Clara Hale was one woman mentioned in the book. "She

started with the foster kids, raising forty of them, eight at a time, in her Harlem residence,” tells Meltzer (*HFMS, Meltzer pg. 83.*) This was a story that could have been told about women throughout time; it is what defined women for ages. As Mainardi mentions in *The Politics of Housework*, “the standard American housewife [is defined by], all husband, home, and kids.” Since this is what defined women up until the 1920s, it makes sense that many woman heroes are known for their nurturing ways. Men never used to have the responsibility of staying home with the kids, so they were rarely ever remembered for being nurturing or for caring for many children.

Another woman mentioned in Meltzer’s book was Harper Lee. She was a hero for “influencing readers’ perceptions of race and innocence,” (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 88*). Similarly, Rosa Parks is mentioned for her stand against racial inequality. She was the mother of the civil rights movement (*HFMS, Meltzer, pg. 98*). Both of these women were heroic for their pursuit of racial equality and their roles in the civil rights movements. The participation in these movements and the pursuit of peace usually defines our women heroes rather than our male ones. This may be because women were once limited by social barriers, too. Since they had to overcome something in their past, it is very heroic of them to try to help others overcome similar social barriers. But, this is not to say that men are not considered heroic for standing up for equality. In fact, many are considered heroes for this, but the difference is that many of them are considered heroes for being *leaders* in these movements. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela were both proponents of racial equality. Both stood up for the equal treatment of blacks and whites, and both were vital parts to the change in history. The difference is that these men are known for being leaders in these movements. They did not simply participate; they lead groups of people to fight for equality and had the power to make change

happen. It is no doubt that Rosa Parks is heroic for what she did, but she was remembered for how she participated. She was merely part of the Civil Rights movement, and her actions did not simply change the country's way of viewing racial equality. On the other hand, Martin Luther King's superior leadership skills and effective peaceful rallies were often considered the face of the Civil Rights movement. The movement would not have been effective if they did not have such a strong leader. The same goes for Mandela. He was the face of a movement, and he was the president of South Africa that was able to end apartheid. His leadership skills and power are what is emphasized in his heroism, rather than his beliefs in equality.

There are many social differences among men and women. They do not seem like much, but their implications may be more than what we can imagine. Almost 150 years went by in the United States where white males had more opportunities and were given superior education. Not only that, with their education, they were given a stronger support system. In those 150 years, there could have been plenty of women capable of handling power and inventing new things, if only they had the proper tools to. Now that these resources are more readily available to women, they are quickly catching up to men in their achievements. Although we may still be greatly influenced by the previously male-dominant society, times are changing and more and more women are being defined as heroes. With the broad definition of women heroes, it will not be surprising if as the years go by, our lists of heroes begin containing more and more women as they catch up to the accomplishments of men.

Sources Used:

Meltzer, Brad. *Heroes for My Son*. New York: HarperStudio, 2010. Print.

Mainardi, Pat. *The Politics of Housework*.

Meltzer, Brad. *Heroes for My Daughter*. New York: HarperStudio, 2012. Print.