

Textual Analysis: Student Sample¹

Gender Representations: Spheres of Activity in *Girl Runner*

Carrie Snyder's *Girl Runner* is a story about Aganetha Smart, a fictionalized Olympic runner who won the gold medal for Canada in the 800m race during the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. On the surface, this is a story about Aganetha's running career. A deeper analysis of the spaces on the farm she grows up on, however, reveals that this is really a story of gender, particularly Aganetha's attempts to come to terms with the gender norms that inform her life and life choices. Her father and mother are essential characters who shape Aggie's perspective of gender. What is striking in this novel is that nearly every activity between Aggie's father, Robert, and Aggie happens in the barn, constructed as a male sphere of activity, and nearly every activity between her mother, Jessica, and her self happens in the house, constructed as a female sphere of activity. Barns are often associated with production. Houses, on the other hand, are associated with the womb, with protection and privacy. As C. Warner in her book about clothing and women's participation in the Olympic games shows us, women at this time were viewed as "keepers of the hearth" (85) who were unfit for athletic competition. Warner calls the emphasis on women's appearance and their limitation to the domestic sphere "social restraint" (85). Although analysis of spaces as a motif in the novel suggests that Aganetha, as a runner, identifies throughout her life with the freedom associated with

¹ This student sample was originally developed by Dr. Jackie Rea for her ASTU 204A class and builds on the ideas and writing of a former Vantage student.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:07 PM

Comment [1]: Note the use of a title here, the way it identifies the abstraction and big issue as well as the title of the novel.

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Comment [2]: Here, we have a brief introduction to the novel – what it's about overall and then a link to a major theme (gender & gender norms) in the following sentence.

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Comment [3]: Much of this is background that explains the motif (spaces: barn/house) and its connection to the theme of gender norms.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:09 PM

Comment [4]: Warner is used here to establish the big idea of "social restraint" that will help me to structure my analysis of Aganetha's resistance to spaces gendered as female.

male spaces and activities, this essay asks instead how Aggie's character is shaped, quite profoundly, by her resistance to the "social restraint" of female spaces and activities. It is her resistance to the confinement of female spaces that illustrates the broader issue in the novel of gender norms and how these norms restrict and shape women's lives and Aggie's life in particular.

In *Girl Runner*, the barn is a masculine space where Aggie communicates with her father, feels comforted by and certain of her father, a man who otherwise "goes on ahead in his thoughts and leaves us behind" (26). In this space, her father has a solidity and purpose, a visibility that he lacks in the house (26). Moreover, work done in the barn is creative and mysterious: "I've examined his plans, sketched in pencil onto the backs of flyers that come advertising cures for bloat or canker or colic. His measurement is mysterious and meticulous" (26). In fact, her work with her father, an inventor of sorts, allows her to forget about her sister's infidelity: "I love the smell of cut wood. I've forgotten about Fannie, here, amidst the ragged ends and sawdust and debris" (26).

However, the house and work in the house appears to be associated with the world of rules and uncreative, "impossible ever to be finished" (28) 'female' chores that call her away from the creative, comforting space of the barn where she goes to forget her troubles:

[W]e can hear Mother calling our names. . . . We burst out of the stable door at the same moment.

. . . . Mother frowns. "You're meant to be working in the garden, Aggie. And Cora, there's laundry to pull off the line and ironing."

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Comment [5]: Note that I am explicit about what I'm analyzing here.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:11 PM

Comment [6]: Here, we find the overall interpretation of the motif (an argument about it based on the analysis of the motif). This actually needs some work as does the whole paper, but I think from what is written here, you can get a good idea of what an argument about a motif might look like.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:12 PM

Comment [7]: Here, I'm renewing the idea of masculine spaces (higher level idea) to frame the information in this paragraph.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:12 PM

Comment [8]: Note my use of the period after a parenthetical citation that comes at the end of the sentence.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:13 PM

Comment [9]: Note my use of a colon (punctuation) to anchor the quotation that follows in the sentence that explains it/introduces it. Use colons when the text that precedes the quotation is a full sentence.

“I finished in the garden, “ I say, knowing that it is quite impossible
ever to be finished in the garden.” (28)

Jessica Smart’s initial call, her frown, and her insistence on what the girls are “meant’ to
be doing suggests that there is a division of labour on the farm that must be upheld: girls
do the never-ending laundry, gardening, and ironing, not the inventing and certainly not
the forgetting. In fact, as Jessica gives the girls their orders, she quizzes Agenetha and
Cora about Fanny whereabouts, suggesting that in female work-spaces, one is never
allowed to forget the hard, complicated realities of life.

Throughout the novel, Agenetha links outdoor male spaces (barn, playing field)
and ‘male’ activities (inventing, baseball) with freedom:

I burn past Olive . . . one in a clump of big girls near the door. . . . I scatter
with the boys, heading for the playing field. I like boys. Boys say little,
except what’s necessary and brashly mocking. Boys talk about what
they’re doing, provide running commentary, try to make each other
laugh. . . . [H]e would slide feet first into you at home plate in hopes of knocking
the ball out of you frozen fingers. This makes sense to me. (113)

Indeed, this freedom – in this instance, the ability to “brashly mock,” “to make each
other laugh,” or to “say little” – contrasts with the constraints represented in Olive (her
sister) and the “clump of big girls” huddled at the door of another space of rules and
responsibilities: the school.

Yet, while one might assume that Agenetha chooses running as a means of
replicating the ‘outdoor’ space of the barn and field and thus the male experience of
freedom and escape from constraints, throughout much of the novel there is a marked

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Comment [10]: Here, we have a block quotation. Notice how it is formatted (indented, no quotation marks, parenthetical citation goes after the period). This is MLA style. For Chicago, please consult a Chicago Manual (author, date) style guideline.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:14 PM

Comment [11]: Notice that I don’t just quote the passage, but I also provide “bread” by leading into the quote and then also discuss it further re: Agenetha’s mothers activities of calling, frowning, insistent, etc.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:15 PM

Comment [12]: Again, notice my use of quotation sandwich and how I introduce this quotation with some interpretation of it, then follow the quotation with some more interpretation, this time with bits of text re-quoted.

ambivalence surrounding the restrictions of gender identifications. For example, although she values traditional male spaces and activities such as working in the barn and running, she does not wish to be labelled “mannish”: “I’m familiar too with the slur of mannish woman’ that gets attached to sporting girls, and suddenly furious, rent up inside with rage” (210). Still, even though Agenetha does not want to be too closely aligned with male spaces and activities, with mannish behaviour, she resists the “disintegrating,” (171) “crumbling” (171) “darkness” (170) of the house, choosing instead to “remove [herself] from [its] stale warmth” to run in the “clean” outdoor air (172). Her description of female space as stale and “crumbling” suggests that, as she ages, she views this metaphorical space of femaleness in two ways: as a space that stifles but one that is no longer sustainable. Indeed, in the end, her decision to give away both the house and the barn to her greatgranddaughter suggests that she ‘gives away’ or lets go of the traditional gendered identities associated with these buildings, perhaps seeing the “social restraint” (Warner 85) of gendered structures as “transient” as the physical structures that represent them: “The pavement, the concrete, the very foundations . . . cannot last, nor hold” (353).

Works Cited

Carrie, Snyder. *Girl Runner*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2015.

Warner, Patricia C. “Women Enter the Olympics: A Sleeker Swimsuit.” *When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear*, Uof MassP, 2006, pp. 84-103.

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:16 PM

Comment [13]: Again, notice how I’m renewing and developing my interpretation/argument about the motif throughout the paper, making sure that my reader knows what to focus on and how things are supposed to be adding up overall. I do this through the repetition and renewal of key abstractions (e.g. gender identifications). However, I don’t just repeat ideas, I try to develop them in this paragraph by adding this idea of ambivalence and then later Agenetha’s understanding of both the barn and the house (or to what they represent for her).

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:17 PM

Comment [14]: Words such as represent, associated with, suggests, reveals – signal my interpreting self (me analyzing the text).

Laila Ferreira 2019-10-26 5:17 PM

Comment [15]: I’ve used ‘work cited’ – that’s what MLA uses. If you’re using Chicago the title of this section will be different and your citation mi