

3-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Farren, Elizabeth J. (2020) "Nancy Drew: A Feminist Icon or a Problematic Figure of the Patriarchy and White Privilege," *WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/writ.03.01.06>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ/vol3/iss1/6>

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## Nancy Drew: A Feminist Icon or a Problematic Figure of the Patriarchy and White Privilege

### Cover Page Footnote

To Jay Jones for encouraging me both academically and creatively in writing and for always supporting me and my work. And to Riddhima Sharma, for educating me on the importance of diversity in academia and beyond. May all feminists have the space, visibility, and opportunity to have their stories and voices heard.

## **Nancy Drew: A Feminist Icon or a Problematic Figure of the Patriarchy and White Privilege**

by Elizabeth J. Farren

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Since 1930, Nancy Drew has served as an inspirational figure for young girls as an independent, smart, and confident young woman, as her legacy as the “girl detective” has been immortalized in not only her book series, but also through movies, television shows, and video games. Nancy’s detective skills allow her to step outside traditional gender roles and become a feminist icon to advocate for women’s autonomy. On the other hand, certain characters are portrayed using racist and ethnic stereotypes, only to be rewritten later as these ideas were recognized as problematic. While the series is seen as progressive for featuring a young female as an inquisitive detective, Nancy’s identity as a white, middle-class woman is troubling, as she never questions her privilege or the existence of the patriarchy. Even though Nancy Drew serves as an empowering female role model for girls across generations, she is not a fully feminist character due to unacknowledged elements of racism, classism, and women’s subjugation.

Upon hearing the name Nancy Drew many are reminded of their childhood, recounting rides in her car while they sat passenger side, waiting to embark on another adventure. The reason why Nancy still remains relevant today is because women projected their identities onto the character, they aspired to become “the kind of girl who was capable of accomplishing a great many things” (Rehak 117). She challenges a woman’s capabilities physically, intellectually, and cognitively as her independence and intellect are liberating for young girls (Stiles 85) whose potential is limited by the demands of the patriarchy. Empowering women with the ideology that, “We can fight for justice! We too can have adventures! We can do it!” (Cornelius 3), Nancy is an iconic figure because she helps young girls realize that they too could be strong and independent.

Symbolized by her iconic blue roadster, Nancy’s freedom is essential to her ability to solve mysteries and escape from the confining clutches of the patriarchy. The first novel *The Secret of the Old Clock*<sup>1</sup> depicts Nancy’s independence in the opening line as she, “[drives] home along a country road in her new, dark-blue convertible” (Keen 1). She differs from the traditional woman, as she is not

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to the *Nancy Drew Mystery Series* and *The Secret of the Old Clock* refer to the 1960s rewrites.

socialized to conform to gender roles, free to pursue any case that comes her way. Uninhibited by the dauntless tasks of household chores, marriage, or child rearing (Woolston 178), Nancy asserts her autonomy again and again with each closed case. Nancy is also brave, never stopping to think if a situation is too dangerous or frightening, instead “[placing] herself at the forefront of danger in search of answers, investigating fraud and thievery,” never passing on the opportunity to help others (Woolston 179). Nancy’s bravery and independence are the core of her identity, as they are not only skills which she uses to solve her mysteries, but rather qualities which counteract women’s perceived essence of femininity and passivity.

Likewise, Nancy Drew’s independence, assertiveness, and bravery all are qualities which the girl detective archetype exhibits, traits which usually take on a masculine connotation. Although her femininity is clearly emphasized in the text, her characterization as both feminine and masculine is an interesting contradiction, allowing her to challenge the status of men’s supposed superiority to women. For example, “her independence, her puissance, her sense of justice, her fearlessness—are those qualities that are more often described as emanating from tradition masculine realms,” differ from more feminine qualities, as “her gentility, her compassion, [and] her dedication to appearance” (Cornelius 2) serve to compliment her expressed masculinity. These dueling descriptions of Nancy, however, do not limit her independence or identity as a feminist, as her expressed masculinity aspires women to “subvert the patriarchal paradigm by fusing the theoretical active and passive gender roles together in one significant and complex act” (Woolston 179). Women are inspired by her quest for justice and self-reliance, as she challenges the conventional roles of womanhood, comparable to a modern-day Joan of Arc (Cornelius 4). Throughout the series, Nancy’s masculinity is one of the weapons which she uses to undermine the patriarchy.

The adventures that Nancy Drew embarks on not only signify her independence as a woman but also represent her freedom from dependence on men. Despite the presence of her successful lawyer and father Carson Drew, Nancy investigates cases on her own with little help from him. Rather, she embodies the same inquisitive nature and optimism as her father, and he in turn shows her respect and support (Parry 149). In addition, Nancy’s boyfriend Ned Nickerson is more typically described as Nancy’s social companion and investigative sidekick than romantic partner (Rehak 168), as “men were secondary to Nancy Drew’s world” (Still 80). While Ned is occasionally “useful for manual labor or punching out a bad guy” (Cornelius 78) he never interferes with her work or tries to control her. Throughout the series Nancy’s autonomy serves to liberate women from their public and private domination by men. Instead of conforming to the notion that women are to remain passive and silent while their husbands assert their power,

Nancy disregards the concept that women should be occupying a subservient place beneath their male counterparts.

Nancy's intellect and logical reasoning help her solve mysteries and also reject the stereotype that women are intellectually inferior to men. Whether it's chasing down criminals or discovering a secret passageway, her intellect helps her connect clues and remain rational (Brown 85). Rarely allowing her emotions to interfere with her detective work, Nancy bears a striking resemblance to Sherlock Holmes, as "there is a constant emphasis on Nancy's rational detection method, and each story becomes a showcase for Nancy's clear thinking, remarkable competence, and steady nature" (Siegel 173). For example, in *The Secret of the Old Clock* Nancy is locked in a closet and left to starve by a gang of thieves, but instead of panicking she reassures herself by saying, "I'm only wasting my strength this way. I *must* try to think logically" (Keen 112). Taking a step back Nancy then observes her surroundings and coming upon a wooden rod, she has the clever idea to insert it between the door and its hinges in an attempt to break herself out (113). In addition, like many other girl sleuths she is able to outsmart and solve mysteries which even male authority figures, like the police and her lawyer father, find perplexing (Parry 145). The officers are routinely astounded by Nancy's keen judgement, proclaiming "not many girls would have used their wits the way you did," (Keen 140), as Nancy does not fit the stereotype of the helpless and dependent women (Brown 86). Through the implementation of deduction and logical thought, Nancy is able to quickly solve cases and enlighten her audience to the idea that women too are intelligent.

Lastly, Nancy Drew's athleticism is a character trait which enables her chase after criminals, but it is also another characteristic which she uses to rebel against the patriarchy. Nancy expertly swims and dives, navigates planes and boats, runs after suspects, and escapes from traps and tight compartments (Parry 150). Although Nancy's personality is feminized, she ignores the assumption that women are weak and exist only as attractive objects to men, as "[her] body is not merely a beautiful object to be viewed; instead, it is a vehicle through which she can carry out her desires to solve crimes" (Woolston 173). On the other hand, Nancy's strength threatens the culture of male domination that the patriarchy uses to suppress women physically, emotionally, and mentally. In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, the thief Nancy spies on catches her, dragging her body across the floor and shoving her in a closet while saying "this will be the last time you'll ever stick your nose in business that doesn't concern you!" (Keen 109). A metaphor for men's physical suppression of women, violence against women, and their attempt to silence women's voices, Nancy shows women that they must fight back (Woolston 181). Through physical altercations with criminals, Nancy demonstrates that women are more than sexual beings to be preyed on by authoritarian men, but

that they are strong and resilient despite growing up in a culture of sexism and silence.

For these reasons, Nancy is deemed by many as a feminist icon, as she redefines women's roles and expectations of what their lives could be outside of the home at a time when women united to demand their liberation. Nancy appealed to the second wave feminists of the 1960s, as her independence has historical significance "during a moment in American history when female 'dependence' was 'treated as the preferred occupation'" (Woolston 175). Betty Friedan addressed the identity crisis of the American housewife in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, saying "Women were bored, lonely, and, worst of all, had forgotten how to lie without a man...the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her mind and spirit...[made up] of incomplete truths and unreal choices" (Friedan quoted by Rehak, 254). Breaking through patriarchal femininity and womanhood, Nancy shows women that they can unite to solve the sexism and inequality, just as she solved her mysteries (Dyer 6). Nancy is intelligent, brave, free from domestic responsibilities, and goes after what she wants, traits which inspired women to take up the feminist agenda rather than the submissive housewife role (Rehak 255). For feminists, Nancy "[represents] women's lived emotional experiences, [subverting] the collective patriarchal wish to silence women" (Woolston 181). To both young girls and 60s feminists, Nancy serves as a role model for what women can be, and what they will become after dismantling the social and patriarchal hierarchy.

In fictional River Heights, Nancy remains unrestrained by the cult of domesticity and conformity, a world which young girls can use to escape from the patriarchy yet still retain their femininity. Independent, competent, and daring, Nancy lives in a "world [that allows] her to become the primary source of justice and order in her own feminist domain" (Cornelius 83). At the same time, however, she still remains the ideal "beautiful blonde daughter" (Geer 312) that patriarchal culture projected as the ideal. Although her role as heroine and girl sleuth allows Nancy to transcend gender roles, her privilege and quintessential girlhood innocence depict a fanciful society rather than an increasingly complex world (Siegel 163). Although published during the Great Depression, Nancy and her town do not experience economic hardship, unrealistically portraying America as a prosperous middle-class utopia (Geer 312). So while Nancy Drew still retains her status as a feminist figure, her world is unrealistic, as she does not directly confront her class privilege or how her idealized femininity helps enforce conformity to traditional womanhood in America.

Although the Nancy Drew series continued to remain popular throughout the 1960s, it received criticism for the use of racist stereotypes, and as a result was rewritten to exclude the offensive characterizations. In the original 1930s publications, these racist stereotypes included people of color speaking in a "mock-

dialect” and holding traditional servitude positions to whites, alluding to a lack of intelligence and inferiority. (Fisher 64). The unrevised version of the first novel, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, exemplifies these racist tropes when Nancy is rescued after being trapped in a closet by black caretaker Jeff Tucker. Speaking in the offensive accent and slang he says, “I was just all fed up bein’ a caih-taker. It ain’t such an excitin’ life, Miss, and while I’s done sowed all my wild oats, I still sows a little rye now an then” (MacCann 133). Likewise, the assumption that blacks are inherently liars, untrustworthy, and criminals is also evident in Nancy’s adventures, as people of color are typically either a suspect or the culprit. This is again articulated in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, as Nancy racially profiles Tucker by assuming he knows where the jail is, to which he responds, “Fact is, dis my favorite jail,” reinforcing Nancy’s racist stereotype as valid (133). From *The Haunted Showboat* to *The Hidden Window Mystery*, the blatant use of racist stereotypes allows the audience to perceive these characterizations as realistic and acceptable.

Despite the elimination of racist characterization in the 1960s editions, the series instead excluded all people of color from the novel, favoring whitewashing. In doing so, Nancy’s status as a progressive, young white woman is elevated, as her white privilege continues to go unquestioned. By erasing these non-white characters from the pages, the publishers neglect to acknowledge people of color as full human beings (MacCann 134), implying that their representation is not valuable in literature nor to the reader. The “new Nancy” exhibited tolerance, as the revisions were made to “assume a white implied reader whose sense of default privilege [and colorblindness]...can be counted on to remain unexamined” (Fisher 63). Often undiscussed and denied, white supremacy and privilege is still viewed as unconscious, a view which both Nancy Drew and the syndicate hold, blind to a world of racial stratification. Nonetheless, the idea that characters of color either need to be portrayed in a racist light, or not at all, contradicts Nancy’s feminist traits, as Nancy is written in a way where she never questions her privilege.

Nancy’s view of race is not the only issue, as she also is naïve to the fact that she holds white and economic privilege as a member of the upper-middle class, a part of her identity which the authors continually emphasize. Labeled as a “true daughter of the Midwest” (Siegel 164), Nancy’s status is congruent with the idealized 50s and 60s American Dream of a loving, financially secure family living in a quaint, suburban house with the white picket fence. Even in the original 1930s novels, Nancy and her family remain untouched by the Great Depression and her financial status is never jeopardized, a theme which is also reflected in many other female detective fictions (Cornelius 5). Furthermore, in *The Secret of the Old Clock* Nancy’s wealth and status are indicated by a description of the sleuth’s double-car garage and large, red-brick home kept up by their employed housekeeper (Keen 12-13). These descriptions of her socioeconomic status as the norm are troubling,

enforcing an idea of classist superiority as “her class and the fact of her ready money...make her an embarrassment today” (Heilbrun 18). Her father is a very successful lawyer, allowing her to not only reap the monetary benefits of his job, as demonstrated by Nancy’s new roadster, but also by providing her with his unsolved cases for her to investigate.

In addition, most of her cases involve the theft or absence of a priced document or heirloom, stolen from a lower-class individual who desperately needs the money. Nancy therefore views her crime solving ability as a form of charity. By finding the prized object she not only solves the mystery, but she elevates these people to her middle-class standards, restoring them to “their accustomed places in society,” (Parry 154). *The Secret of the Old Clock* demonstrates Nancy’s classist ideology, as she hopes to recover the lost will for the Hoover sisters which will allow Allison to afford expensive music lessons (Keen 56), a luxury which Nancy can afford, and aspires for the sister to be able to as well. This classist idea indicates an ideological hierarchy (Parry 146), one which allows Nancy access to “River Height’s finest stores,” (Keen 22) and other resources that are denied to economically disadvantaged members of the working-class. Throughout the series Nancy serves as a “a model of privileged consumption to which [her clients] can aspire,” (Geer 314), as she not only solves complex cases but also restores confidence and wealth to kindhearted citizens, as she desires for them the status, independence, and access which she possesses.

Although both the original and rewrites are problematic, the revised novels also place greater emphasis on Nancy’s appearance and heteronormative values, as the United States relied on traditional gender roles to promote American unity in opposition to communism. In the 1950s and 60s, second wave feminists began advocating for women’s rights and gained greater liberties for women’s suffrage, pay, and employment (Brown 82). These women grew up reading Nancy Drew, so she became “a role model for young feminists”(Rehak 278) who wanted to break free of the patriarchy. Terrified by not only the heightened tensions between United States and USSR but by the upset to heteronormative gender roles, Americans found solidarity and security in the lifestyle of the nuclear family (Brown 81). Influenced by the conflicting messages about a women’s place in society, the authors rewrote her character to appear as more traditionally feminine, or “house type” (83). The authors continue to feminize her through constant descriptions of her appearance, with subtle comments such as Nancy “looking very attractive in a blue summer sweater suit”(Keen 153). This emphasis on her appearance allows her identity to regress and symbolize nothing more than a desirable object. Moreover, the 30’s novels feature Nancy as predominantly independent, while the later versions “made Nancy much more dependent on—and deferential to—male authority figures, especially the police, whereas the older versions often featured

Nancy working against them, without help from men” (81). The revised Nancy Drew is a character who still embodies feminist traits while restoring the gender status quo disrupted by the Cold War (Parry 155), as she remains blind to the patriarchy’s power and her forced conformity to femininity.

While many women consider Nancy Drew a feminist, her status as a feminist icon is controversial, as she does not directly confront the patriarchy, her privilege, or other feminist issues. On the other hand, some might argue that even though “Nancy does not take on women’s issues per se, solving a mystery is an act of power” (Still 79) which she used to counter traditional gender roles. Yet her naivety and characteristic innocence make her problematic, as she is blind to her inherent race and class privilege, two issues which are central to the feminist movement and intersectionality. The second wave feminist perspective strongly emphasized that all women experience sexism in the same ways, falsely equating the middle-class white women’s experience to that of minorities and the working class. Therefore Nancy cannot speak for all women (Heilbrun 20), and by depicting her as an ideal feminist and static character throughout the series, she is comparable to a white rather than a progressive feminist figure. By not overtly challenging the patriarchy, Nancy Drew conforms to the expectation of women’s passivity and is “happy in her current niche in society” (Parry151), as her privilege gives her comfort and security. A “feminist icon who did not take on feminist issues” (Still 82), Nancy is a controversial figure, as a true feminist would assert herself above the patriarchy and actively work to increase equal opportunity and visibility for all women.

While many call Nancy Drew a feminist role model for challenging traditional notions of femininity, her character’s naivety to the patriarchy, privilege, and racism make her controversial. Independent, logical, and athletic, many girls aspired to be Nancy, and eventually her autonomy inspired women in the 1960s to rebel against sexist roles and expectations. Although second wave feminists had good intentions for uniting women and feminists under a single message of sisterhood, their failed acknowledgement of intersecting identities made them inherently problematic. They saw women’s experience with sexism through the lens of the white, upper-middle class, dissatisfied housewife, and so their privilege made them the visible architects of feminism. As a result, women of color and poor women’s experiences were invalidated, as white women worked within the patriarchy to obtain the status of white men. Likewise, Nancy Drew exhibits the same characteristics and blindness in regard to the patriarchy, as she never directly takes on feminist issues such as racism and classism. By never confronting the patriarchy or taking on feminist issues, then Nancy is denying the existence of sexism, racism, and classism in society, media, and culture. This lack of a discussion is problematic, as it allows for women’s further subjugation by men and

denys women's differing sexist experiences. Embodying the white and liberal feminist ideal, Nancy reforms the sexist system by challenging gender roles, but she does not seek radical change. On the other hand, the agenda of more modern, radical feminists is to overthrow the patriarchy, rather than make small compromises with it, only to continue living as second-class citizens. Radical feminism is all-inclusive, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, a movement which seeks to raise society's conscience to differing sexist experiences and liberate all women. Although Nancy Drew was a feminist figure of the 1960s, her identity does not align with the intersectional feminists of today, as she operates as a silent agent of the white capitalist patriarchy while only representing a single feminist story and experience.

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