

# **Gender, Power, and Ideology in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle***

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a literary analysis of Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, an award-winning novel for young adults. The novel employs the plot device of journey to engage the protagonist in a coming-of-age experience and describes the heroine's transformation. By reading the novel through the feminist and Marxist lenses, I examine the portrayal of the heroine and discuss the social structure in the novel's setting. I demonstrate that the heroine's transformation, along with her self-discovery and liberation, lays bare restrained gender roles within the patriarchal society. My analysis also exposes the way how patriarchal order operates through power and oppression.

**Keywords:** young adult literature, feminism, Marxism, journey, coming-of-age

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## 閱讀《一位女水手的自白》：性別、權力、意識形態

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### 摘 要

本論文針對《一位女水手的自白》這本備受好評的青少年小說做文本分析，本小說利用冒險故事的旅程情節安排將女主角置身於成長學習改變的經驗中，本文援用女性主義及馬克思主義的理論為基礎，檢視小說中女主角的角色刻畫以及故事中的社會結構。本文主要論點是：女主角的成長改變，以及伴隨其中的自我發現與解放，不僅凸顯父權社會中受壓抑的性別角色，也揭露了父權秩序是如何以權力及壓制遂行其意。

**關鍵詞：**青少年文學、女性主義、馬克思主義、旅程、成長

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Though Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* is an award-winning and beloved novel for young adults<sup>1</sup>, it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. In fact, few peer-reviewed articles or book chapters have focused on it. Scholars Rachel Carazo and Anna Soter are among the few. Carazo argues that this novel should be regarded as a canonical work because of its innovation in the maritime genre. She details its literary merits and discusses the different sociocultural issues that it contains through an Orientalist and postcolonial framework. On the other hand, Anna Soter defines this novel as a *Bildungsroman*; her analysis focuses on the first-person, unreliable narrator and demonstrates a deconstructive reading that provides "a wonderful example of the ultimate ambiguity of language in literary play" (80). My paper is thus intended for filling the scholarly void.

This novel mixes genres of adventure, historical fiction, mystery, and coming-of-age story, and most of the genre characteristics are reported among the favorites on teenagers' reading preference surveys (Kiefer and Tyson). However, I will read the novel as an adventure and a coming-of-age story, for the author employs the plot device of journey in adventure to engage the protagonist in a coming-of-age experience and describes the heroine's transformation.<sup>2</sup> I will adopt some concepts from feminist and Marxist literary theories to analyze the portrayal of the heroine, and I argue that the heroine's transformation, along with her self-discovery and liberation, lays bare restrained gender roles within the patriarchal society. My analysis also exposes the way how patriarchal order operates through power and oppression.

### **Intersections between Feminism and Marxism**

Since gender issues intersect with those of class and power in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, it is appropriate to analyze the story through both feminist and Marxist lenses. Feminist literary theory posits that in patriarchal society men dominate women, and that patriarchy works to ensure the subordination of women to men in almost all aspects of life (Cuddon 315). In fact, the assumed "natural" gender roles or stereotypes benefit men but limit and oppress women. In literary analysis, feminist critics ask questions such as the following: "How are women or girls depicted

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<sup>1</sup> It is a Newbery Honor Book, an ALA notable Children's Book, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and an NCTE Notable Children's Book in the Language Arts, to name just a few.

<sup>2</sup> There seems to be nothing ground-breaking in reading this novel as an adventure. For example, Tzu-Chang Chang also reads the novel in the tradition of the adventure genre and focuses on the quest motif (Home-Away-Home) to illustrate the protagonist's growth and self-discovery repeatedly in his reading journals (39-40, 106-08, 187-88). Other than the quest motif, Chang uses the term "gaze" to illustrate Charlotte's change of position and power in several paragraphs (107). Given its formal feature as adventure, I attempt here to offer alternative critical approaches to the novel as well.



in the work?” and “how does patriarchy function in the society of the novel’s setting?” (Latrob and Drury 191).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, as critics point out, feminist literary theory often responds to literature with a Marxist “bent” because both are theories of power (Latrob and Drury 191). In particular, two concepts of Marxism, “ideology” and “ideological state apparatuses,” can provide tools for explaining gender roles and how patriarchy functions in the society. According to Marxist Louis Althusser, ideology represents the “imaginary” relationship of individuals to the real world. In other words, such “imaginary” consciousness, or ideology, helps people make sense of the world though at the same time disguising the real relations of individuals, but people embracing the ideology accept it as common sense. As Terry Eagleton further explains, ideology is “that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as ‘natural,’ or not seen at all” (5). Althusser also claims that to protect the class in power, ideology is disseminated and inscribed in individuals either by violence and oppression through repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) (e.g. the government, the police, the court, the prison, etc.), or in more subtle ways through ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) (e.g. the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the cultural ISA, etc.) (1488-491).<sup>4</sup> Either way, ideology functions to make people accept the ruling ideology as natural, normal and safe. In literary analysis, Marxist critics are thus concerned about “the social structures that are portrayed in a particular work,” “how power is allocated among different social groups,” and what “the dominant view of the world” is (Appleman 64-65). In short, both Marxist and feminist approaches to literature consider power and oppression and examine “the prevailing ideologies that help construct the social realities in which we participate” (Appleman 58).

Adopting the theoretical framework above, I will analyze the portrayal of the heroine and illuminate how patriarchal order structures the ship world through power. Specifically, I will follow the sequence of Charlotte’s transformation along the journey and examine how men and women are situated in the patriarchal society, how the patriarchal order operates in the society, and how social structure is organized in terms of power and oppression.

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<sup>3</sup> The feminism I refer to here and the related questions applied to literary analysis in this paper are more in line with the second wave feminism. For a historical review of the three phases of feminism and how gender criticism evolved from feminism, see Latrob and Drury (185-192), Cuddon (315-18), and Harlan (1-20). For more questions for feminist literary analysis, see Latrob and Drury (191).

<sup>4</sup> According to Althusser, every state apparatus functions both by violence and by ideology. However, repressive state apparatuses function predominantly by repression and secondarily by ideology, whereas ideological state apparatuses function predominantly by ideology and secondarily by repression (1488-491).



## Subverting the Adventure Story Conventions

The story is an account of thirteen-year-old Charlotte Doyle's voyage in 1832 from Liverpool, England to her home in Providence, Rhode Island. Her father has arranged two other families as her companions on a merchant ship named *Seahawk*. However, it turns out that the two families won't be traveling, so Charlotte becomes the only female aboard *Seahawk*. At first, she is warned by the sailors that she should not be on the ship. After the cook Zachariah befriends her and gives her a knife for protection, she learns that all the sailors, except the first mate, Hollybrass, have signed up on this journey in order to take revenge on Captain Jaggery for his cruelties. Captain Jaggery asks Charlotte to inform him if she learns anything about the mutiny. Charlotte struggles between her friendship with the sailors and her loyalty to the captain. Finally, she does inform the captain of the mutiny. However, when she witnesses Captain Jaggery's cruelty with the mutineers, she feels that she must stand up. Charlotte confronts the captain and threatens his authority, so he withdraws his protection and abandons her. To compensate her wrong-doing and to win the sailors' trust, Charlotte finally decides to join the crew. She dresses like a boy and takes up the crew's work. Charlotte's change of status brings about her transformation in both appearances and mentality. By the end of the journey, she is no longer the submissive young lady who acts, dresses, and talks "properly" as seen in the beginning; she becomes a woman who transcends gender categories.

The story pattern of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* fits quite well the sequences of the archetypal hero's journey: separation-initiation-return (Campbell). In any culture, the attributes of the archetypal hero "are seen as the good, the beautiful, and the true, and thereby teach us culturally valued aspirations," and in Western culture, such heroic ideals have generally been reserved for men (Pearson xxv). However, in this novel it is a *heroine* who undertakes the journey. Moreover, instead of *womanhood*, the prescribed social role for her, Charlotte Doyle is initiated into *manhood*. Charlotte's transformation is unacceptable in the patriarchal society and thus finally leads to her resolution to pursue another journey on the sea at the close of the story. The reversal role of the archetypal hero transgresses the boundary of man/woman binary opposition and thus foregrounds the gaps and contradictions of the prevailing ideology of how men and women are situated in the patriarchal society. In addition to her self-discovery in terms of gender roles, Charlotte's journey also entails her questioning of power and oppression in the world of the ship, a metaphor of the real world. The story pattern of the archetypal journey is thus a clever device to bring into greater visibility the issues of gender, power, class, and ideology.

## Representation of Woman



At the departure for the voyage, Charlotte is innocent and accepts her gender role without questioning. She dresses as a young woman though “at the age of thirteen [she] was very much a girl, having not yet begun to take shape, much less the heart, of a woman” (1). As she recollects, “I certainly wanted to be a lady. It was not just my ambition; it was my destiny. I embraced it wholly, gladly, with not an untoward thought of anything else” (1).

As a girl, she “had been trained to obey, educated to accept” (17). It is men’s order that she obeys; it is her prescribed social role as a woman that she accepts. She follows her father’s instruction to keep a daily journal of the voyage across the ocean. On the ship, she tries “to gather all [her] womanly arts so as to present [herself] in the most agreeable way” in order to please Captain Jaggery, who serves as a patriarchal father that she used to obey (30). Captain Jaggery reminds her of her father because “so much were their characters alike” (67). Charlotte explains why she takes pride in the captain’s attention and praise during the early phase of the voyage: “Now I had been taught that at the start of each day I should present myself as a proper young gentlewoman to my parents, or when at school, to the headmistress. On shipboard it was only natural that the captain should be the one I wished to please” (62). Her behavior is proper and natural because it is the way she had been educated. She disregards Zachariah’s warning about the captain’s cruelty because she believes the captain “was a gentleman, the kind of man [she] was used to” (27). She takes pleasure in the captain’s praise for “in his commendation I was certain I had won my father’s approval too” (67).

In a patriarchal society, woman’s role is “designed to facilitate the smooth-running of society to the advantage of men” (Peck and Coyle 173). Similarly, Captain Jaggery uses Charlotte to his advantage. She is his “eyes and ears among the men” (45) and helps “keep the crew in order in her ladylike ways” (188). The function of Charlotte as a woman is to ensure the order of the ship world and keep the crew from mutiny. As Captain Jaggery confides to the second mate, Mr. Keetch: “she’s the trump. With her as witness, they’ll not dare to move” (24).

### **Portrayal of the Social Structure**

The ship is a miniature of the real world, where power and class structure determine how everyone operates in this society. On the ship, everything is under the captain’s order and he is the only master, the one “who rules. As God is to his people, as king to his nation, as father to his family, so is captain to his crew. Sheriff. Judge and Jury. He is all” (35). Second in power are the first mate and second mate. Lower in the hierarchy are the crew, with Zachariah, the only black on the ship, at the bottom.

Although Charlotte’s position as the daughter of the ship owner gives her privilege, she is still subordinate to the captain. As we will observe later in the trial scene when she relinquishes her father’s protection, her position becomes no better than Zachariah’s.



At the beginning of the voyage Charlotte's attitude towards the crew reveals how power is allocated among different groups and how the prevailing ideology affects her behavior and thoughts. When Zachariah first offers her friendship, she finds "the suggestion—from him—unpleasant" (22). Even when he warns her about the captain's cruelty, she thinks that Zachariah is forgetting his position: "Never had I met with such impertinence! That this Zachariah, my inferior, a cook, should tell such a slanderous tale of violence and cruelty regarding Captain Jaggery to me—as though it were a confidence—was deeply mortifying" (40). Even after they have developed friendship, when Zachariah gives her a pair of canvas trousers and blouse made by himself, she confesses in her journal, "in fact I took the gift as a warning that I had been forgetting my station" (66). She then resolves "not to stoop so low again" and she even composes "an essay on the subject of the proper behavior for young woman" to show her determination (67). Charlotte's reactions thus reveal her internalized ideology of social order.

Charlotte, like Captain Jaggery, believes that there are boundaries between classes. As Captain Jaggery advises her, "I don't think you will find the crew to your liking, [though] there is no harm in being friendly to them" (43). Regarding her contact with the crew, she convinces herself that "I was simply doing what the captain had suggested . . . Above all, I cherished the notion that my contact with the crew improved *them*" (64). Charlotte believes that she and the crew are always "on different levels" (64).

However, "[a]s the days wore on," Charlotte finds "it was increasingly difficult to refrain from some degree of intimacy" with the crew (64). She "learned the men's language, their ways, [and] their dreams" and "became something of a 'ship's boy'" (65). So far, her world view and values are still determined by the patriarchal order. That is why she reports the evidence of mutiny (a round robin) to Captain Jaggery: "It was to him I owed my allegiance—by custom—by habit—by law. To him I must speak" (77). Charlotte can hardly change in such a short time.

### **Transgressing the Boundaries**

The proper order of the ship world remains until the mutiny led by Cranick fails. Cranick is shot dead by Captain Jaggery, who wouldn't allow anyone to say a prayer before throwing his body into the sea. Seeing that, Zachariah is the first that stands up and denounces the captain's cruelty. Charlotte then follows to stop Zachariah from being whipped to death and accidentally inflicts a cut across the captain's face. The captain wouldn't tolerate the acts of Zachariah and Charlotte because they challenge his authority and threaten to disrupt the proper order.

Charlotte faces a dilemma. The crew wouldn't accept Charlotte because she informs upon them, nor would the captain have anything to do with her because she



insults him before the crew. Charlotte needs to decide which side to stand with. She draws on her education in attempt to find a solution: “I tried, desperately, to imagine what my father, even what my mother or Miss Weed, might want me to do, but I could find no answer” (99). At this moment, she has to totally rely on herself.

Although Charlotte tries to justify her betrayal of the crew by saying that she has no idea what will happen, Mr. Fisk points out the contradictions in her ideology: “I find Miss Doyle mistaken. You did have an idea. You had it from Zachariah. I know you did. What you mean to say, Miss Doyle, is that you didn’t choose to heed his words because Zachariah was an old black who lacked the captain’s graces” (104). What Mr. Fisk means here is that Charlotte would rather choose to subordinate herself to the one in power than stand with the one below her class.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Fisk’s words make her reflect upon herself. She realizes that her mistake causes two deaths; she is filled with guilt and remorse.

To seek forgiveness from the crew, Charlotte offers to be the replacement for one of the crew. She wants to show that she stands with them, that “[she] made a mistake” (109). To prove her determination, Charlotte has to accomplish a task: “to climb to the top of the royal yard. And come down. In one piece” (113). The climb is “not only stupid, but suicidal,” but still she has to climb because this is her “restitution” (115). Charlotte eventually passes the test, and the crew accept her “without reservation” as they see her desire to become a crew member as “atonement” (122).

From then on, she is no longer the lady passenger under the captain’s protection. The captain’s announcement marks her change of heart and position: “Mr. Hollybrass, remove Miss Doyle’s belongings from her cabin. Let her take her place in the forecabin with the crew. Put her down as Mister Doyle and list Miss Doyle in the log as lost. From this point on I expect to see that he works with the rest” (121). Thenceforth, the crew and she are equals. Charlotte views them as her “brothers” and she is no longer called “Miss Doyle, but Charlotte” (123). This shows the change of her title, position, and relationship with the crew.

The new role and position give Charlotte the freedom and happiness that she has never had before. Her language use changes as she learns men’s “rough language” (123). As she confesses, “in my newfound freedom I brandished a few bold terms of my own—to the amusement of the men at first. But after a while, it became a second nature to me and to them. I say this not to brag, but to suggest the complete absorption I felt in my new life. I came to feel a sense of exhilaration in it such as I had never felt before” (123).

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<sup>5</sup> Though both gender and race issues involve power and class, I choose to focus on gender rather than race; thus, I delve into the portrayal of the heroine here, instead of the character Zachariah.





Charlotte's transformation is both inner and outer. Her appearances and mentality change accordingly: "My hair, uncombed for days, blew free in the salty air. My face, dark with weather, was creased with smile . . . And there I was, joyous, new-made, liberated from a prison I'd thought was my proper place!" (124). It gradually comes to her that the protection of patriarchal order is actually restraints in disguise.

### **Interrogating the Prevailing Ideology**

From the feminist perspective, underlying the oppressive restraints on women are "the essentialist definitions of what it is to be a woman: definitions that assume human nature is universal" (Peck and Coyle 170). Later Charlotte is accused of Hollybrass's murder, and her trial exposes the essentialist notion of women's role and the oppressive power of the patriarchal law. The captain accuses her of being "unnatural" in every way she acts: a girl who desires to learn the use of a knife, a girl who takes up crew's work, and a girl dressing in unnatural ways. Even though Charlotte asserts that her behavior is "unusual" rather than "unnatural," all the male crew feel compelled to admit that she is "an unnatural girl" (168). Captain Jaggery's argument in the trial epitomizes how oppression is justified in a patriarchal society: "A girl, who all agree, is unnatural in every way she acts. Gentleman, do we not, as natural men, need to take heed? Is it not our duty, our *obligation*, to protect the natural order of the world?" (168). In the name of natural order, any difference in social role will not be tolerated.

For Captain Jaggery, the only one who rules on the ship, "To preserve order . . . sacrifices must always be made" (189), and Charlotte's death penalty is simply a necessary sacrifice. Similar to Charlotte's trial, Cranick's death, Zachariah's punishment, and Hollybrass's murder are actually all the ways that the captain tries to solidify his absolute power. Captain Jaggery resorts to the law and the trial/court, claiming that he is "the soul of reason" (190), and trying to make all the ship members believe that "[a]ll will be restored to its proper balance" if Charlotte resumes her "place and station" (191). However, "order" and "reason" are nothing but his rhetoric to cover cruelty and inhumanity. He is a "cruel despot" (129); he is God, King, Father, Judge, and Law all in one, preserving his power by force. Captain Jaggery's acts thus illustrate Althusser's repressive state apparatuses (e.g. the Court, the Law, the Police, etc.) in that they function by overt violence and oppression to inscribe ideology and ensure the power of the ruling class.

In his opening argument on the trial scene, Captain Jaggery spells out the prevailing ideology that they share for making sense of reality and controlling the society. The world of a ship is:

a world that does work according to its own order. Now when a voyage commences, all understood the rightful balance between commander and commanded. I can deal with the sailors, and they with me. I need them to run the



*Seahawk*. Just as they need me to command her. So we live by a rough understanding, they and I. But you, Miss Doyle, you interfered with that order. You presumed to meddle where you had no right. your difference encourages *them* to question their places. And mine. The order of things. (188)

It is Charlotte's questioning and challenging the patriarchal order that encourages the crew to reflect upon their social positions.

Charlotte's transgression of the man/woman boundary empowers herself and thus disrupts the patriarchal order. Further, her gender difference encourages the crew to question their position in the social structure. After Captain Jaggery accidentally falls into the sea while chasing Charlotte, she is elevated to captain by the crew unanimously because she "has done what men could not do" though "it was Zachariah who took true command" (195-96). The social positions are reversed; the formerly most marginalized minority, a girl and a black, now take control of the ship.

In the last chapter, when Charlotte changes into a lady's apparel upon arriving home, "[she] felt so much pinched and confined [she] found it difficult to breathe" (199). After reading her journal, her father is furious and throws her journal into flames because "what [she] has written is rubbish of the worst taste" (207). He had intended to send her daughter to the Barrington School for Better Girls for "an education consistent with [her] station in life," only to find her mind now filled with "the unfortunate capacity to invent the most outlandish, not to say *unnatural* tales. It is beyond *belief!*" (207). Charlotte's father forbids her to talk about her voyage to her brother and sister and plans to send for an American tutor to "instill a little order in [her] mind" (207). Receiving no warmth or comfort from her family, Charlotte feels unaccepted by her family. Though she plays along, "maintaining an . orderly life" (209), she is actually plotting to be a sailor again back on *Seahawk*. Finally, after three weeks of being confined at home, Charlotte gets aboard the ship departing for Europe, saying, "I've decided to come home" (209). Charlotte escapes from her old life to her new home on the sea. She is no longer the submissive daughter of her father, seeking his praise and approval by behaving well. After her voyage experience, Charlotte has become a new person and thus chooses a new life accordingly. It is only at this point that her journey as a heroine is complete. In a word, she has become independent and autonomous, resolving to flee from patriarchal restraints and pursue freedom on the sea.

In conclusion, in this novel, the heroine's journey serves as a structural device to foreground how reality (the dominant ideology) is accepted as natural order, though in fact they are constructed by means of power and oppression. The gender role is not inherent, but socially constructed as natural. The entrenched social position is also justified by "natural order." What people living within the ideology don't see are



actually the power, oppression and restraint, all of which are what Avi's novel aims to expose.

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