


Visual Transformation of Gender Representation on The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island Book Covers (1942-2017)

Muhammad Farid Imaduddin¹, Taufik Murtono²

^{1,2} Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta

Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i></p> <p>Received May, 2025 Revised May, 2025 Accepted May, 2025</p>	<p>This study examines the visual transformation of gender representation on the covers of Enid Blyton's "The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island," comparing editions from 1942 and 2017. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design framework, the research analyzes how visual elements construct gender meaning across different historical contexts. The findings reveal a significant shift in the representation of George (Georgina), from a distinctly masculine-coded character in the 1942 edition to a more feminized portrayal in 2017. Despite being produced in an era of greater gender discourse, the contemporary cover paradoxically presents a less subversive visual model of gender nonconformity. The 1942 illustration depicts George in an active, central position with masculine visual coding that aligns with the character's narrative identity. In contrast, the 2017 cover introduces feminine elements through clothing, posture, and composition that create tension with the character's established rejection of femininity. This transformation reflects complex interactions between changing social norms, commercial considerations, and visual conventions in children's media, demonstrating how design decisions actively participate in constructing cultural understandings of gender.</p>
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<p><i>Corresponding Author:</i></p> <p>Name: Muhammad Farid Imaduddin Institution: Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Jl. Ki Hajar Dewantara No.19, Jebres, Kec. Jebres, Kota Surakarta, Jawa Tengah 57126 Email: faridimaduddin229@gmail.com</p>	<p><i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.</i></p> 

1. INTRODUCTION

Book covers function as visual gateways to literary content, reflecting both narrative elements and sociocultural values of their era. As the initial point of contact between readers and text, covers operate as communicative tools that shape expectations and interpretations. This research examines gender representation through a comparative analysis of two editions of Enid Blyton's "The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island" (1942

and 2017), investigating how evolving social norms influence visual design decisions.

The analysis centers on the character George (Georgina), whose tomboyish identity provides a compelling case study for gender representation. In Blyton's original text, George explicitly rejects feminine conventions, preferring to be treated as a boy, a characterization that challenged 1940s gender norms [1]. According to UNESCO's Index Translationum statistics, Blyton ranks

as the fourth most translated author worldwide, with 3,924 translations across various languages [2]. Her books have sold over 600 million copies to date, establishing her as one of the most commercially successful children's authors with profound influence across continents and generations. The evolution of this character's visual representation across different historical contexts reveals shifting societal attitudes toward gender nonconformity.

Scholarly literature has established media's significant role in shaping gender stereotypes among children [3]. Recent studies in developmental psychology demonstrate media's crucial influence in forming gender stereotypes, while research in children's literature highlights the importance of illustrations in conveying gender-responsive values [4]. Historical analyses of literary character development note the nineteenth century emergence of figures challenging traditional gender roles, including George in *The Famous Five* [5]. Contemporary literary criticism argues that Blyton's novels contested existing gender biases in children's fiction, making them valuable subjects for visual analysis [6].

The 75-year interval between editions offers a unique opportunity to analyze gender representation shifts in response to changing social norms. Hodder Children's Books published the 2017 edition to commemorate the series' 75th anniversary, during which time the books became established in cultural memory across diverse global contexts. Blyton's narratives have shaped childhood reading experiences worldwide, with translations in over 90 languages and adaptations across various media platforms. This research addresses how George's visual portrayal has been reimagined to reflect contemporary gender understandings, specifically: How do gender representations differ between the 1942 and 2017 covers, and what do these differences reveal about evolving societal attitudes toward gender expression?

This study aims to investigate the visual transformation of gender representation in children's literature through

a systematic comparative analysis of two historically distinct cover illustrations. The primary objectives are twofold. The first objective focuses on analyzing the shifts in gender visualization through specific visual elements between the 1942 and 2017 editions, examining how design choices reflect period-specific conceptions of gender identity. The second objective involves critically evaluating how these visual transformations function as cultural artifacts that document evolving social norms related to gender between the mid-twentieth century and contemporary society. By examining the visual grammar employed in each illustration, this research seeks to illuminate how visual communication in children's media both reflects and potentially influences societal understanding of gender roles across different historical contexts.

This study employs established visual semiotic frameworks, which provide systematic tools for analyzing how visual elements construct meaning [7]. This methodology enables detailed examination of compositional elements, representational strategies, and interactive features contributing to gender representation. By analyzing visual choices including positioning, gaze, color schemes, and character depiction, this research reveals how design decisions reflect and reinforce period-specific gender norms.

The research contributes to understanding how social changes manifest in children's book cover design. This analysis of gender visualization evolution extends beyond visual communication design studies to provide insights into gender representation development in children's media. By examining how visual changes influence audience perceptions of gender, this study offers new perspectives on how children's literature reflects societal norms and potentially shapes conceptions of gender roles and identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Role of Visual Representation on Book Covers*

Visual representation on book covers plays a significant role in shaping readers' perceptions of the content and characters. Representation is the practice of producing meaning through language, images, and other signs. In the context of book covers, visual representation reflects the social and cultural values of the time in which it was created [8].

Visual elements such as posture, facial expressions, clothing, and composition are never neutral [7]. These elements actively participate in constructing or challenging social norms, including gender stereotypes. Images have their own grammar that can be analyzed through three main functions: representing the world through stories or concepts, building relationships with viewers (through gaze, distance, and perspective), and organizing visual elements into meaningful wholes. The process of creating and reading images is always bound to socio-cultural contexts, making every image inherently value-laden rather than neutral.

The visual semiotics approach provides a framework for understanding how images communicate meaning through signs and symbols, particularly in relation to gender representation. This approach recognizes that visual signs operate within cultural contexts and can be decoded to reveal underlying power structures and ideologies [9]. Book covers function as the "face" of a book, creating first impressions that significantly influence readers' interest and understanding of the content [10].

In children's literature, book covers are not merely aesthetic but also serve as communication tools that influence how young readers perceive gender roles and identities. Research emphasizes the importance of gender-responsive illustration in

children's books [4]. Visual literacy plays a crucial role in how children interpret and internalize gender norms, with book covers serving as powerful tools for either reinforcing or challenging stereotypes [11].

2.2 Gender Representation in Media

The representation of gender in media has been widely studied, with contemporary theory emphasizing that gender is performative and shaped by repeated actions influenced by social and cultural contexts [12]. Gender is not something fixed but formed through repeated actions influenced by social environment and culture. In the context of visual representation, such as book covers, images and designs can be seen as performances that communicate certain gender norms and expectations [13].

Media, including book covers, often reinforce or challenge gender norms through visual cues. Media exposure significantly influences children's understanding of gender roles, often perpetuating stereotypes that restrict individual expression [3]. Research demonstrates that while the effects may be subtle, continuous media exposure can strengthen existing gender stereotypes, including traditional notions that women should be gentle, emotional, and domestically oriented, while men should be strong, rational, and dominant [14].

Contemporary research on gender representation in children's media identifies a shift toward more inclusive portrayals, though traditional stereotypes persist in subtle forms. The evolution of gender representation in children's literature reflects broader societal changes in gender discourse, with increasing recognition of diverse gender identities and expressions [15]. However, commercial considerations often influence how progressive these

representations can be, creating tensions between market demands and social progress [12]

Gender representation in visual media is increasingly understood as a complex interplay between biological sex, gender identity, and social construction. This complexity is evident in how characters like George in *The Famous Five* are visually coded across different time periods [13]. The concept of gender fluidity challenges binary representations in media, suggesting that gender exists on a spectrum rather than as fixed categories [14]

2.3 *Visual Design Elements and Gender Coding*

The Grammar of Visual Design provides a framework for analyzing visual elements on book covers, focusing on three metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional [7]. These elements work together to create specific meanings and reflect societal norms. For instance, the use of pastel colors and delicate poses often signifies femininity, while bold colors and strong postures are associated with masculinity.

Body posture and gesture play important roles in shaping gender meaning. In visual representation, gender distribution is often shown through body posture, with male figures depicted in active postures as action performers, while female figures are positioned in reactive postures as observers or admirers [16]. Direction of gaze and vectors reflect power relationships between genders, supported by body representations that often reduce women to certain body parts.

Color psychology research demonstrates that color associations with gender are culturally constructed rather than innate. Color preferences evolve over time and vary across cultures [17]. The strategic use

of color in design can either reinforce or subvert gender expectations, making it a powerful tool for visual communication [18].

Color is not only an aesthetic element but also a social and political tool that reinforces or challenges gender norms. Gender has been shown to influence color preferences, with girls demonstrating greater sensitivity to a wider range of colors than boys [19]. Research shows that colors with high cyan content such as blue and green tend to be associated with boys, while colors with high magenta content such as magenta, purple, and red are more associated with girls. Masculine colors generally have high saturation (more intense) and low brightness (darker), reflecting stable and focused qualities. In contrast, feminine colors have low saturation and high brightness, representing softness and cheerfulness [20].

Illustration style in visual communication design significantly influences message delivery and audience perception. Semi-realistic illustration presents recognizable objects with slight modifications while maintaining essential elements [21]. This style balances realism with creative interpretation, preserving realistic proportions. Conversely, cartoon illustration simplifies and exaggerates forms, creating non-realistic representations [22]. The selection between realistic or cartoon styles impacts not only visual aesthetics but also how audiences interpret gender representation in visual media.

Typography also communicates gender, with script fonts often perceived as more feminine, while display fonts (characterized by thicker and more robust features) are more frequently associated with masculinity [23]. The evolution of typography in children's book covers

reveals changing attitudes toward gender, with contemporary designs often employing more neutral typographic approaches. The integration of typography with illustration creates a unified visual message that can either reinforce or challenge gender norms.

2.4 Historical Context

The 1940s were shaped by World War II, which catalyzed shifts in gender roles as women entered the workforce to replace men serving in the military. This period saw increased acceptance of masculine expressions in women, with practical clothing becoming necessary. Women's fashion featured military-inspired silhouettes with padded shoulders, and while trousers became more acceptable due to wartime necessities, they still challenged social norms [24]. Children's clothing mirrored adult styles, with girls wearing dresses and boys in formal school uniforms, reflecting the era's conservative values [25].

The 2010s, by contrast, witnessed significant advancement in gender discourse, with greater emphasis on inclusivity and diversity. Britain legalized same-sex marriage during this decade, marking a major shift in social acceptance. Digital media transformed social interactions, while family structures became more diverse [26]. However, contemporary media often commodified feminist values, presenting surface-level inclusivity while maintaining underlying constraints on gender expression, a phenomenon described as "post-feminism" [27].

This decade was characterized by fast fashion and heightened consumerism, with British consumers purchasing twice as much clothing as other Europeans. By 2016, people in the UK consumed 1.1 million tons of clothing annually, with technology and social media driving this

consumption [26]. The rise of social media influencers and celebrities like One Direction significantly shaped youth fashion trends and consumer behavior during this period.

The illustration styles of these periods reflect their historical contexts. The 1942 illustrations featured detailed, decorative work with limited but attractive colors, often depicting characters embodying wartime values like courage and patriotism. In contrast, 2010s illustrations employed digital techniques producing more dynamic images with brighter color palettes designed to appeal to contemporary young readers.

3. METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the visual transformation of gender representation on the covers of "The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island." The study examines two editions: the 1942 original cover illustrated by Eileen Soper and the 2017 commemorative edition illustrated by Laura Ellen Anderson. These editions were selected because they represent significant temporal points, the original publication and the 75th anniversary edition, allowing for meaningful analysis of visual changes across time.

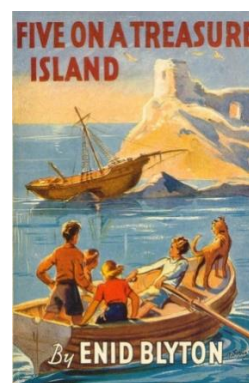


Figure 1. Cover Book The Famous Five 1942 Edition



Figure 2. Cover Book The Famous Five 2017 Edition

The primary analytical framework used is Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), which provides systematic tools for interpreting visual communication. This framework examines three metafunctions: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The representational meaning analyzes narrative and conceptual structures, examining how images depict actions, events, and concepts. The interactive meaning focuses on the relationship between the image and the viewer, considering factors such as gaze, social distance, and perspective. The compositional meaning examines how visual elements are arranged to create coherent meaning, including information value, salience, and framing.

Data collection involved documenting visual elements from both covers, including character representation, clothing, posture, facial expressions, composition, color schemes, and spatial relationships. The research also incorporated contextual analysis of historical periods (1940s and 2010s) to understand how social norms regarding gender influenced visual design decisions. Additionally, the study examined textual descriptions of the character George in the original novel to establish a baseline for comparing visual representations against the author's characterization.

The analytical process followed several stages: (1) detailed visual documentation of both covers; (2) identification of representational structures and processes; (3) analysis of interactive meanings between images and viewers; (4)

examination of compositional arrangements; (5) comparative analysis of gender representation between the two editions; and (6) contextualizing findings within historical frameworks of gender discourse. This systematic approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how visual elements construct gender meaning across different historical contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 1942 and 2017 covers of "The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island" reveals significant shifts in gender representation through visual elements. These changes reflect broader societal transformations in gender norms between the 1940s and 2010s.

4.1 Representational Meaning

The 1942 cover employs a narrative representation, with clear vectors visible in the direction of the boat and the characters' gazes toward the island [7]. The illustration style is semi-realistic with detailed line work and naturalistic proportions, typical of children's book illustrations from that era [21]. George is depicted actively rowing the boat, positioned centrally, emphasizing her leadership role and active participation. Her visual coding is distinctly masculine, with short hair, a practical sweater, and notably, shorts rather than a skirt or dress. This choice of clothing represents a significant rebellion against gender norms of the 1940s, when shorts were primarily associated with boys and men [25]. Julian and Dick are shown in supportive roles, while Anne is depicted in a more passive position, sitting quietly at the side of the boat. Timmy, the dog, is represented as strong and reliable.

In contrast, the 2017 cover also uses narrative representation but introduces significant changes in George's representation. The illustration style shifts to a contemporary cartoon aesthetic with simplified forms, exaggerated expressions, and a more stylized approach [22]. While George retains her short hair, her clothing shifts to a patterned yellow sleeveless top,

which introduces traditionally feminine visual coding. Her posture is slimmer and less sturdy, and her position in the boat is less central, reducing her dominance. The other characters are depicted with more equal roles, and the overall composition creates a







narrative representation with more expressive characters. Timmy is now presented as a cartoonish and playful figure, with exaggerated proportions and a cheerful expression.

Table 1. Comparison of Character Representation Elements

Visual Element	1942 Edition	2017 Edition	Significance
Clothing	Sweater and shorts (masculine-coded, rebellious for the era)	Yellow patterned sleeveless top (feminine-coded)	Shift from gender-nonconforming to more conventional feminine appearance
Posture	Sturdy, taking up space	Slimmer, less dominant	Reduction in visual authority and physical presence
Position	Central, actively rowing the boat	Less central, positioned toward the back	Diminished leadership role and agency
Hair	Short, practical cut with minimal styling	Short but more styled with visible texture	Maintains some gender nonconformity while adding feminine elements
Activity	Leading the adventure, rowing	Less active, primarily observing	Shift from active protagonist to more passive participant
Expression	Determined, focused	More expressive, emotional	Movement toward conventional feminine emotional display

Source: Muhammad Farid Imaduddin, 2025

Table 2. Visual Transformation of George's Character (1942-2017)

Character	1942 Edition		2017 Edition		Shift in Visual Representation
Julian		Confident posture, serious expression, wearing a plain shirt and trousers		Relaxed posture, smiling expression, wearing glasses and a casual shirt	From authoritative to intellectual and approachable
Dick		Less visible, supportive role, wearing a plain shirt		Enthusiastic expression, pointing, wearing a striped shirt	More expressive and involved
George		Short hair, masculine clothing (buttoned shirt and trousers), active rowing in central position		Short hair, patterned yellow sleeveless top, slimmer posture, less dominant position	From masculine-coded to more feminized portrayal
Anne		Passive but brave, sitting on the side, wearing a modest dress		Fearful, hiding at the edge of the boat, wearing a pastel-colored dress	From passive to visibly weak and timid.

Timmy		Strong and alert posture		Playful, cartoonish proportions	From reliable protector to entertaining companion
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4.2 Interactive Meaning

The 1942 cover presents the characters from a medium distance, with their backs turned to the audience as they focus on the island. This creates an "offer" image, where the audience observes the adventure without direct engagement. The perspective positions the audience as equal observers, maintaining a sense of neutrality while emphasizing the seriousness of the journey.

The 2017 cover reduces the social distance by bringing the characters closer to the audience. The frontal angle and direct gaze of the characters create a "demand" image, where the characters actively engage with the viewer, establishing a more personal connection. The characters exhibit varied emotions, such as curiosity, fear, and excitement, engaging the audience more directly. This approach aligns with modern marketing strategies, which prioritize relatability and emotional engagement.

4.3 Compositional Meaning

The 1942 cover employs a central composition, with George positioned prominently in the middle of the boat. The natural color palette, including blues and greens, reinforces the adventurous theme without strong gender coding [20]. The framing integrates George's active role within the group, making her the focal point of the narrative [16].

The 2017 cover adopts a more balanced composition, distributing visual focus among all characters. George's position shifts to the back of the boat, and her activity is less emphasized. The color palette includes pastel tones, which introduce subtle gender distinctions [17]. This compositional shift, while appearing more egalitarian, paradoxically diminishes George's visual dominance and the subversive nature of her character.

Discussion: Gender Representation and Social Context

The visual transformation between the 1942 and 2017 covers reveals a complex relationship between gender representation and changing social contexts. While contemporary discourse often assumes linear progress toward more inclusive gender representation, this analysis suggests a more nuanced reality.

The 1942 cover, despite emerging from an era with more rigid gender roles, presents George as a visually subversive character who challenges binary gender categories. This representation aligns with the character's narrative identity and offers young readers a visual model of gender nonconformity. The visual elements work cohesively to present George as genuinely masculine-coded, creating what Butler would describe as a performative challenge to gender norms [28].

In the context of George's character, the use of shorts by a female character in the 1942 edition reflects a significant challenge to the gender norms of the time. During the 1940s, shorts were predominantly associated with boys and men, and girls were expected to wear dresses or skirts [25]. This visual representation of George wearing shorts aligns with the narrative identity as a tomboy and symbolizes defiance against the rigid gender expectations of the era [5].

Paradoxically, the 2017 cover, despite being produced in an era of greater gender discourse, presents a more ambiguous and less subversive visual representation of George [27]. The character's visual coding introduces feminine elements that create tension with the narrative identity. The commodification of feminist values in contemporary media often results in surface-level gender inclusivity that masks more fundamental constraints on gender expression [29].

Children's literature often reinforces rather than challenges rigid gender constructions. The visual "feminization" of George in the 2017 cover suggests commercial considerations may have influenced design decisions, with publishers potentially seeking to make the character more conventionally appealing to contemporary markets.

The analysis also reveals how color functions as a gender signifier across different eras. The 1942 cover uses relatively gender-neutral colors, while the 2017 edition introduces more contemporary color coding that subtly reinforces gender distinctions [17]. Color in design functions as a powerful gender marker reflecting social constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The evolution of typography between the two editions further reflects changing approaches to gender in children's literature marketing. The shift from formal, neutral typography to a more playful, visually varied approach mirrors broader trends in children's media that increasingly segment audiences by gender through design elements [23].

These findings demonstrate that visual elements on book covers do not merely reflect gender norms but actively participate in constructing them. The transformation from the 1942 to 2017 covers illustrates how design decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, shape cultural understandings of gender. This analysis challenges simplistic narratives of progressive evolution in gender representation, suggesting instead that commercial factors and changing visual conventions may sometimes limit rather than

expand possibilities for gender expression in visual media for children.

5. CONCLUSION

This research examining the visual transformation of gender representation on The Famous Five book covers (1942-2017) reveals significant shifts in how visual elements construct gender meaning across different historical contexts. The analysis shows that despite being produced in an era of greater gender discourse, the 2017 cover paradoxically presents a less subversive visual model of gender nonconformity than its 1942 predecessor. While the 1942 illustration depicts George with distinctly masculine visual coding (short hair, boy-like clothing, central active positioning) that aligns with the character's narrative identity, the 2017 cover introduces feminine elements through clothing, posture, and composition that create tension with the character's established rejection of femininity. This transformation reflects not simply progressive evolution but complex interactions between changing social norms, commercial considerations, and visual conventions in children's media. The findings demonstrate how seemingly aesthetic design decisions actively participate in constructing cultural understandings of gender, with implications for how young readers perceive gender roles and possibilities.

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