Reese Video Abstract Transcript: The Rise of American Girls’ Literature

This Element seeks to look at the publishing history of girls’ literature, specifically American girls literature, and uses the parameters of being published in the United States between 1850 and 1940. It features a girl as its main character and is written by a female author. And within those parameters, we find that girls’ literature usually shares a bildungsroman, which means that the girl, instead of growing up to be an individual, actually grows up to join her community, what Annis Pratt calls growing down. So, it's a little bit different than you might see with the boy's bildungsroman, such as Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn.

This Element begins with American women's literature. So, by looking to see what girl, what women's literature comes before the girls’ literature. We can see this establishment: fictional, idealized woman in American literature. So, she's someone who in order to influence the country, the United States for what it's going to become, she's going to be devoted to being a mother first, but also a wife and raising these, her boys to take care of this country. And so then by looking at girls' literature in light of that, we see how girls are influenced in the same way to become this idealized version, this wife, this mother. And that even though they might have adventures beforehand, ultimately, for the vast majority of them, that's where it's headed.

So, we then go on to look at the subgenres is what I'm terming them, of family stories, orphan stories, and the school story. And even though each of those subgenres varies a little bit in terms of how much agency the girl has, how much various adventures the girl might go on. Ultimately, each girl is growing down to join her community, growing down to fulfill the role of wife and mother.

And importantly, the Element ends with African American girls' literature. And looking at that emerging genre in light of the women's literature that's come before, in light of the other girls' literature that's happened, which, you know, is a troubling distinction because if you think girls' literature means white and African American girls' literature just means not girls' literature or a different type of girls' literature. But by looking at them side-by-side, we see how publishing history, how we've kind of gotten where we are today in terms of children's literature, or girls' literature, today.