

“It Isn’t as Though We Were Awfully Bad”: Exploring Freedom and Femininity in Jean Webster’s College Girls’ Novels

Luelle D’Amico notes, “since the mid-nineteenth century, series books ... [have] helped [young American women] to understand the cultural demands pressing on them and to see models of how others in their same social positions have navigated the complicated waters of adolescence” (vii). Whereas it is questionable whether two books constitute a series, Jean Webster presents two versions of “aquatic navigation” in her novels *Daddy Long Legs* (1912) and *When Patty Went to College* (1903). In my presentation I will argue that Judy must conform to “traditional” femininity while simultaneously finding her own voice, because as an orphan she needs to assimilate to the dominant culture; in opposition Patty, who has a wealthy family, is able to end the novel unmarried and still behaviorally unconventional. In essence, though the orphan is traditionally associated with freedom (cf. Avery 177; Mills 228), of Webster’s two college girls, it is Patty who has the ultimate freedom.

Daddy Long Legs’ orphaned Judy has the opportunity to attend college because of a benefactor. She narrates her story through epistles, making her voice the central one. Through hard work and the typical orphan virtue (Avery 178), Judy establishes herself as student and a writer. Her story follows the fairy tale model when she marries her benefactor in a problematic rags-to-riches ending.

Patty, in contrast, is described as “[excelling] in impudence and audacity” (*Just Patty* 35). At the end of *When Patty Went to College*, Patty confesses her crime, an indicator that she might yet change her behavior “for the better.” However, she then tells the student president that “I may think of some good excuse [to avoid punishment] in the night” (*College* 75). Unlike other turn-of-the-century girls’ novels with a “naughty” protagonist, Patty’s changed behavior does not appear to be complete and permanent, nor does Patty end the novel engaged to be married. Whereas Webster continues Judy’s story with *Dear Enemy* (1915), in which we see Judy married, with a baby, and the benefactress of her former orphanage, Webster returns to Patty’s story to tell when Patty was a still capricious student at boarding school.