Problem Statement Example:
Growing Up Male in American Children's Books

By many accounts, American boys are in trouble. In recent years a library of new books and journal articles has explored the problems of boys, reflecting approaches by scholars from nearly every imaginable background and perspective: Harvard psychologists (William Pollack, Dan Kindlon), men doing feminism (Digby), cultural critics (Marina Warner), mythopoetic/Iron John gurus (Gurian), feminists (Susan Faludi), and right-wing intellectuals (Christina Hoff Sommers). These books describe a dire situation. Boys are twice as likely as girls to be labeled "learning disabled." Boys constitute two thirds of the children in special education. Boys are ten times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. While girls seem to be narrowing the gap in math and science relative to boys, boys continue to lag behind girls in reading. While boys are more likely to drop out of school, girls are now more likely to attend college (and 55% of the college population in the United States is now female). American boys have a higher rate of depression than girls, are three times more likely to be the victim of a violent crime, and four times more likely than girls to commit suicide. A common explanation for these phenomena is that there is a gap between how young males must function in contemporary society and how they attempt to live up to society's idea of hegemonic masculinity, a conception of masculinity that often renders boys dysfunctional.

What grounds this conception of masculinity? Back in 1976, David and Branyon reviewed the research on boys' ideas of masculinity, research based on interviews with thousands of boys. They were then able to identify four basic schemata for maleness that collectively make up what William Pollack calls, "The Boy Code."

1. The Sturdy Oak. Boys should be tough, stoic, stable, independent, confident, and show no weaknesses. Boys shouldn't show or share their pain or grieve openly. As a result boys must ignore feelings of fear, pain, or loss. For boys, living is a constant acting job, pretending to be confident when they are really scared, acting independent when they really want love and support.
2. Give 'Em Hell. Boys are supposed to be macho, show high energy and even be violent. Society expects boys to be extremely daring, display bravado, and be attracted to danger.
3. The Big Wheel. Boys must achieve the highest status they possibly can. They should be dominant and powerful over situations and over others. Boys should avoid shame at all costs and put on a mask of coolness, avowing that everything is under control.
4. No Sissy Stuff. Boys are not girls. They are not just different from girls, but the opposite of girls. One of the worst insults you could hurl at a boy is to call him a girl. Empathy, warmth, and dependence, emotions that are associated with girls and women, are forbidden emotions to boys. When boys crack from the strain of the code, society tells them to be tough, to be strong, to ignore the pain, and above all, they are shamed by being told not to be sissies.

A quarter of a century later, little seems to have changed. In Raising Cain (1999), Kindlon and Thompson noted that the more traditional the attitude a boy held about masculinity, the higher the risk of that boy to substance abuse, have problems with the law, have problems with school,

and to engage in risky and reckless sexual behavior. What were these traditional notions? The need for respect (or The Big Wheel), physical toughness (Give 'Em Hell) reluctance to do housework (No Sissy Stuff), and a reluctance to talk about problems (The Sturdy Oak).

Pollock writes of the need "to rescue our sons from the myths of boyhood," that is, from beliefs that straitjacket boys into living out a destructive masculinity. While Pollock is probably using the word "myth" to mean "a false belief," another meaning of myth seems pertinent. As Marina Warner argues, myths are not always delusions that can be dismantled and eradicated, but "they represent ways of making sense of universal matters, like sexual identity and family relations, and . . . they enjoy a more vigorous life than we perhaps acknowledge, and exert more of an inspiration and influence than we think." (1994, p. xix). The Boy Code has such a mythic existence, in that it is not enough to demonstrate its falseness because it is perpetuated by the culture through the repetition of stories. The hero tale, the coming of age story, Ursula LeGuin (1993) writes, is about the establishment and validation of manhood (and see also Hourihan's (1997) extended analysis). As Warner argues, "the fictions and narratives of a society contribute as fundamentally to its character as its laws and economy and political arrangements, [and] the dimension of the 'imaginary' is too often overlooked in the struggles to define the nature of men, of women, of children, to express exclusion and belonging" (p. xvii). To give rise to a new Boy Code that is more liberating than the straightjacket code of today is going to take a multitude of new stories, and readings of old stories that reveal the Boy Code for what it is. A further aspect of the Boy Code, which is of particular relevance to the themes and structures of American children's fiction, is the assumption that manhood is something that must be proven or acquired. In *Manhood in America* (1996), a history of notions of manhood across American history, Michael Kimmel argues that American ideas of masculinity have always included the notion that a boy's or a man's sense of masculinity is constantly tested and so must constantly be proven or reacquired. To prove or to (re)acquire manhood is encapsulated in status seeking among men, a homosocial act driven not so much by a need to dominate as by a fear of being dominated by others. Further, Kimmel goes on to argue that the ideal American male is a self-made man, an idea of manhood that gained prominence in the nineteenth century and still holds force today. This self-made man is independent, self-sufficient, solitary, and self-disciplined. Through a combination of work and will, he earns whatever success comes his way.

When American males feel their masculinity threatened, according to Kimmel, they respond in three ways. First, they seek to exercise greater control, either over themselves or over others. They retreat to the weight room to pump up. Second, they find ways to exclude others from the privileges society confers upon males. There is here a long history of excluding women, gays, and other minorities from full participation in society. Third, they seek escape. They run off to the frontier or, lacking a frontier, go off to the woods to drum, chant, and discover their inner warrior.

If a boy (or a man for that matter) were to attempt to challenge the code, the chances are great that other males would shame the boy unmercifully. Susan Faludi in *Stiffed*, a study of men she began as a critique but would turn into a compassionate portrait of society's abandonment of men, noted that it is very difficult for men to struggle collectively against society's notions of what it means to be male. The Boy Code is well protected from internal challenges, because for men to admit there is a problem is also to admit that they are not in control and are incapable of

standing strong without support, and thus they run the risk of losing face and status.

Faludi also suggests that such views of masculinity seem to be particularly American, but goes on to argue, citing David Gilmore's cross-cultural study, *Manhood in the Making* (1990), that they are not essential but socially constructed: "Manliness is a symbol script, a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary." Both Faludi and Warner argue that in order for this script to be rewritten, males need what feminism can provide. No tramping off to the woods with the other boys on Iron John retreats, getting in touch with their inner warrior. No visits to the weight room to tone the body into a buff, polished sculpture. No preoccupations with "three bulges", muscles, wallet, and crotch. Rather, males could come to know that patriarchy works on them just as surely as it works on women, that being the "Big Wheel" and "the Sturdy Oak" are just cultural constructions supporting the illusion that the male must always be in charge and in control. Hierarchies also keep men under control, or perhaps more accurately keep men under the illusion that they have control. Feminist theory tells us that life isn't a set of either/or oppositions. More often than not, life is both/and. Life isn't being in control or being out-of-control. Sometimes the monster doesn't need to be subdued or killed. Sometimes the monster needs to be nurtured. Sometimes, as in Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the monster needs to be embraced and taken in. Slaying the monsters, merely to affirm one's manhood, is futile; there are always more threats and more challenges. nstead of seeking dominance, men might look for transformation, recognizing that the danger is a result not of some outside threat, but rather of men's desire to dominate some outside threat.

But myth works to obscure this by naturalizing concepts, as Barthes demonstrated (1972, p.129), so that what is actually a social construction is seen as a natural phenomenon. Vital to this project of making the signs of maleness visible and transforming these signs into other, different ideas of masculinity is the clarification and understanding of how the Boy Code and the notion of the self-made man came to be and how it is maintained so that we might better "read" the gendered nature of old stories and new ones. We can notice how masculinity is acquired and reacquired by male characters, and to do this we need both to re-read coming of age narratives, whether from the past or the present, and to redirect attention towards alternative masculinities and to texts which embody these.

To re-read a male hero quest or coming of age story is not merely to look for stereotypical Boy Code behavior, but rather to disclose how the code is woven into the fabric of daily living, and assumed by the story as "the way things are." This requires an inversion. What was once seen as virtuous is now questioned as being too limited, too oppressive to be of service today. From this point of view the act of reading itself becomes a means for breaking and reconstructing the Boy Code.

Using this hybrid perspective of feminist theory, myth theory, the Boy Code, and an emancipation-based epistemology, I will look at selected American children's books, reading for affirmation and/or questioning of conventional ideas about what it means to be male in American culture. These books will include: *Stone Fox* by Gardiner, *Old Yeller* by Gipson, *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Rawls, *The Yearling* by Rawlings, *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by DePaola, *William's Doll* by Zolotow, I*ra Sleeps Over*, and *Wringer* by Spinelli. These books were chosen because they are well-known and well-reviewed books. S*tone Fox*, *Old Yeller*, *Where the Red*

Fern Grows, and *The Yearling* each can be considered a classic of children's literature and each book represents an affirmation of the conventional view of what is "good" male behavior. *William's Doll, Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, and *Wringer* are books that challenge the conventional view, however, I will argue that only Wringer and Ira Sleeps Over are successful in mounting the challenge, and even then they are only a partial successes.

References
David, Deborah & Robert Brannon. (eds.) *Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1976.
De Paola, Tomie. *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1979.
Digby, Tom. *Men Doing Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
Faludi, Susan. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: William Morrow, 1999.
Garbarino, James. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
Gardiner, John Reynolds. *Stone Fox*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980.
Gilmore, David. *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.
Gipson, Fred. *Old Yeller*. New York: HarperCollins, 1956.
Gurian, Michael. *The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Boys into Exceptional Men*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996.
Heaney, Seamus (translator). *Beowulf*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999.
Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
Kindlon, Dan & Michael Thompson. *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. New York: Random House, 1999.
Le Guin, Ursula K. *Earthsea Revisioned*. Cambridge, England: Green Bay Publications, 1993.
Le Guin, Ursula K. *A Wizard of Earthsea*. New York: Parnassus, 1968.
Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
Paul, Lissa. *Reading Otherways*. Stroud: Thimble Press, 1998.
Paul, Lissa. "From Sex Role Stereotyping to Subjectivity: Feminist Criticism," In Hunt, Peter (ed). *Understanding Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
Paulsen, Gary. *The Cookcamp*. New York: Orchard Press, 1991.
Pollack, William. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Random House, 1998.
Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*. New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell, 1961.
Spinelli, Jerry. *Wringer*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.
Summers, Christina Hoff. T*he War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
The *New York Times Magazine* (1999, August 22). "The Troubled Life of Boys," pp. 30-41.
Waber, Bernard. *Ira Sleeps Over*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
Walter, Virginia & Katrina Roeckelein. *Making Up Megaboy*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1998.
Warner, Marina. *Six Myths of Our Time: Little Angels, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts, and More*. New York: Vintage Press, 1994.
Zolotow, Charlotte. *William's Doll*. Illustrated by William Pene Dubois. New York: HarperCollins, 1976.

This problem statement sets out the issue of what it means to grow up male in American culture. It argues that stories are important to how boys come to learn what it means to be male and what society expects of its boys. It also argues that these expectations are unhealthy and that we need new stories and new ways of reading old stories to counteract this. This places the study within an emancipation epistemology. The author claims he or she will use recent psychological research on boys, myth theory, and feminist theory to interpret the books. The author sets out a pretty hefty list of books to consider, perhaps too many for one paper to discuss in any depth. This problem statement is quite good, setting out the question and laying down a theoretical base. Its weakest part is explaining how the research will be done –- it's not bad, but the author could have gone into more detail in that section.

This study could easily be turned into a teacher-as-researcher study. Here the researcher would revise the question to "How do the boys in my classroom understand masculinity?" You could pick one or two of the books listed above and hold a book discussion, recording their talk and then analyzing the talk according to the Boy Code, noting where the boys seem to affirm the Code and where they seem to challenge the Code. You would describe how you will select the boys. You would describe how you will conduct the discussion. What questions would you ask and why those questions?