

Feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity in Scott Stuart's *My Shadow is Pink*: a queer reading

Nadia Riskia Safitri¹

SUBJECT

Literature

¹) Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: nadiariskiasafitri@mail.ugm.ac.id

Received: February 4, 2026

Accepted: March 26, 2026

Online version: April 30, 2026

Keywords: gender nonconformity; feminine gender expression; queer; children's picturebook; *My Shadow is Pink*

Abstract

This study examines the representation of feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity in Scott Stuart's illustrated children's book *My Shadow is Pink* (2020). Situated within discussions of gender diversity in children's literature, the study explores how non-normative gender expression is constructed and negotiated in a heteronormative context. Using a qualitative multimodal approach, this research analyses the interaction between verbal narration and visual elements, including colour, clothing, and gender-coded objects. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal framework, the study examines representational and compositional meanings, while Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Sally Hines's perspective on gender expression and social response guide the analytical process. The findings reveal three main forms of feminine gender expression: symbolic imagery, clothing, and gender-coded objects. These elements not only reflect the child's internal struggle but also illustrate how gender identity is performed and negotiated through everyday practices. In addition, the study highlights the significant role of familial response, particularly the father's evolving attitude, in shaping the child's emotional experience and process of self-acceptance. Overall, *My Shadow is Pink* offers a nuanced portrayal of gender nonconformity in childhood and underscores the importance of supportive social environments in enabling children to express their identities.

Introduction

In contemporary society, gender expectations are introduced to children from an early age through everyday social practices. The clothes they wear, the colours associated with them, and the toys they are encouraged to play with often reflect broader cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity. As these patterns are repeated, they become normalised and shape how children understand themselves and others. In this context, it is important to distinguish sex from gender. While sex refers to biological characteristics, gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, and expressions that are shaped by cultural expectations (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2023). In other words, gender is not simply attached to the body, but produced and reinforced through social interaction.

These expectations are closely connected to heteronormativity, a social system that tends to privilege normative forms of gender and sexuality while marginalising identities and expressions that do not conform to dominant expectations. These expectations are closely related to heteronormativity, a system that privileges normative forms of gender and sexuality while marginalising identities and expressions that do not conform to them. Within such a system, boys are often expected to display masculine traits, whereas femininity is commonly associated with girls. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is sustained through repeated social performances, which makes deviation from these norms socially visible and often contested. This issue becomes particularly important in children's literature, since literary texts not only reflect social values but also shape children's understanding of identity, difference, and belonging.

One picture book that raises this issue is Scott Stuart's *My Shadow is Pink* (2020). The story follows a young boy whose pink shadow symbolises feminine traits that differ from the masculine norms surrounding him. Through this symbolic narrative, the book portrays the child's discomfort, self-exploration, and gradual acceptance of his gender expression. Rather than explicitly naming the child as transgender, the picture book presents a child whose feminine expression places him in tension with dominant expectations of boyhood. This makes the text particularly relevant for examining gender nonconformity and the ways children negotiate identity within heteronormative environments.

To analyse this issue, this study draws on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Sally Hines's discussion of gender expression and social responses to gender diversity. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an innate essence but is repeatedly performed through acts, behaviours, and embodied expressions. This perspective is useful for understanding how the child's shadow, clothing, and preferred objects function as signs of gender expression. In addition, Hines (2007) emphasises that gender diversity is shaped not only by self-expression but also by social responses, particularly those coming from family and other immediate environments. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for reading *My Shadow is Pink* as a narrative about feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity in childhood.

Previous studies have discussed queerness and non-normative identities in children's literature. Lester (2014), for example, shows that queer-themed picture books often remain tied to homonormative values such as whiteness, monogamy, and gender conformity. Similarly, Taylor (2012) finds that children's picture books featuring lesbian and gay themes often align with middle-class norms and broader heteronormative expectations. These studies are important in showing how difference is represented in

children's books, but they focus mainly on gay and lesbian themes or on homonormativity more broadly.

Less attention has been given to picture books that depict feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity in boys, especially in relation to emotional experience and family response. In addition, the combination of queer theory and gender diversity studies has rarely been applied to a single picture book to examine how visual and verbal elements work together to represent this issue. Based on this gap, this study aims to examine how feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity are represented in Scott Stuart's *My Shadow is Pink*. Specifically, the study analyses how visual and verbal elements in the picture book portray the child's experience of expressing gender in ways that differ from dominant masculine expectations. In addition, this study explores how social responses, particularly the father's reaction, influence the child's emotional experience and process of self-acceptance.

Research method

This study employs a qualitative multimodal analysis to examine how meaning is constructed through the interaction of verbal and visual elements in children's illustrated literature. The data were taken from Scott Stuart's picture book *My Shadow is Pink* (2020). Rather than selecting pages based on subjective judgment of what appears "most explicit," this study applies a purposive sampling strategy using clearly defined criteria. The units of analysis consist of pages that (1) visually represent the child's shadow (pink or blue), (2) depict interactions between the child and other characters, particularly the father, (3) include gender-coded objects or clothing, and (4) illustrate shifts in the child's emotional experience. These criteria ensure the selected data are relevant, transparent, and representative of the narrative as a whole.

The analysis draws on a multimodal framework adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which emphasises how meaning is produced through visual and verbal modes. In this study, visual elements are analysed in terms of representational and compositional meanings. At the same time, the verbal narration is examined in relation to how it frames the child's experiences and emotions. To support analytical consistency, each visual category is operationalised through specific indicators. Colour symbolism is examined in terms of dominant colour usage, contrast, and culturally constructed gender associations. Character posture is analysed through body positioning, gesture, and spatial orientation, which may indicate confidence, hesitation, or submission. Gender-coded objects are identified based on their cultural association with masculinity or femininity, such as toys, clothing, and accessories. In addition, spatial composition is considered in terms of visual prominence, placement, and the relationship between elements within the frame.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the selected pages were identified based on the sampling criteria. Second, the visual elements were coded according to the operational categories, including colour symbolism, posture, spatial composition, and gender-coded objects. Third, we analysed the accompanying verbal narration to understand how the text frames the child's feelings, experiences, and interactions. Fourth, the visual and verbal findings were compared and grouped into thematic patterns that reflect forms of feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity.

The theoretical framework is integrated throughout the analytical process. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is used to guide the identification of

repeated acts, behaviours, and expressions that construct gender as something performed rather than fixed. In addition, Sally Hines's discussion of gender expression and social response informs the analysis of how the child's identity is shaped through interaction with others, particularly within the family context. By combining multimodal analysis with these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a more systematic and theoretically grounded interpretation of gender representation in *My Shadow is Pink*.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that feminine gender expression in *My Shadow is Pink* is constructed through the interaction of visual and verbal elements. The picture book portrays the child as a boy whose pink shadow symbolises feminine traits that contrast with the masculine expectations surrounding him. Through colour symbolism, clothing, and gender-coded objects, the narrative illustrates how the child negotiates his gender expression within a heteronormative environment.

The analysis reveals two main aspects in the portrayal of gender nonconformity. First, feminine gender expression is represented through symbolic imagery, clothing, and gender-associated objects. Second, the narrative highlights how social responses, particularly from family members, influence the child's emotional experience and gradual process of self-acceptance. These findings demonstrate how visual and verbal elements work together to construct a narrative about gender expression in childhood.

The Representation of Feminine Gender Expression

Heteronormativity shapes how gender roles are constructed and regulated within society, including expectations regarding appearance, behaviour, and self-presentation. These norms often position masculinity and femininity as fixed, opposing categories, which are reinforced by social practices and cultural expectations (Eagly & Wood, 2012). As a result, individuals are often expected to conform to these predefined roles, which can limit alternative forms of gender expression.

However, not all individuals adhere to these expectations, particularly children, whose expressions of identity may not align with dominant gender norms. In *My Shadow is Pink*, this tension appears through the child's feminine gender expression, represented by his pink shadow, preferred objects, and clothing choices. Rather than presenting a fixed transgender identity, the picture book portrays a child whose gender expression does not fully align with the masculine norms expected of boys.

The child's experience can be understood through Butler's (2004) concept of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not a fixed identity but is produced through repeated acts within a framework of social constraints. As Butler (2004) states, gender is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint, meaning that individuals continuously negotiate their gender through everyday actions and interactions. In *My Shadow is Pink*: this is evident in how the child repeatedly expresses forms of femininity that feel closer to his sense of self, even when these expressions do not align with dominant expectations. This repetition highlights that gender is actively constructed rather than inherently given, and is shaped through both personal expression and social context.

Through imagery

In picture books, images play a significant role in conveying the story, particularly through colour, shape, and spatial arrangement to depict the child's emotions, actions, and identity. In *My Shadow is Pink*, the pink colour of the child's shadow symbolises his feminine gender expression and the difference he feels from the masculine norms around

him. By contrast, the father's dark blue shadow represents masculinity and authority. This contrast is not merely decorative, but functions as a key visual strategy that constructs the central tension of the narrative. In this sense, colour operates as a representational element that communicates gendered meaning within the visual composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Since the colour of the child's shadow has significant meaning, examples can be seen below:



Picture 1. The first time the pink shadow appears.

Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

On this page, colour and composition play an important role in shaping meaning. The pink shadow is partially hidden behind the couch, reducing its visual prominence and suggesting that the child has not yet fully acknowledged his gender expression. At the same time, the strong contrast between the bright pink shadow and the dominant blue background makes the shadow visually stand out, drawing the reader's attention despite its hidden position. This contrast creates a tension between visibility and concealment, reflecting the child's uncertainty about his identity. The child's gaze toward the shadow further reinforces this hesitation, as his facial expression suggests confusion and discomfort. In addition, the blue-toned background and the presence of masculine-looking figures in the picture frames reinforce the dominance of masculinity in the environment, intensifying the child's sense of difference. Through this arrangement, the image constructs gender expression as both visible and suppressed.



Picture 2. He began to recognize his shadow

Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

Feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity...

In this scene, the shadow increasingly functions as a visible sign of the child's feminine expression. Unlike the previous image, the pink shadow is now more visually prominent and actively engaged in movement, particularly through dancing and ballet gestures. The use of posture and gesture here becomes significant, as the shadow's expressive movements suggest freedom and playfulness. The child's response, which shifts from hesitation to amusement and eventual participation, indicates a gradual process of recognition and acceptance. From a representational perspective, this shift reflects how gender expression is performed through repeated actions and embodied practices, as Butler (1990) suggests. However, this moment of openness is interrupted by the father's entrance. The father is positioned near a dark blue door, and his shadow appears stable and dominant, reinforcing masculine authority within the composition. This contrast between movement (the child and shadow) and stillness (the father) highlights the tension between self-expression and social constraint.



Picture 3. Pink shadow feels intimidated by father's blue shadow
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

In this image, spatial positioning and scale are crucial to constructing meaning. The father's shadow appears large and dominant, occupying a central, visually powerful position, thereby increasing its prominence. In contrast, the child and his pink shadow are placed toward the edge of the frame, smaller in size and slumped. This difference in positioning and body orientation suggests a power imbalance between the two figures. The child's slouched posture and facial expression indicate discomfort and emotional pressure, while the father's upright stance reinforces authority and control. The contrast in colour (blue versus pink), size, and posture collectively constructs a visual hierarchy that places masculinity as dominant and femininity as marginal. This can be read in line with Butler's concept of gender performativity, where normative masculinity operates as a regulating force that shapes how gender is expressed and perceived. At the same time, the emotional shifts shown in the pink shadow, ranging from confidence to sadness, reflect that the child's gender expression is not stable but is influenced by the social context, particularly the presence of the father.

Through clothing

In addition to symbolic imagery, clothing also serves as an important medium for representing gender in *My Shadow is Pink*. The child's choice of clothing, particularly the dress associated with his pink shadow, visually communicates his feminine expression

Feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity...

and highlights the tension between personal identity and dominant expectations of boyhood. In this context, clothing operates not merely as appearance, but as a performative element through which gender is expressed and negotiated. Through its visual representation, the picture book suggests that clothing becomes a site where identity is both constructed and contested.

My heart skips a beat as *I put on a dress*
and I look at my Dad who is anxious and stressed.



Picture 4. He began to adapt to the shadow of pink and femininity

Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

This illustration demonstrates how clothing functions as a central element of gender expression. The child's dress becomes visually prominent through its placement and the use of an empty white background, which isolates the figure and directs the reader's attention to him. This compositional choice creates a strong sense of visual focus, positioning the child as the central subject of the image. The yellow color of the dress, which echoes the color of the shirt worn earlier, suggests continuity in the child's identity while also evoking feelings of joy, youth, and optimism (Madden, Hewett, and Roth, 2000: 92). At the same time, the dress resembles a ballet costume with a tutu skirt, reinforcing its cultural association with femininity.

The child's posture further strengthens this meaning. His upright stance and relaxed arm position suggest confidence, while his smile indicates comfort and self-recognition. In contrast to earlier images where the shadow was partially hidden, the pink shadow here appears animated and expressive, reinforcing the child's growing acceptance of his gender expression. From a representational perspective, this moment can be understood as an instance of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), where identity is articulated through repeated acts, including the act of dressing. Through this composition, the image constructs clothing as a visible and meaningful expression of the child's sense of self.



Picture 5. The child feels insecure again, but the father comfort him
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

In contrast to the previous image, this scene shifts the emotional tone through changes in composition and visual emphasis. The dress, which previously functioned as a source of confidence, is now placed on the floor, becoming the central visual element within a darker, blue-dominated background. Its placement on the ground reduces the child's physical connection to it, symbolising a temporary rejection of his gender expression. At the same time, the contrast between the bright dress and the dark background gives the object visual prominence, drawing attention to it as a sign of emotional conflict.

The surrounding blue tones reinforce the dominance of masculinity and intensify the child's sense of isolation. In this context, the dress no longer represents comfort but becomes associated with vulnerability and social pressure. This shift illustrates how gender expression is not fixed, but can be shaped by external responses and internal emotional states. The image, therefore, reflects the instability of the child's confidence, showing how easily it can be disrupted in a heteronormative environment.

The father's later appearance in a dress introduces a significant shift in meaning. Although the dress is culturally coded as feminine, the father's blue shadow remains unchanged, suggesting that masculinity is not erased by adopting feminine-coded clothing. This challenges rigid gender binaries and supports Butler's argument that gender is constituted through repeated acts rather than fixed traits (Butler, 2004). In addition, the father's action can be read through Hines's (2007) perspective as a supportive social response, in which acceptance within the family plays a crucial role in shaping the child's experience of gender expression.



Picture 6. His father support him to be more confident with his dress
Source: *My shadow is Pink*, 2020.

This image further emphasises the role of clothing as a shared space of expression between the child and his father. Both figures are positioned prominently within the frame, and their similar attire creates a visual parallel that reduces the distance between them. This compositional arrangement suggests a shift in relational dynamics, from tension to support. The dress, which was previously a source of conflict, is now recontextualised as a symbol of acceptance and solidarity.

The father's participation is particularly significant, as it redefines the meaning of the dress within the narrative. Rather than being limited to feminine identity, the dress becomes a flexible sign that can express care, support, and resistance to normative expectations. This moment reinforces the idea that gender expression can be negotiated through everyday practices, aligning with Butler's concept of performativity and Hines's emphasis on the importance of social response. Through this visual and relational shift, the picture book presents clothing as a powerful medium for communicating identity, emotion, and acceptance.

Through gendered item

Beyond clothing, the picture book also conveys gender expression through objects culturally associated with masculinity or femininity. In *My Shadow is Pink*, items such as dolls, unicorn toys, and fairy-related objects surrounding the child visually reinforce his feminine preferences and further highlight his difference from dominant masculine expectations. Through the presence of these gender-coded objects, the narrative illustrates that the child's gender expression is reflected not only in his appearance but also in the objects and activities that he enjoys.



Picture 7. The child's favorite things
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

This image presents a dense arrangement of objects surrounding the child's pink shadow, creating a composition where gender-coded items become visually prominent. The scattered placement of toys such as a doll, a unicorn plushie, a fairy wand, and a miniature fairy contributes to a playful yet meaningful visual field. These objects are culturally associated with femininity, and their accumulation within the frame emphasises the child's preference for items that fall outside dominant masculine norms.

From a compositional perspective, clustering these objects around the pink shadow increases their visual salience, directing the viewer's attention to the association between the child and these items. The text "My shadow loves ponies and books and pink and toys, princesses, fairies, and things not for boys!" (Stuart, 2020: 4) further reinforces this relationship by explicitly acknowledging that these preferences are socially marked as "not for boys." This interaction between visual elements and verbal narration strengthens the image's representational meaning, in which objects function as extensions of the child's gender expression.

At the same time, this scene reflects Butler's concept of gender performativity, as the child's identity is expressed through repeated engagement with these objects and activities. Rather than being an innate trait, femininity is constructed through these everyday practices, including play and preference. The child's awareness that these items are socially coded as feminine, yet his continued attachment to them, highlights the tension between personal identity and social expectation.



Picture 8. Gendered items around the child
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.



Picture 9. Gendered items around the child
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.



Picture 10. Gendered items around the child
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

The recurrence of similar objects across multiple pages reinforces the consistency of the child's gender expression throughout the narrative. Plush toys, fairy-related objects, and other feminine-coded items recur, creating a pattern that reinforces their representational function. This repetition is significant, as it suggests that the child's preferences are not temporary or incidental, but form a stable part of his identity.

Visually, these objects are often positioned close to the child or his shadow, which creates a sense of association and intimacy. Their placement within the frame contributes to their visual prominence, even when they are not the image's central focus. This compositional strategy reflects how gender expression is embedded in everyday environments, rather than limited to singular moments of performance.

In addition, the presence of these objects can also be understood through Hines's (2007) perspective on gender expression as something shaped by social context. While the objects themselves reflect the child's preferences, their cultural coding as "feminine" introduces the possibility of social judgment. As a result, these items not only represent identity but also carry the potential for tension, particularly when placed within a heteronormative environment that restricts acceptable forms of gender expression.

Finally, the child's response toward these gender-coded items parallels his relationship with clothing, particularly the dress. In both cases, he acknowledges that his preferences do not align with dominant expectations of boyhood, yet he continues to engage with them. This consistency further reinforces the idea that gender expression is not fixed or externally determined, but actively constructed through repeated choices, practices, and interactions. Through the use of gender-coded objects, the picture book expands the representation of gender expression beyond appearance, showing how identity is also shaped through everyday engagement with material objects.

The influence of social response on gender expression

Children who express gender in ways that differ from dominant social expectations often experience various emotional and social consequences. In a heteronormative society, feminine expression in boys is frequently treated as a deviation from what is considered normal, which can lead to misunderstanding, pressure, or rejection. As Hines (2007: 49) notes, experiences related to gender diversity are never uniform, since they are shaped by different social factors such as family, environment, and support systems. In addition, the presence or absence of support plays an important role in shaping how children understand and express themselves. In *My Shadow is Pink*, the child's feminine gender expression influences several aspects of his life, particularly his emotional experience and his relationship with his father.

Emotional distress and social alienation

The child's feminine gender expression not only shapes how he sees himself, but also influences his emotional experience and social position. In *My Shadow is Pink*, the child is repeatedly shown feeling different, uncertain, and isolated in environments that are dominated by masculine expectations. These feelings are conveyed not only through verbal narration but also through the visual arrangement of colour, shadow, and space. As a result, the picture book presents emotional distress as one of the consequences of growing up in a heteronormative environment that leaves little room for gender nonconformity.



Picture 11. Feeling disconnected from one's surroundings
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

As seen in the pages above, the child imagines himself being separated from the people around him. This imagined scene constructs a strong sense of fear through the dominance of dark blue tones, which intensify the emotional tension of the moment (Bang, 1991: 59). The child's stiff posture and frightened expression further reinforce his discomfort, while the surrounding blue shadows visually represent the masculine figures from whom he feels emotionally distant. The contrast between the child's pink

Feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity...

shadow and the blue shadows increases its visual prominence, emphasizing his difference and sense of isolation within the family environment.



Picture 12. The child feels intimidated because he is different
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

On his first day of school, the child decides to wear a dress. As he stands before the classroom to introduce himself, he imagines his classmates' shadows judging him. This scene reflects his fear of being seen as different and his anxiety about how others might respond to his appearance. The classmates' shadows are blue, in contrast to the child's pink shadow, reinforcing his awareness that he does not fit in with the dominant expectations around him. The line, "So, I step in the doorway and puff out my chest... One thing is clear... I'm not like the rest" (Stuart, 2020: 15), shows that the child already recognises his difference before any direct rejection occurs. The shadows' poses further intensify this feeling: some appear shocked, others confrontational, and one even points at him. Together, these visual details suggest that the child has internalised the possibility of judgment, which significantly affects his confidence.



Picture 13. He felt his classmates were bullying him
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

After coming home, the child feels frustrated, as shown in the line, "I run to out the door and I push people past my dad. I run to my house feeling angry and sad" (Stuart, 2020: 17). In the illustration, the only elements that stand out against the blue background are the child and his pink shadow. The child is placed in the corner of the page, hiding under a blanket, which emphasises his fear and discomfort. He looks worried as he stares at his shadow across the room, which appears defeated and slumped, unlike its usual lively

self. The line, “If my shadow was blue, I’d be there making friends. I’d be laughing and playing and drawing with pens” (Stuart, 2020: 17), suggests that the child sees his feminine gender expression as the reason for his loneliness and sense of alienation. He imagines that, if he were able to conform to dominant masculine expectations, he would be accepted more easily and could live like the other children around him. On the right page, the yellow dress on the floor and the light entering from the open door become the most visually striking elements. In the line, “I rip off my dress, throw it down to the floor. I won’t wear it again. Not ever, no more” (Stuart, 2020: 17), the crumpled dress symbolises the child’s frustration and emotional distress. This moment illustrates how heteronormative expectations can produce emotional pressure for children whose gender expression differs from dominant norms. At this moment, the dress is no longer presented as a source of confidence, but as something he believes has made him different and isolated.

Family response and father-child relationship

The child’s feminine gender expression also affects his relationship with the people closest to him, especially his father. In *My Shadow is Pink*, the emotional tension in the story is shaped not only by the child’s internal struggle but also by his family’s responses. As Hines (2007: 147) notes, gender diversity is closely connected to social and familial relationships, since acceptance or rejection from significant others can strongly influence how an individual understands and expresses themselves. In this picture book, the father-child relationship becomes one of the central sites where this tension is expressed.



Picture 15. The child doubts himself and tends not to get validation from his father
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

The child is placed in a room dominated by blue, a colour closely associated with masculinity in the book. The dark background creates an uneasy atmosphere and reinforces the child’s discomfort. In contrast, both the child and his pink shadow appear brighter than the room, making them visually stand out while still appearing isolated within the space. The child is positioned in the bottom-right corner of the page, which reduces his visual prominence and suggests his marginal position within the family. The accompanying line reinforces this feeling, “My dad has a shadow that’s blue as can be, and there’s nothing but blue in my whole family tree” (Stuart, 2020: 1). The statement shows that the child sees his father as the clearest model of what a boy is expected to be: masculine, strong, and aligned with the blue shadow that dominates the family.

Throughout the book, the father repeatedly shows discomfort toward the child’s feminine gender expression. One early example appears when the father enters while the

child is dancing with his pink shadow. The text states, "... then stops as my dad walks in with a glare" (Stuart, 2020: 6), suggesting that the child does not feel free to express himself in front of his father. Referring to Figure 3 (Stuart, 2020: 7–8), the father's blue shadow is the largest shape on the page, emphasising masculinity and authority. This contrast reflects Butler's idea that gender norms operate through repeated social expectations, where masculinity becomes the dominant model against which other gender expressions are judged. By contrast, the child and his shadow are positioned to the side and appear much smaller, making them look weak and intimidated. The father's words strengthen this imbalance: "It will turn blue one of these days. Don't worry," he says. "It is just a phase" (Stuart, 2020: 7–8). Here, the father minimises the child's feelings and treats the child's feminine expression as temporary, something that should eventually disappear. His response reinforces the expectation that the child should return to normative boyhood. This pressure is reflected again in the line, "Dad's shadow is blue, it is big, it is strong. But when I stand with it, I just feel so wrong" (Stuart, 2020: 8). By comparing his pink shadow with his father's blue one, the child becomes more aware of the distance between his own sense of self and the masculine ideal represented by his father.



Picture 15. The father looked anxious as his son entered the classroom
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

This scene is dominated by shades of blue, emphasising the father's anxiety and emotional tension. His shadow appears dark and large, reinforcing the father's anxiety and disapproval. "He takes me to class, and I turn to say bye. His face is all worried, there's fear in his eyes." (Stuart, 2020: 14), the child notices the uneasiness in his father's expression due to the fear of how the other children might treat him because of his differences.



Picture 16. The father begins to support the child's feminine expression
Source: *My Shadow is Pink*, 2020.

This scene marks an important shift in the father's attitude toward the child's feminine gender expression. Unlike earlier scenes, where the father responds with discomfort and dismissal, this illustration shows him actively participating in what had previously been deemed unacceptable. By wearing a dress, the father no longer positions femininity as something shameful or temporary, but instead begins to make space for it within the family. His action challenges the rigid association between masculinity and boyhood that had shaped his earlier responses.

Visually, this moment is significant because the father's blue shadow remains present even while he wears a dress. This suggests that his masculinity is not erased by adopting clothing that is culturally coded as feminine. In other words, the picture book presents the dress not as something that determines identity in a fixed way, but as a means of expression that can be worn without threatening one's sense of self. Through this image, the father demonstrates to the child that femininity does not need to be rejected or feared. His support becomes more meaningful because it is expressed through action rather than advice alone.

This moment also strengthens the emotional dimension of the father-child relationship. The father's gesture can be read as an effort to reduce the child's shame and isolation by standing beside him visibly and symbolically. As a result, the relationship shifts from tension and invalidation toward reassurance and acceptance. The father's support in this scene helps create a safer emotional space for the child to recognise and express himself more confidently.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Scott Stuart's *My Shadow is Pink* represents feminine gender expression and gender nonconformity through the interaction of visual and verbal elements. The symbolism of the pink shadow, the use of gendered clothing, and the presence of feminine-coded objects collectively illustrate the child's struggle to express himself within a social environment that strongly associates masculinity with boys.

The findings also show that the child's emotional experience is shaped not only by his internal sense of difference but also by social responses, particularly within the family. The father's initial discomfort and eventual acceptance play a crucial role in the child's process of developing confidence and self-acceptance.

Overall, the study highlights that gender expression in childhood is not fixed but dynamic, shaped by everyday practices and social interaction. By applying a multimodal approach, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how children's literature can represent gender diversity. It also emphasises the importance of supportive environments in enabling children to express their identities more freely, thereby encouraging more inclusive perspectives on gender expression in children's literature.

Disclosure statement

The author of the article has no conflict of interest in research or the review.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express appreciation for the academic guidance and constructive feedback that supported the completion of this article.

Bibliography

- Bang, M. (1991). *Picture This: How Picture Work*. Chronicle Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research. (2023). *What is gender? what is sex?*. CIHR. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html>
- Eagly, A. H. & Wood, W. (2012). *Social Role Theory*. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 458-476. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n49>
- Hines, S. (2007). *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care*. Policy Press
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Lester, J. Z. (2014). *Homonormativity in children's literature: An intersectional analysis of queer-themed picture books*. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11(3), 244-275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2013.879465>
- Madden, T. J., Hewett, K., & Roth, M. S. (2000). Managing images in different cultures: A cross national study of color meanings and preferences. *Journal of International Marketing*, 8(4), 90-107. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jimk.8.4.90.19795>
- Stuart, S. (2020). *My Shadow is Pink*. Larrikin House. US.
- Taylor, N. (2012). *U.S. Children's Picture Books and the Homonormative Subject*. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 9(2), 136-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2011.649646>