Introduction

So what is shoujo?

The word literally means "girl" or "young woman" in Japanese, and the genre began as a type of manga aimed directly at them, with a strong focus on character interaction, atmosphere, and complex dialogue. Dramatic and terrible events frequently happen to protagonists, antagonists, and bystanders, and are often used deliberately to explore the actions and reactions of the characters involved. The story may focus on flawed or outright evil characters — the results of a character's decisions, in the past or present, often compose a major part of the story — and cycles of redemption or corruption become major themes.

Shoujo can be romantic, or fantastical, or playful. Five girls are the reincarnations of warrior princesses from a world thousands of years ago, and must discover the truth about their past while struggling against a foe who has travelled down the millennia to confront them and destroy the world. A mysterious masked man haunts their footsteps, searching for a legendary crystal with the power to sustain worlds. Are their mysterious allies justified in killing in order to save the earth? Who is the Guardian of the Gate to Time? Will they ever find true love?

Shoujo can be dark and threatening. Two teenagers, brother and sister, live together in a somber and corrupt Tokyo, where the brother works as a medium and psychic. Their best friend is the local veterinarian, a kindly and gentle man. But what is the vet's dark secret, and why does he know killing magic? What bargain was once made and has been forgotten, but must be fulfilled within the year? Will the young medium be yet another sacrifice buried beneath the cherry tree?

Shoujo For Girls

Shoujo Manga, literally speaking, is manga that is marketed primarily to school-aged girls in Japan, and is written with them as the primary audience across a vast array of genres. However, it has caught on across a much wider audience, and the stories have themselves begun to reflect that. Strictly and literally, shoujo manga is supposed to be the province of teenage girls, and is written mainly for them. But as the target audience ages and still keeps on buying their favorite manga in order to read work by their favorite artists or about the characters they particularly loved, so in turn the stories have come to deal with more mature themes, and to embrace a wider selection of styles, to keep the attention (and money) of older readers. As a result, shoujo has broadened and deepened as a genre, and when something is described as "shoujo" these days, unless the speaker is being very specific indeed, it means a great deal more than just "manga for teenage girls."

Shoujo can be warped and twisted. Is it true that the young hero is the reincarnation of one of the two most powerful angels in creation? Why does he love his sister so much, and what is her affinity with lilies and water? Who is the strange veiled chancellor who controls Heaven with a tyrant's grasp? Why does the angel of death go masked? Who was the hero's best friend, millennia ago, before he was trapped in the form of a seven-bladed sword? Can the angel of fire ever be reconciled with his older brother? Who will be the 999th bride of Lucifer?

Shoujo themes and elements can appear in any genre, from hard science fiction to the wild west, or from samurai fantasy to the present day. What matters in shoujo is the relationships between characters (often the more twisted, the better) and the personal adventures and torments which each character must undergo. Nobody gets out unscathed. Everyone has to fight for their happy ending — if they get one at all. Villains can be honorable, and heroes can be petty. One story may come to an end, but another will be founded on its loose ends. The past always has secrets, and the future is never settled, however many prophecies may litter the world.

There used to be a wide divide between shounen (boys) and shoujo (girls) manga, more recently the two have become much more closely blended. It is rare to find a shounen manga without some trace of the character definition and relationships which used to be the province of shoujo. Similarly, a number of shoujo manga have the high detail of technology and weaponry, and the constant battles, which used to be the hallmark of shounen. It is no longer possible to split shoujo and shounen cleanly apart — even if shounen is still more prone to have fold-out diagrams of the heroes' armors where shoujo presents personality analyses, star signs, and blood types (believed to indicate personality) for the heroines. Artists such as CLAMP have heavy crossover appeal; they have stories serialized in shoujo magazines which have huge non-shoujo audiences (such as *X/1999*), and even appear in shounen manga serials, targeted towards that audience as well (the series *Chobits*). Art styles which were originally found almost entirely in shoujo books have made their way into shounen books as well — such as the series *Tenshi na konamaiki*, or *A Cheeky Angel*. Today, shoujo manga reflects an increasingly heterogonous society, and a much larger manga industry. Shoujo themes are similarly more and more common in role-playing games, however much shounen fighting such games may also involve, and deserve further exploration.