Examining the Representation of Slavery within Children’s Literature

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Abstract
Middle level teachers, at times, link historical content with relevant English literature in interdisciplinary units. Elementary teachers periodically employ history-themed literature during reading time. Interconnections between language arts and history are formed with developmentally appropriate literature for students. Historical misrepresentations, however, proliferate in children’s literature and are concealed behind engaging narratives. Since literacy and historical thinking are essential skills, children’s literature should be balanced within, not banished from, the classroom. Using America’s peculiar institution of slavery as a reference point, this article examines children’s literature, identifies almost a dozen areas of historical misrepresentation, and proffers rich primary source material to balance the various misrepresentations. We provide teachers with reason for caution when including such literature; but also model how to locate, use, and, at times, abridge primary source material within an elementary or middle level classroom. Such curricular supplements provide balance to engaging but historically-blemished children’s literature and enable educators to attain the rigorous prescriptions of Common Core.

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Children’s literature in the context of this research paper (and hopefully too in the eyes of the majority) is the ultimate escape; it is neither box nor leash nor constraint of any sort. It is the one genre of literature that does not hold itself to a predetermined standard upon which the postmodern (as in the theory, not as in the time) minds can muddle together an amalgamation of text to form something novel. Phillis Wheatley’s legacy is one shrouded behind the veil of slavery in the 18th Century. Her contributions to literature and the movement to abolish slavery might as well have been anonymous in that the academic world has never settled on the matter of where Wheatley’s allegiances lie in relation to the social issues of her time.