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Analysis of The Black Fairy by Fenton Johnson

Crystal Tolbert
Marquette University

A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

Crystal Tolbert

Professor Sarah Wadsworth

English 4710

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The exploration of noncanonical text is a rather interesting journey. There is an abundance of works that have been hidden in the recesses of time and not touched by hands or gazed upon by eyes of readers in decades. Such texts can shed light on ideologies of an era that precedes the present. The turn of the 20th century meant a lot for America. The country had officially ended slavery by way of the Emancipation Proclamation and 13th Amendment to the Constitution (1863 and 1865 respectively), which created a new society that gave rise to almost a need to perpetuate prejudiced thoughts about African Americans and their legal education. Looking through archival readings, one will find that books about and geared towards African Americans seem to be quite rare. Children's literature of this time period substantiates that this is true. Books and stories created for white children portray African Americans in the poorest of light, making folly of characteristic features and imbuing texts with stereotypes of ignorance and pure stupidity. Fortunately, as the years progressed literature has been made available for African American children that dismisses the cruelty of racial discrimination in such a negative light. One such work is [*The Upward Path*](#), an anthology of poetry, essays, short stories, folklore, biographical sketches, and drawings by prominent African American writers, educators, and other personalities of the time. The copyright is 1920 in the state of New York. One particular story contained in this "Reader for Colored Children" (Pritchard and White Ovington i) is titled

[*The Black Fairy*](#) by Fenton Johnson. This fantasy story helps children of this era to understand the history of slavery and encourage feelings of brotherly love among all races.

In order to prove how this single story truly engages children and speaks not only in a register that is familiar and entertaining to them but also in a realistic way, this paper will be separated into four sections. The first segment will explain how the story fits into Seth Lerer's literary history (*Children's Literature: A Readers' History from Aesop to Harry Potter*). The following piece will illuminate the ways in which the story responds to its historical and cultural context. Thirdly, the "cultural work" of the text will be revealed. Finally, the text will be unpacked in a way that reveals how the culture regarded children.

SETH LERER'S LITERARY HISTORY

John Locke would most likely take a liking to the style in which [*The Black Fairy*](#) is written and presented. In Chapter Five of Seth Lerer's book *Children's Literature*, he takes an in-depth look at Lockean ideas. One of Locke's most famous beliefs was that each "child is born a blank slate-- a *tabula rasa*, whose mind's cabinet is empty [which influences] a way of representing knowledge and experience in literary narrative" (105). Annabelle, the protagonist of [*The Black Fairy*](#), is clearly a blank slate because she does not know about the history of the Ethiopians. Child readers or listeners (who will be referred to as simply readers in the following) travel with Annabelle and the fairy, Amunophis, to learn something new. Locke's pedagogy includes that children learn from experience, especially experiences in the world. Johnson realized that by using a fantasy story he could give children experience of the world.

The child reader could imagine and explore all that the fairy showed Annabelle. By the end of the story it did not seem as though Annabelle had a solid grasp on the whole history, but

she knew that she wanted to see the fairy again, so the fairy gave her the conditions that she would return under. Lerer shows that Locke believed that children learned from the particulars. At the end Amunophis is very particular about what it took for her to come back. Johnson follows Locke's pedagogy in being deliberate and meticulous about what must be done. The child reader will walk away with the sense that they want to see the last picture too and seek ways to make Amunophis's last request possible.

Lerer also points out that "We encounter all things on the street; our task is to take each as a tool for teaching" (118). Johnson again falls in line with this ideology. He begins the story using a popular folktale like the Grimm Brothers' to draw the readers in and then uses it for a teaching tool. The idea of a fairy does not seem so farfetched if it is read or heard about elsewhere. Johnson certainly used this notion to his advantage.

In Chapter Nine, "Ill-Tempered and Queer," Lerer says, "As a scholar of languages, I begin with the idea of linguistic meaning" (193). He poses many questions about the meaning of utterances, sounds having some unique reference, and language conventions, among other topics. Lerer would find [The Black Fairy](#) quite interesting in terms of language. A lot of the vocabulary would seem to make the work hard for a child reader to read or understand on his / her own. Johnson may have meant it this way in order to open up a dialogue between adults and children. The story also uses terms like "village" and "colored," which do not seem to quite fit in the same cultural context. (The terms African versus African American will be explored more later in this paper.) Johnson is sure to give readers a clear idea of how he hears, or wants readers to hear, the voice of Amunophis, describing it as "soft and low and gentle like the Niger on a summer evening" (Johnson 176). It is very important to pay attention to the language used because it can

disclose a lot about an author (as Lerer was able to make some assumptions about Lewis Carroll).

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

[The Black Fairy](#) is clearly representative of its time for several reasons. When the story first begins, Annabelle is reading a volume of Grimm. The Brothers Grimm were a very well-known German author pair in the 19th century and celebrated with much fame in the following decades and even now. Their children's books were "[collections] of folktales from among their neighbors and relatives" (Griffith and Frey 36). Their first publication was made available in 1812. Great success was experienced from their following works, which is evidenced by their many translations. Even after the brothers' demise (the last passing in 1863), their stories were yet being translated and disseminated all over the world. American children were certainly no strangers to the folktales that the brothers compiled. It should be noted that their stories were being published at a time when African Americans were enslaved, so naturally they would not have had free access to the "tales [containing] the most timeless and unchanging of situations and characters" (36). However, although they did not experience free access does not mean denial, as it was a covert fact that white children would read to their black slaves and teach them things. It is not impossible to imagine slave-owners' children enjoying the Brothers Grimm so much that they could not help but share it with their slaves. For this reason, it is plausible to understand how the Brothers Grimm came to be in the personal libraries of African American children as well. Johnson's connection at the beginning of the story to a text that transcends racial lines helps to build ideas of brotherly love among all races.

The setting of the story is somewhat problematic in understanding the historical and cultural context. The story seems to take place in an African country, most likely one near the Niger River because Amunophis, the fairy, lives near the river. Also, the fact that Anna's home is described as a "village" hints at African landscapes. Anna is described as "the daughter of a colored lawyer" (Johnson 175). The term "colored" presents an interesting assertion. "Colored" has traditionally been an American term for African Americans, but if the story was set in an African country there really was not a need to say "colored;" "African" would have been more appropriate. Because of this one signifier the setting could be easily thought of as a "village" in the city. Johnson further makes the setting ambiguous by simply saying that the fairy "[lives] in the tall grass many, many miles away, where a beautiful river called the Niger sleeps" (176). Many, many miles away could really be another country in Africa or an entirely different continent. It would also seem unnatural to have the fairy formally introduce the river if Annabelle was already familiar with it. With these contrasting differences, the setting is hard to place, but the meaning of the story is not lost or compromised in either situation. Children still take away a history lesson along with an appeal to accept people of all races through the culture of Africans or African Americans.

CULTURAL WORK

Johnson certainly employs [*The Black Fairy*](#) to leave an impression on its readers. He shows Annabelle as a little girl who loves to read and is smart because of it, sharing that "She had long played in the fairyland of knowledge, and was far advanced for one of her years" (Johnson 175). Whether she was African or African American is not of importance. Here Johnson is basically telling his audience that reading is the key to knowledge. Keeping in mind the post-slavery

society that he lived in with de facto segregation rearing its evil head, a reader in this day and age can see that this is a coded message: the only way to move ahead in America is through education.

The portrayal of the father as a lawyer is also a sign of some “cultural work” being done. First and foremost, it says to black children reading it that they can be lawyers too. Johnson is dispelling any myths that his readers may have ingested and taken on as true regarding the intelligence of African Americans. Secondly, it says that education is not inaccessible to his audience. Johnson is empowering his readers and letting them know that they too can have careers, even if this did mean troubles and trials, which went without saying.

Amunophis, the fairy, describes ancient Ethiopia as a beautiful prosperous place where “Proud and great were the black kings of [the] land” (178). She recalls the happiness of thousands of years before life changed. The history lesson is beginning at this part of the story. Johnson is building a sense of African pride in his readers. His audience now feels special and like they really do have something to offer despite what society tells them--cultural work. The fairy goes on to tell the story of destruction, capture, slavery in other African countries, and slavery in America. Johnson uses a simple way to teach his audience this history lesson.

Amunophis tells Annabelle that though they have “gone through great tribulations and trials, and have mingled with the blood of the fairer race” so that they are not entirely Ethiopian, “they have not lost their identity” (180). The cultural work being done here is building the sense of belonging in readers. The African American culture was deemed subhuman and therefore separated from other Americans. However, by reminding readers that although they may not be able to trace their lineage to exactly which country and group of people they descended from, they are still a part of a great past and are valued.

Johnson ends the story with Amunophis telling Annabelle that she will return “When the brotherhood of man has come into the world; and there is no longer a white civilization or a black civilization, but the civilization of all men” (181). Again, thinking about this work being published in the year 1920, there probably were not many African Americans clinging to such views. However, because of the way that Johnson shows the great past and the trials and tribulations that were suffered by African Americans, it makes this ending sensible. Basically, he shows that African Americans descended from greatness and need to return to greatness through comradery. Johnson uses this story to produce a great amount of cultural work through exposing history and presenting a call to action for togetherness.

TEXT REVELATION ON CHILDREN

[*The Black Fairy*](#) shows that culture, at least the African American culture, expected a lot from young African American people. Annabelle had a great appetite for reading and a healthy imagination. It shows readers today that this kind of behavior is what would be desired as the norm. Amunophis teaches Annabelle so much and does not hold back at all. She tells Annabelle about the good and bad times and even sheds tears. It would seem that the culture, again mainly the African American culture, wanted to educate their young people about their past. They saw the youth as sponges to absorb all that they could receive.

The best person to disseminate that knowledge was another black person. Annabelle remarked to herself, “I wonder if there is any such thing as a colored fairy? Surely there must be, but in this book they’re all white” (Johnson 175). As aforementioned, she was reading the Brothers Grimm, and the text says that she enjoyed the stories, but she did not learn a life lesson until she had an encounter with a black fairy. She had most likely been reading about white

fairies since she learned to read, and yet she had not had a life-changing experience like she had when experiencing life with the black fairy. This story gives off the impression that black children can receive pleasure and entertainment from outside of their culture, but the real lessons come from within and they are more real than just words on a page.

The call to action at the end of this story is one of great weight. The black fairy Amunophis basically puts the burden of bringing the races together on the shoulders of Annabelle if she wishes to see the last picture and her again. From this mantle placed upon the nine-year-old, it shows that society sees children as the key to changing the future to treat everyone of every race with brotherly love. The task at hand may seem overwhelming or impossible to young people at the moment, but the earlier that they are made aware of it the more time they will have to work on changing society as they become adults.

CONCLUSION

Looking at older texts really can help to teach about the past. Thinking about what the people of another era found interesting opens doors to beliefs that they held as well. Analyzing [*The Black Fairy*](#) proved that fact. Every aspect--using Lerer, looking at the historical and cultural context, and examining the cultural work--showed how society viewed young people. This fantasy story truly helped children of this era to understand the history of slavery and encourage feelings of brotherly love among all races.

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