

4-1-2013

Analysis of a Colonial Alphabet Book

Zoha Khatoon
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.

Zoha Khatoon

April 9, 2013

English 4710-101

Dr. Sarah Wadsworth

Analysis of a Colonial Alphabet Book

During the nineteenth century, the Romantic Movement was in full bloom in England and in America. Traces of this movement are apparent in the Victorian era, as well as in the literature of that time period. Many view the Victorian period as the “golden age of children’s literature” due to its strong flourishing of books for children. Moreover, the influence of Romanticism in the Victorian era can be portrayed through the ideas of the child as innocent, the child of nature, the ministering child, feminized spirituality, and the redemptive child (“Children’s Literature and Child Life in the Age of Victoria” 6-7). Romanticism put significant emphasis on nature. Nature is seen as pure and divine, just like the Romantic idea of childhood. Furthermore, a popular genre during the nineteenth century was the alphabet book. Alphabet books were used to educate children on the basic letters of the English language. The children’s book [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) was published in the year 1880 in London. This book was published under the genre of alphabet rhymes and poetry. An appealing poetic approach is used to unfairly educate children on England’s world dominance during the nineteenth century. Additionally, the [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) utilizes the theme of nature to portray the implicit messages of the superiority of Great Britain.

In the [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) nature is displayed in the majority of images. Various animals and people are presented standing outside in the vast, open landscape. Nature encompasses each of the main subjects in the illustrations; therefore, it can be viewed as a

recurring theme in this book. The environment serves as a background to help draw attention to the main focus of the pictures. For example, the letter “L” stands for “...the Lighthouse with lantern so clear / To show ships at sea the safe way to steer” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 3). This verse is using nature as a tool to highlight the central subject, which is the lighthouse. This is also present in the picture, which displays a lighthouse with a body of water surrounding it and crashing into its sides. Since the sea is represented as vast and dangerous, the lighthouse used in conjunction with the body of water not only suggests safety, but also makes the depiction of the sea “safe”. Another example deals with the letter “Q”. In this piece of text the letter “Q” represents “...the Quadruped gentle and mild / In the Indian jungle where Lions run wild” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 6). In this phrase nature is being linked to freedom because it is stating how in the jungle the lion has the ability to run wild and freely, allowing it to have freedom and act independently. Moreover, the depiction of nature reveals information about the relationship of the child to nature. The images portray nature as clean, simple, lively, pure, and safe. The color used to represent the landscape is bright green for the grass and trees, deep blue for the ocean and rivers, and pure white for the snow. These colors flamboyantly expose each of the elements of nature, and that allows for the relationship between the child and nature to be revealed. The child is able to trust nature, and use it as a safe haven. The child can also find his or her freedom and independence in nature. The bright colors used in this book help to define nature as lively and youthful, and that is how the child can relate to nature. The child may see his or her own characteristics in nature, allowing him or her to relate to it to a larger extent. This book allows for the child to easily connect with nature, and that is due to the text’s use of poetry and colorful images.

Moreover, the [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) takes part in responding to its historical and cultural context. This book was written during the Victorian era, when there was still the influence of the Romantic Movement. This is apparent in the text because the book uses the concept of the child of nature, and that is a Romantic idea. Throughout this piece of literary work there are multiple examples of nature, such as the sentence describing the letter “D”. The letter “D” stands for “...a Diamond a digger once found / At the Cape of Good Hope buried deep in the ground” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 2). This phrase deals with the concept of nature because it is referring to the ground and how diamonds, which are made in nature, can be found there. This example relates to children because often they play by seeking adventure and going on treasure hunts, where usually gold and silver are buried deep in the ground. Thus, a child reader is able to view these examples and relate them to his or her own life. This creates a connection between the child and nature, which shows how this book responds to the Romantic Movement.

Additionally, the text reveals information about how the culture of the nineteenth century regarded children, childhood, and the role they play in society as a whole. The children were viewed as innocent beings that had to rely heavily upon their elders for guidance. This led them to believe the misconceptions that were taught to them by their elders. For instance, the letter “J” is described as “...the Junk that goes sailing along / And takes to Old England the goods of Hong Kong” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 3). This depiction is teaching the children to associate all goods that come from Hong Kong with “junk” (a type of boat). This fallacy is clearly present in the book, and elders are teaching it to their child readers. The culture during the Victorian era viewed childhood as a time when individuals are at their purest state. Therefore, they are highly gullible and they believe everything that is taught to them. Childhood

is a time for simplicity, livelihood, and the constant sense of feeling safe. It is a period in one's life when there are no pressing issues or worries, and one can live life to the fullest extent with ample happiness and joy. Children did not play a major role in society during this time period. They just lived life in an innocent and pure manner.

The [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) uses a strong approach to teach children not only the letters of the alphabet, but also the influence of Great Britain around the world. At first glance, this book seems like a great educational tool to demonstrate the letters of the alphabet. It includes large depictions of the letters, and thorough drawings that associate respectively with each of the letters. The images are large enough for children to understand their intended meanings, and the pages are filled with color. The pictures utilize vivid colors to make the concepts prominent. Also, aside from the images there are sentences that correspond with the letters. These sentences are simple with ample use of adjectives to help children associate the letters with specific words. Likewise, each of the sentences utilizes words that rhyme to help abridge the ideas behind the letters and the words. The use of rhymes is a powerful technique in this book because it allows the child reader to learn with ease, and it makes it more entertaining for them. The pictures are quite amusing, and they fulfill their purpose of attaining the child's attention. The topics of the drawings are all that a child would be interested in, such as ships, animals, adventure, and different types of people. This book seems like a great educational tool due to its vast usage of rhymes and colorful illustrations; however, with an intense focus one can clearly observe the underlying assumptions made to show Great Britain as a superior world power.

Furthermore, a deepened glance reveals that this book contains many harsh judgments and stereotypes. It almost ridicules the individuals of the various cultures by portraying them in a very negative and stereotypical manner. For example, the sentence representing the letter "H"

can be viewed as offensive to the Hindus. In this book, the “H” stands for “...the Hindoo with queer little drum / His music is nothing but tum-ti-tum-tum” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 3). This phrase is somewhat degrading the Hindu population because it is teaching children to view this group of people as uneducated individuals who solely know how to play the drums and make artless music. The youth are being told that the Hindus only know how to make weak sounds with no complex meaning. Also, the image that corresponds to this sentence shows a frail, dark skinned, elderly man who is sitting on the grass and playing a drum. This image is stereotypical because it gives the idea that all Hindus are dark skinned, uneducated, and only know how to play the drums while making odd sounds. Another example of how this book mocks people of different cultures can be seen in the sentence for the letter “I”. The letter “I” stands for an “...Indian savage, with club or with bow / He fights, and in war is a very fierce foe” ([*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) 3). This phrase is humiliating the Native Americans by stating that they are savages, and that they only know how to fight and use weaponry. The image that parallels this letter displays a dark-skinned man with a grim smile, wearing a headpiece and traditional tribal clothing. The man is also holding a bow and arrow, which suggests that he is eager to participate in war. This picture can give the wrong impression to young children by teaching them that all Native Americans are violent people, who always dress in tribal clothing, and live as savages in the wilderness. Thus, this piece of children’s literature uses the theme of nature and a poetic approach to display the implicit messages that England is the superior world power.

In addition, the text displays Great Britain in a different light than it does for other countries. England is portrayed in a positive light, and this is obvious from the verses and pictures used to describe Great Britain and its citizens. The British folk in this book are shown

without any stereotypes. In fact, this group of people and their culture are rendered with pride. This can be viewed through the examples that are present throughout the book. For instance, the letter “P” stands for “...a Patriot so proudly he stands /And plants Britain’s flag in all the Queen’s lands” ([Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery](#) 6). This phrase is showing superiority in favor of England. It is implying that the British are the greatest and most powerful beings, and it plays with the assumption that England has the right to plant its “flag” on other lands. This idea of supremacy enables the mechanisms of imperialism. The image that relates to the letter “P” is of a young, healthy-looking man, who is holding Great Britain’s flag while in a tall, satisfied stance. The picture also gives the idea that Britain is all-powerful because it utilizes a young, heroic man. The other representations of some of the letters use old, dark-skinned men, who are wearing somewhat outlandish clothing. These odd-looking men are used to describe the letters that correspond with the words that seem offensive and stereotypical. The theme of nature is utilized in this example by the means of the image. It seems as though the man is standing in a vast field, encompassed by the open ground and sky, and this sends the message that nature is helping England gain superiority over the other world powers. In a way the alphabet book “naturalizes” the idea of British dominance. Another example pertains to the letter “W”. The book uses this letter to state, “A West India Planter is he / Who sends us our cotton and sugar by sea” ([Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery](#) 7). This sentence contains the underlying message that those who help Britain are worthy and respectable, and its equivalent image also enforces this idea. The illustration is of a middle-aged man standing on farmland with plants behind him. The male seems Caucasian, and he is wearing decent clothing that is appropriate for the scene. The theme of nature is used in this description through the usage of the cotton, sugar, and sea. The use of raw materials in this image shows as though the purpose of the other parts of the world is

to provide England with valuable resources, while England takes advantage of these helpless countries. Also, the man in the picture is standing on grass in the middle of a farm, which draws focus on the recurring theme of nature. This phrase and its depiction help interpret the central goal of this book, which is that Great Britain is a dominant power. The use of drawings, poetry, and the theme of nature are used to educate children of this main idea.

Thus, the [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#) develops the theme of nature to express the implicit messages of the superiority of Great Britain. An appealing poetic approach is utilized to unfairly educate children on England's world dominance during the nineteenth century. This book was written during the Victorian era. At this time children's literature was in full bloom, and many new books were published that were geared toward the child audience. In this genre of books, the ideas from the Romantic Movement are present. This mainly includes portraying the child as innocent, and creating a relationship between the child and nature. This book, the [*Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*](#), uses many techniques to help display the central message that Great Britain is a very powerful and dominant nation. This piece of text uses the recurring theme of nature and the poetic style of writing to help educate children on this topic. By using these useful literary devices, children are able to grasp the main concept with slightly more ease. Several of the sentences that correspond to the various letters are offensive, degrading, and stereotypical to many populations. Even the images take part in enforcing the unfair stereotypes. This gives the wrong impression to young child readers, who are innocent and will accept and believe anything that they are told. Hence, this book is easily able to manipulate children into believing that England is superior to the other nations of this world. Although Britain may be more financially independent with a larger organized form of government, it does not mean that they are a better country. The country does not entirely define the individuals residing there;

therefore, it is not fair to judge the citizens of other nations solely by what they may seem like from the outside. Furthermore, it is especially wrong to teach children these misconceptions in order to make Great Britain seem superior to the rest of the world.

Works Cited

- Goode Bros. *Colonial Alphabet For The Nursery*. London: Goode Bros., 1880. *University of Florida Digital Collections*. Web. 3 Mar. 2013. <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00025026/00001>
- Lerer, Seth. "Ill-Tempered and Queer." *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008. 190-208. Print.
- Wadsworth, Sarah. "Children's Literature and Child Life in the Age of Victoria." PowerPoint Presentation for English 4710. Marquette University. Spring 2013.
- . "Romanticism and Childhood." PowerPoint Presentation for English 4710. Marquette University. Spring 2013.