

Midterm essay - childrens literature essay sample

[Health & Medicine](#), [Alcoholism](#)



Children's literature can have many purposes - they are often used to entertain, to delight, and to spark imagination. Many are also used to provide children with useful lessons for proper behavior and desirable attitudes. However, one additional benefit that children's literature has is its unique method of discussing adult topics and subjects in front of children in a way that does not offend the status quo, or introduces it to them too harshly. At the turn of the twentieth century, three stories in particular were particularly useful in conveying adult messages to their audience - " Uncle Remus," " Rip Van Winkle," and " The Happy Prince." The Uncle Remus stories help to discuss the often-sensitive topic of slavery by presenting an oft-considered offensive portrayal of African Americans; the Rip Van Winkle story discusses the evils of alcoholism and idleness; and " The Happy Prince"'s subject matter heavily involves notions of sacrifice and death. These children's stories couch these heavy themes in positivity and subtle metaphor, so that the message themselves are conveyed with a certain level of elegance and sophistication.

Uncle Remus

Joel Chandler Harris' " Uncle Remus" stories, whether intentional or not (since this is debatable), tackle the subject of racism through the author's depiction of the narrator of these fables and their arguably racist content. The narrator, Uncle Remus, is an exaggerated portrait of a plantation-era African-American, complete with negro dialect and his love of didactic folklore. Many of these stories revolve around Brer Rabbit, a precocious animal with a tendency for trickery; the connection of these stories with this narrator lends the stories their own racial connotation. Often, through the

placing of the subject of their ire into anthropomorphized bodies like animals (or, as we see in Wilde's work, golden statues), they can use metaphor more clearly while still hiding the message that these stories are about people.

For example, in one story Brer Fox attempts to catch Brer Rabbit by creating a literal "tar baby" with clothing, in the hopes of fooling Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit sees the tar baby, "en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished" (Harris). Upon engaging the baby in conversation, only to be met with silence, Brer Rabbit punches the tar baby and becomes stuck in the mud. This type of story allows for innocent fun to be presented to a child, while more adult connotations of racism and racial violence are portrayed. The 'tar baby' is a subtle epithet for a black man, which is suddenly portrayed as being troublesome and uncooperative. This kind of story perfectly illustrates how children's authors hid messages about race or other adult themes in metaphors and fun stories about animals and the like.

The Otherization of African-Americans is very clear in the Deep South Negro dialect that is given to Uncle Remus, in which words are spelled out phonetically in order to guide the reader toward hearing the thick accent. In the bookend sections, Harris writes clearly and accurately, as if to further distance himself and the overarching narrative voice from that of Remus'. This places the author above the character somewhat, and sends the (troublesome) message that Remus' speech is somehow lower or more 'quaint' in comparison. The use of dialect and odd writing and dialogue styles is one way to portray troublesome depictions of characters in a way that

hides it from children; kids may not get it, but adults might potentially pick up on this very intentional use of dialect.

With Washington Irving's short story " Rip Van Winkle," the author found a way to provide a cautionary tale to children of the dangers of alcoholism, and the negative consequences of idleness. The titular character, in essence, is a drunk whose inactivity can be directly related to his own unhappy marriage and life. Rip Van Winkle, at the beginning of the story, minces no words in expressing his displeasure at being hen-pecked so much by his wife; " his wife kept continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family. Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was incessantly going" (Irving). Here, the author is making plain to children the reasoning behind Rip's distance and lackadaisical nature toward life; it is a coping mechanism to help him deal with feeling so powerless and beaten down by his shrewish wife. " Times grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle as years of matrimony rolled on; a tart temper never mellows with age, and a sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener by constant use" (Irving). Rip Van Winkle is non-confrontational by nature, and so he simply avoids his wife and marriage in order to pursue strict idleness.

Irving uses Rip's unique situation to show the dangers of drinking and of idleness. Due to his being sick of his wife's nagging, he lets the farm fall to pieces because he chooses not to do anything but sit around and smoke. One day, instead of dealing with his unpleasant wife, he goes into the mountains with his dog, Wolf, where he finds a group of men who are just

like him - sitting around, playing games and drinking liquor. Rip is noted to be a fan of liquor, and there is the implication that he drinks it often: " He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught" (Irving). However, this drinking instead puts him into a deep sleep, causing him to miss everyone he ever knew. He wakes up in a world he does not know, and even after he becomes used to it, he does not change his habits.

Despite this treatise on idleness and alcoholism, Rip Van Winkle is also shown as an idealistic figure; this idleness is shown as a wonderful dream, as he manages to escape the horrors of the Revolutionary War. In this way, Irving provides a pacifist message in the wake of American nationalism and patriotism, stating that the perfect world would be one in which war could simply be skipped. The changing of George Washington's portrait in place of King George's portrait being one of the only changes Rip really notices is Irving's way of noting the insignificant changes that America experienced under its change of leadership. These unique messages are shown through this magical fable, where Irving uses the plot device of a magical time-traveling alcohol-induced coma to comment on overt idleness in unhappy, hen-picked men, who also manage to avoid the horrors of war.

Oscar Wilde's short story " The Happy Prince" tackles the uniquely difficult and adult subject of death and destitution by showing a literal symbol of youth and wealth (both attributes associated with vitality and life) become dead over the course of the story. However, this is not presented as a sad thing; though it is undoubtedly tragic, Wilde presents the gradual destruction

of the Prince as a sacrificial move; he gives of himself so that the poor people around him, who are all suffering, may live better lives and be happy.

One of the more depressing and heavy themes presented in "The Happy Prince" is the notion that, whether rich or poor, many men are not happy. The Prince, all decked out in gold with sapphires and a giant red ruby, is surrounded by the destitute masses, who are all incredibly sad because they cannot improve their own living conditions. This contrast is shown by Wilde to illustrate just how important money has become to people, despite being unimportant to the overall quest for happiness: people believe he is happy because of his outward appearance and his riches, but he is in fact as despondent as everyone else. Here, Wilde explores the divide between monetary wealth and true happiness, noting that even the rich will die some day; this is a hard truth that is couched in metaphor by having the rich prince be a statue forced to confront his ignorance of his people. The destitution of these people can no longer be held at a distance, and he understands the fight for survival these people endure; "now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep" (Wilde).

Wilde, in his tackling of the subject of death, manages to sugarcoat the subject by having the characters' deaths mean something, and literally depict their entering into Heaven. This is a direct consequence of his own sacrifices, as he makes the Sparrow remove parts of him to give to others. With this, Wilde tells children that there is something that can be done to

help those who are in need, and the existence of misery means that people must take action: " you tell me of marvelous things, but more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and of women" (Wilde). To that end, Wilde shows children the importance of sacrifice, even if it means one's own existential demise.

In conclusion, children's story authors use a variety of techniques inherent to children's literature to discuss taboo or adult topics of the day. Harris uses cute animal stories and sharp use of dialect to make statements about racism in his Uncle Remus stories. Irving shows the journey of Rip van Winkle to both show the irresponsible nature of alcoholism, shrewish marriages and idleness, as well as the lack of change that occurred in American after the Revolutionary War. Finally, Wilde's Happy Prince shows the equal level of unhappiness that is felt by both rich and poor alike, and offers a happy ending to offset the fact that the prince has died through virtue of sacrifice. All of these tactics and more are used to sneak in themes of economics, race and politics that are far too adult for children to fully understand.

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