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A Child’s Optimism

In every piece of classic girl’s fiction, there exists a specific conflict between the adults and children. Interestingly enough, the same conflict is present in both *Pollyanna and Pollyanna Grows Up* by Eleanor Porter, as well as *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Both of the authors focus on the conflict between adults and children in the novels, where the children attempt to bring optimism into the lives of those around. However, when they do this they a met with much opposition from the adults surrounding them that are filled with a strong sense of contagious pessimism. Children in each of the books struggle to make others think more positively about unhappy circumstances. As a result, they end up being able to heal several individuals from physical illness and injury. Like with other classic literature written for girls, it might seem as though the authors highly favor the children in this conflict, but there is much more complexity to the argument. Both *Pollyanna* and *The Secret Garden* show the attitudes and children being clearly triumphant over those of adults. However, *Pollyanna Grows Up* shows the other side of the argument, and it even ends up justifying the frequent pessimism of adults by showing how optimism can be limited by life’s harsh realities such as severe poverty and death.

In her book *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk*, Lois Keith discusses how characters throughout classic girl’s fiction go through the similar process of being healed from injury and illness and also discusses the conflicting ideas between adults and children. Relating to her discussion of *The Secret Garden,* Keith attributes the main conflict in *The Secret Garden* to be the children’s attempt to “gain freedom from the stifling world of adults—servants and housekeepers mostly—whose idea of child-rearing is already old fashioned” (Keith121). Keith also states that *The Secret Garden* is quite similar to *Pollyanna* because in both novels the adults try to stifle the freedom of children. “ Aunt Polly’s stifling ‘sense of duty’ does not include giving Pollyanna a real place of her own within the house, nor the freedom to play outside, as in *The Secret Garden*” (Keith 146). Furthermore, Keith discusses how the philosophies of ‘New Thought’ influenced Burnett’s writing of *The Secret Garden.* The ‘New Thought” held the idea that “there were forces inside and outside of the human body which could be harnessed to cure mental and physical illness”(Keith 119-120). Ultimately, the “restorative powers of the open air” and the children creating their own world free of adults inside The Secret Garden is what heals Collin (Keith 95). While Keith discusses both the role of positive thinking and the conflict between adults and children in *The Secret Garden,* she seems to be missing the fact that the two ideas are directly connected to one another. In this paper, I will argue that freedom is not the main issue between adults and children in Porter and Burnett’s novels like Keith states, but rather their battle between pessimism and optimism about life is.

There are numerous pieces of evidence that show that freedom is not the main conflict between adults and children throughout *The Secret Garden*, *Pollyanna*, and *Pollyanna Grows Up.* Although Keith states that Mary and Colin are “children who have no freedom from the adults around them, who are kept shut inside and who are chaperoned everywhere”, there is much textual evidence that goes against this idea (Keith 125). Both of the novels show the children roaming about of their own with little supervision by adults. Colin “could have anything he asked for and was never made to do anything he did not like to do” (Burnett 141). Therefore, the only person that is actually limiting Colin’s freedom and hindering his exploration of the world outside of his bedroom is his own self. Both Mary and Colin fail to have a strong adult presence in their life that is guides their behavior, with Mary being an orphan and Colin having an dead mother and absent father for almost the entire novel. They frolic outdoors freely without supervision and are even able to open locked gate to the garden. Colin’s father had ordered that the garden be closed upon the death of his wife, but Mary is able to go against this order and open it without any adults knowing about it besides Ben Weatherstaff, the groundskeeper of the mansion. Pollyanna’s freedom is also not as limited as Keith would suggest. While Aunt Polly might seem to want to limit Pollyanna’s freedom at first, Pollyanna certainly is not confined to the house and gains more freedom to roam about town as Aunt Polly warms up to her. Early in the novel, Pollyanna shows that she does not feel confined by her aunt’s rules when she climbs out her window. Although Pollyanna ends up telling a worker in the house named Nancy what she did, Aunt Polly never finds out that Pollyanna has done this. Additionally, Pollyanna is given the freedom to leave the house so that she can visit Mrs. Snow and Mr. Pendleton. Clearly, freedom is not the main issue between adults and children in these novels. But while the argument that freedom is a major discrepancy between adults and children does not hold, there is much evidence that supports the presence of another conflict.

In *The Secret Garden*, the characters Mary and Dickon are able to transform the life of Colin by their insistence that he think more positively. Colin has been sick since his birth and informs Mary that no one believes that he will live long. “He said it as if he was accustomed to the idea that it had ceased to matter to him at all” (Burnett 141). Despite the fact that Colin can have anything and do anything he wishes to because the adults are obliged to follow his every command, he appears to be anything but happy because of his fixation on the idea that he is going to die soon. No one seems to do anything to change this, until Mary befriends Colin and tries to change his perspective. “Don’t let us talk about dying; I don’t like it. Let us talk about living” (Burnett 160). After Mary says this, the two children talk and laugh with one another. “And they laughed so in the end they were making as much noise as if they had been two ordinary healthy natural ten-year old creature –instead of a hard, little, unloving girly and a sickly boy who believed he was going to die (Burnett 160-1). Colin feels great after this incident and seems to forget about his bad back. However, Colin’s doctor, Dr. Craven, is displeased when he finds Mary and Colin together. “ I am afraid there has been too much excitement. Excitement is not good for you, my boy.” (Burnett 162). Dr. Craven refuses to see that Colin’s condition seems to have improved after spending time with Mary, and immediately counters Mary’s positivity with negativity. He gives warning to Colin that “he must not talk too much; he must not forget that he was ill” (Burnett 162). This incident directly shows the strong conflict between the optimism of children and the pessimism of adults. However, in the end, it is clear that children’s optimism is favored.

Once Mary offers Colin a taste of what actually “living” feels like, he is determined to continue doing so, and it ends up resulting in his ultimate healing. Despite the fact the Colin says that he hates fresh air, Mary gets Colin to step outside of his comfort zone and give being outdoors a chance. Mary’s friend Dickon even gets Colin to walk when he helps realize that the only thing that is keeping him from walking is his fear. “ When tha’ stops bein’ afraid tha’lt stand on ‘em, an’ tha’lt stop bein’ afraid in a bit” (Burnett 234). In more simplified words, “ Colin cannot walk because he believe he cannot walk” (Keith 127)> Mary also instills Colin with confidence by saying “ He can do it! He can do it! He can do it! He can!” when Ben Weatherstaff calls Colin a cripple (Burnett 238). With Mary and Dickon’s encouragement and his determination to prove Ben wrong, Colin walks for the first time. Even after this major accomplishment for Colin, Dr. Craven gives no congratulations and is still quite negative about Colin’s health. He cautions Colin that he “ should not have stayed so long”, because he must not “overexert himself” (Burnett 247). Dr. Craven even goes as far as to say that he will not allow Colin to visit the garden again tomorrow, but Colin is determined to do what he wishes and for the first time he wishes to do something proactive. “ I am not going to be a poor thing. I won’t let people think I’m one” (Burnett 248). Finally, Dr. Craven can no longer ignore the tremendous progress in Colin’s health and when Mrs. Medlock suggests that Colin are “growing fat” on laughter, Dr. Craven adds, “Perhaps they are. Let them laugh” (Burnett 275). Finally, one of the most negative and stubborn adults in the novel is able to welcome the fact that the two children have benefited each other in a short period more than he ever did for Colin for years. Burnett’s strong belief in positive thinking and its incredible powers can be best seen in the following passage:

So long as Colin shut himself up in his room and though only of his fears and weaknesses and his detestation of people who looked at him and reflected hourly on humps and early death, he was a hysterical half-crazy little hypochondriac who knew nothing of sunshine and the spring and also did not know that he could get well and could stand upon his feet if he tried to do it. When new beautiful thoughts began to push the old hideous ones, life began to come back to him (Burnett 297).

This passage shows how Colin would have continued to be ill so long as he and the people around him were so completely negative about his circumstances.

Unlike *The Secret Garden, which* strongly favors a child’s way of thinking, both *Pollyanna* and *Pollyanna Grows Up* work together to better show both sides of the conflict in thinking patterns between the two age groups. Dr. Craven’s hopelessness regarding Colin ‘s illness did nothing to benefit Colin’s situation, while Mary and Dickon instill him with the confidence and were able to transform him into a boy who “ walked strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire” (Burnett 312). *Pollyanna* is quite similar to *The Secret Garden,* because Pollyanna is able to unfailingly benefit the lives of each person that she meets with her positive attitude. However, *Pollyanna Grows Up* shows places where optimism is not successful.

Upon reading *Pollyanna,* it is easy to come to the conclusion that Porter is critiquing the common pessimism that many adult hold about life, just like Burnett did in *The Secret Garden*. In the novel, the adults that Pollyanna meets are filled with negativity. Generally, “Pollyanna has a much better sense of what children need to be happy than do the adults around her”, and she also seems to have a better sense of what adults need to be happy as well (Keith 145). Pollyanna struggles to introduce positive thinking and the concepts of the glad game into their lives and is met with much resistance. Mrs. Snow, a character who is bed ridden and sickly, quickly questions Pollyanna’s idea that she should have anything to be glad about in her condition. “Be glad about things—when you’re sick in bed all your days?”(Pollyanna 67). However, Pollyanna is persistent and it eventually pays off. Mrs. Snow starts to incorporate the glad game into her life despite the fact that, “she had been sorry for everything for so long, that is was not easy to be glad for anything now” (Pollyanna 88). One of the town doctors, Dr. Chilton, sees the miraculous effect that Pollyanna has had on Mrs. Snows health and is confident that she might also be beneficial to helping Mr. Pendelton, a man who has been hit by a car. “That girl is better than a six-quart bottle of tonic any day. If anybody can take the grouch out of Pendleton this afternoon, she can” (Pollyanna 119). In the end, the game ends up helping to heal both the injury and illness that the two characters face. This shows that adults can surpassingly benefit from a positive view of life that can instinctively be seen as childlike.

Due to the fact that *Pollyanna* was tremendously successful, it is quite surprising that Porter decided to take *Pollyanna Grows Up* in an entirely different direction than the first book. *Pollyanna* was an instant success both in America and internationally, selling over a million copies in just the first year of its publication (Eleanor Hodgman Porter). After this success, it would be assumed that Porter might stick to the same mold as *Pollyanna* in order to achieve similar stress. However, Porter decided to take a risk in the second book and even goes against many of the first book’s ideas. Instead of writing a second book where Pollyanna charms just about every person she meets and whose glad game is a fix to even the most serious of problems, Porter writes a book where the game fails and her main character isn’t always so positive about life.

*Pollyanna Grows Up* seems to contradict some of the ideas of the first book by putting limits on just how beneficial positive thinking can be and even justifies some of the negativity and pessimism that is held by adults. Instead of finding only things to be glad about in the world around her, Pollyanna more things to be upset about. Yes, the glad game is still seen being successful in the novel, but it is met with significantly more difficultly than in *Pollyanna*. In the sequel, Pollyanna grows older and is able to explore a world outside the narrow confines of Beldingsville, Vermont. When Pollyanna goes to live with a woman named Mrs. Carew in Boston, she exposed to the harsh realities of city life. Pollyanna befriends an impoverished boy named Jamie that she meets in the park and is beyond shocked when she sees the environment in which he lives. Following the sequence of the first book, we would expect Pollyanna to find something rather ridiculous that Jamie could be glad about in this situation, but she seems to be at a loss. Pollyanna wonders he could “ever play the game here at all”, because she “didn’t suppose there could be anywhere such a perfectly awful place to live” (Pollyanna *Grows Up* 110). However, Jamie quickly explains to Pollyanna that there actually are people living in worse conditions than he is. Pollyanna is completely baffled by this entire situation. “For the first time in her life, Pollyanna had come face to face with real poverty. She knew people who did not have enough to ear, who wore ragged clothing, and who lived in dark, dirty, and very tiny rooms” (*Pollyanna Grows Up* 118). Since she is so distraught by this experience, Pollyanna decides that she must do something to help these people. Still, Pollyanna comes to the realization that she is only able to a handful of people on her own and that helping Jamie was a, “mere drop in the bucket”, because there so many people on the streets that also seemed to be in need of help (*Pollyanna Grow Up* 118).

Still anything but glad, the book also finds flaw in the only cure to the problem of poverty: charity. The book discusses how throwing money at society’s issues is simply not enough to them. This problem is addressed when Mrs. Murphy, turns down help from Mrs. Carew but accepts it from her friends at the beginning of the novel because she is doing it as an act of charity. “Help from friends ain’t charity. They CARE; and that makes a difference”(Pollyanna *Grows Up* 112). Another friend of Pollyanna’s, Sadie Dean, also verbalizes the main problem with charity in a conversation with Mrs. Carew; “those good women never seem to put the real HEART and INTEREST into the preventin’ that they do into the rescuin’” (*Pollyanna Grow Up* 141). In the end, the only solution to be effective in the act of charity seems to be to make the act more personal instead and to try and develop relationships with the people they are trying to help. Despite the fact that Pollyanna is proactive and trying her best to help those around her, her mind cannot be settled about the issue of severe poverty.

I don’t see how you can find anything about this poor-people business to be glad for. Of course we can be glad for ourselves that we aren’t poor like them; but whenever I’m thinking how glad I am for that, I get so sorry for them that I CAN’T be glad any longer (Pollyanna Grows Up 120).

Overall, while a seemingly unattainable solution to poverty is given, it still persists till the very end of the book, proving that the glad game is not a cure to all.

We see the glad game fail once again through the character of Aunt Polly. Aunt Polly was successful in playing the glad game in the first novel, has significant trouble playing the glad game in the second after her husband died bringing both grief from the loss and financial struggles. Aunt Polly “ played the game now so seldom” that Pollyanna began to wonder “if she herself always played it, when she might” (Pollyanna Grows Up 241). This shows that once again Pollyanna is accepting of the fact that some people have legitimate circumstances that prevent the glad game from being a quick fix to their problems Scholar Alice Mills explains Aunt Polly’s experience with the glad game well when she says “ the glad game is a set of crutches rather than a cure” and that Aunt Polly’s “transformation is temporary and depends on outside supports for its continuation”(Mills 92). Aunt Polly shows the reader that there are limitations the glad game and that it is not one hundred percent full proof.

Although the first and second book’s in the *Pollyanna* series have distinct differences, they end in very similar ways. Even after seeing significantly more hardship and suffering in the lives of those around her, Pollyanna’s positive spirit is seriously challenged, but it is never completely lost. The first novel ends with a letter from Pollyanna to her Aunt Polly and Uncle Tom. Near the end of the book, Pollyanna states, “ Oh, I am so glad! I’m glad for everything”(Pollyanna 247). The second novel ends with an almost identical statement in a conversation with her love interest Jimmy. “ I am glad, GLAD, GLAD for—everything, now!” (Pollyanna Grows Up 296). Upon closer look at the differences in the punctuation and specific word choice of these statements, the seemingly similar sentences are quite different from one another and once again show the main difference in the theme of the two novels. The pause in the second statement before the word “everything” seems to show that Pollyanna has a little bit of doubt in what saying. Also, the addition of the word “ now” at the end of the statement implies that there were periods before when she wasn’t so glad. In general, this minute difference shows that positivity is indeed favored to get through life, but it is impossible and unrealistic to maintain in all situations.

The role of positive thinking in *The Secret Garden,* Pollyanna, and *Pollyanna Grows Up* is something that cannot be ignored when discussing each of the novels, even on an individual basis. Previous scholars have discussed this concept, yet they have failed to identify it in relation to being the main conflict between the adults and the children in the novels*. Pollyanna* and *The Secret Garden* successfully explore this argument, but ultimately *Pollyanna Grows Up* is more true to real life in its presentation of conflict because it shows both sides of the argument. Positivity doesn’t always serve as “magic” or a “tonic” to cure all life’s problems. But in the end, all the novels still show that children deserve more credit than they are given by adults. Their optimism might not be applicable and extremely helpful in every situation, but that does not mean that it isn’t beneficial under other circumstances. Perhaps in the battle between children’s optimism and adult’s pessimism, neither side is a winner, but instead the solution to the conflict is meeting in the middle and understanding both sides of the argument.

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