

Passive Empathy/ Active Complicity?: Registering Responses to The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850
in *The Youth's Companion*

The Youth's Companion, a United States children's periodical that began its run in the first half of the nineteenth century and continued to be published in the early part of the twentieth century, contains articles about many topics that intersect with activism and reform, including temperance, immigration, abolition, nationalism and nativism, and universal suffrage. Although the periodical claims to avoid all kinds of sectarianism, political and religious, in the content it publishes, throughout its run, non-fiction articles, editorial statements, anecdotes, poetry, and fiction contain details that register political and social changes in the United States and reflect the sectarian attitudes of the writers and the editors of the periodical. This paper will explore pieces in issues published 1849 and 1851 that comment explicitly and implicitly on The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and will investigate how the pieces describe active responses of adults who are complicit with the act or involved in resistance efforts. This paper will also explore how *The Youth's Companion* positions readers to respond to stories about enslavement, pursuit of runaways, abolition, and the possible expansion of slavery into areas beyond the southern states. It will explore the ways in which empathy becomes an inactive and sometimes complicit position in response to laws that writers, readers, and editors of the children's periodical identify as immoral or unjust. As an extension of this specific study of one children's periodical from the mid-nineteenth century, this paper will ask questions about encouraging and promoting empathy as a significant and useful response to children's and young adult literature.