

Soap and Water: Children as Colonized and Colonizers in *Youth's Companion*

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, America made seismic shifts in ideas and practices of personal cleanliness. In *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*, Suellen Hoy states, "In 1850, cleanliness in the United States, rural and urban, stood at Third World levels . . . More than four out of five Americans lived in pre-industrial, hygienically primitive situations on small farms or in country villages. Sanitation was not unknown, but the great majority felt no urgency about cleaning up" (3). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, cleanliness had become closely associated with self-respect, moral self-control, and upward mobility (Hoy 100). It had also become part of national identity: Americans prided themselves on their cleanliness, which, in their eyes, distinguished them from "dirty foreigners" (Ashbenburg 200).

As a result of this movement, children's bodies became sites of contest. This was partly because children were increasingly open to public scrutiny, in city streets and in schools, and partly because middle-class reformers saw them as easy converts (Brown 327). Kathleen M. Brown sees this as a form of cultural imperialism: "However genuine the impulse, the missionary zeal to bring godly, civilized cleanliness to the unclean constituted an effort to transform the intimate bodily practices of others . . . bringing them into conformity with a standard imposed by those with legal and economic power" (327). I am interested in how popular literature for children reflects changing ideas of cleanliness and of children's roles as both "colonized" and as "colonizers." Specifically, I focus on *Youth's Companion*, a widely-read children's periodical that ran from 1827-1927. In her essay on coming of age stories at the turn of the century, Laura Apol describes it as "a far-reaching and influential periodical" that "both shaped and was shaped by the culture around it," affecting even those that didn't personally read it (64). My preliminary reading of *Youth's Companion* suggests a wide range in the ways children are constructed with regard to cleanliness. In some stories, children are forcibly removed from dirty and dissolute parents, and learn to embrace moral and physical cleanliness in their new homes. In others, children act as passive catalysts: they are washed by Sunday school or public school teachers, and this inspires the children's families and communities to clean up. In still others, children play an active role in recruiting family members and others to adopt the new standards. Finally, some child characters challenge stereotypes regarding cleanliness: they prove that, in spite (or even because) of dirt, they are exemplary American citizens.

Works Cited

- Apol, Laura. "Tamings and Ordeals: Depictions of Female and Male Coming of Age in the West in Turn-of-the-Century *Youth's Companion*." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24.1 (Jan. 2000): 61-80. Proj. Muse 22 Sep 2017.
- Brown, Kathleen M. *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*. Yale UP, 2009. Print.
- Hoy, Suellen. *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.