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Racism in *The Hole Book*

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Racism in *The Hole Book*

Peter Newell takes the child reader through a short adventure in his story *The Hole Book*. In it, a young boy accidentally fires a gun and the ensuing travels of the bullet are detailed. As the bullet blasts its way through the lives of the people in the story, a literal hole is carved out of the book to show the path of the bullet. On the surface, the story appears to be about the dangers of playing with guns and the consequences that are the result of one's actions. However, as the reader scrutinizes the text more carefully, elusive messages begin to appear in both the language and illustrations of the story. Subtle implications of white supremacy and racism pervade the book and influence the minds of the young readers. *The Hole Book* is clearly shaped by the racial tensions and beliefs of the time period and culture and it is this racism that is projected into the children's literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Hole Book was written during a time when children's literature and other recreational items were being rapidly produced. This was enabled by the advances in technology that sparked a rise in materialism and consumerism (Whitley). The growing middle class enabled leisure to become a major part of life, creating a greater need for books and other sources of entertainment. There was great progress in education, with better educated teachers and more opportunities for students of all ages to attend schools. Children's literature continued to boom with works like *The Wonderful World of Oz*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, and *Peter Pan* all appearing.

Despite the positive outlook of the 20th century and Newell's fun story about the pandemonium caused by a stray bullet, there is a much darker side to *The Hole Book* and the rest of the 20th century. This story appears between the end of the Reconstruction and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. This was a difficult stretch of time that is known as the Jim Crow period. After the Civil War in the United States, Jim Crow Laws appeared that effectively prevented any possibility of equal rights and "created a system that favored whites and repressed blacks" ("Period of Jim Crow"). Laws that suppressed African Americans ran rampant across the country, particularly in Southern states. Nebraska enacted a law that stated that "marriages are void when one party is a white person and the other is possessed of one-eighth or more negro" ("Jim Crow Laws - Separate Is Not Equal"). These, and other similar laws, not only repressed African Americans, but dehumanized them in the eyes of white people who were deemed superior.

This legal system of racial segregation and suppression set the tone for the way society would look at and respond to race for over eighty years until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. *The Hole Book* can be seen as a result of the institutional racism of the time period. It can be identified within literary history as Jim Crow Children's Literature, along with stories like Frances Trego Montgomery's *Billy Whiskers in the South* or Hergé's *Tintin in the Congo*. All three of these works depict African Americans in an unflatteringly stereotypical light that propagates the beliefs held by those enforcing the Jim Crow laws of the 19th and 20th centuries. These stories, meant for child entertainment, also taught deeper lessons about race and white supremacy that enabled racism to flourish, spread, and remain deeply embedded within American society and culture.

There are only two pages within *The Hole Book* that depict African Americans, but these and other pages provide a look into the beliefs and attitudes of white Americans. The section depicting African Americans includes a short text that says:

A watermelon, large and fine,

Was in the kitchen shed;

The bullet drilled a hole through it

As on its way it sped.

"Who plugged dat melon?" mammy cried,

As through the door she came.

"I'd spank de chile dat done dat trick,

Ef I could learn his name. (Newell 27)

This text is accompanied by an illustration on the opposite page. In it, a large African American woman is angrily pointing to a watermelon with the bullet hole running through it. She is yelling at three small African American children who look both sad and scared. The family stands in a small, monochromatic room that is nearly empty, save for the watermelon, a few cooking items on a shelf, a pail, a saw, and white cloth hanging on a hook. It can be assumed that this is their home and that they are poor, based on their clothing and house.

There are many things within this small extract of text and its accompanying illustration that reinforce the racism of the Jim Crow time period. The first involves the use of the mammy archetype, which is referenced in both the name given to the African American woman and the

illustration of her on the accompanying page. The mammy image was created in order to serve the “political, social, and economic interests” of white Americans (Pilgrim). Mammies were depicted as African American women who were happy as slaves and dedicated their lives to being a maternal and devoted figure for a white family; her own children were not nearly as loved by her as her white family’s children. Physically, mammies were always “obese, coarse, maternal” figures who were completely desexualized, therefore making them non-threatening to both white men and women (Pilgrim). The African American shown in *The Hole Book* embodies this archetype. In the illustration, she is shown as a heavy-set woman with overly-exaggerated features that make her visually unappealing. In the text, she is shown yelling at her own children and threatening to “spank” whoever ruined the watermelon (Newell). By using the mammy figure in the novel, Newell is reinforcing the idea that slavery is an ideal situation for both white and black people; the mammy loves serving her white family and has no life outside of her work with them.

The mammy archetype builds upon a much larger and racist stereotype found throughout the Jim Crow time period. This is the stereotype for which the time period got its name. The Jim Crow stereotype was created during the early 19th century when white performers would wear blackface in order to portray African American characters for entertainment. These performers “darkened their faces with burnt cork, painted grotesquely exaggerated white mouths over their own, [and] donned wooly black wigs” (Green). This created the caricature known as Jim Crow, which mocked African Americans in both their appearance and actions. The image in *The Hole Book* of the mammy and her children closely mirrors the “grotesquely exaggerated” features of the Jim Crow character. All of her features exaggerate those stereotypically found in African Americans. Her lips are excessively large and her eyes are much too big. Her children are also

seen with overly large white eyes and thick, light lips. Her nose is flat and spread out and her children have extremely dark skin and short, wooly-looking hair. These images are not positive and do not attempt to depict beauty.

These images sharply contrast those of white people in the book. The first and last images in the story depict a white child and a white woman. The first image shows a young boy firing the gun that begins the journey of the bullet throughout the story. He is shown with soft-looking, dark hair that blows back when he fires the gun. He has white, unblemished skin and a small, button nose. His eyes, though widened in surprise, do not look as large as those of the African American family. The second image depicts a young, newlywed girl who looks at the bullet embedded in her freshly baked cake with surprise. She has delicate, thin fingers that do not look as harsh or claw-like as those of the mammy. She also has a small, petite nose and lips that are thin and subtle on her milky skin. Her hair is pulled back and has a soft, wavy texture.

The white boy and woman demonstrate the beauty that was idealized at the time. They both have the white, European features that were considered attractive and superior to African American features. By emphasizing the features of the African American family and drawing them out to be unappealing and unrealistically grotesque, the illustrator subtly teaches children who can be considered beautiful and who cannot. This was extremely damaging for young African Americans, particularly women. The crippling effects of this outlook sparked the “black is beautiful” phrase coined by the cultural movement of the 1960s aimed at changing the view that natural African American features are inherently ugly. Authors like Toni Morrison allowed this negative view to inspire their writings and undo the damage caused by the negative depictions of African American physical beauty in books like *The Hole Book*. Her novel, *The*

Bluest Eye, specifically looks at the effects of the racism propagated in *The Hole Book* on the self-image of young, African American women.

The physical appearances of the African American family against those of the white people are not the only indicators of racial superiority. The language utilized by the two different races also demonstrates the superiority felt by white people. As the bullet flies through the pages of the story, the reactions of various people are documented. The white people who are affected by the bullets trajectory utter phrases like, “What do you mean, sir...by knocking off my high silk hat” (Newell 18). These phrases, along with the narration, are all said in proper English, devoid of grammatical or pronunciation errors. This is in stark contrast to the phrases uttered by the African American woman. She cries out to know who shot a hole through “dat” melon and threatens to spank “de chile dat done dat trick” (Newell 27). Her English is marred by her pronunciation of words, which is shown through the spelling errors deliberately made by the author.

While on the surface this appears to simply mimic the way African American people stereotypically spoke during this time period, it also has broader implications about intelligence and education. Through the errors she makes in her speech, it is implied that she is not well-educated. This was due to the laws that allowed African Americans to receive inferior education, but would be viewed by white people as the result of the intrinsically inferior intelligence of black people. This perceived lack of intelligence became the study of various racist pseudo sciences of the time, such as eugenics and craniology. Eugenics is the theory and practice of improving the genetic quality of the human population. Proponents of eugenics attempted to prove that white people were biologically superior due to hereditary traits; this also meant that African Americans were naturally inferior due to their own hereditary traits. Craniology is the

study of the shape and size of the skull to determine intelligence, among other things. This allowed alleged scientists to say that African Americans were inferior based upon shared characteristics of their skull shape and size. Neither eugenics nor craniology was capable of scientifically backing the claims made by their proponents, but they did allow for racism to continue and feel scientifically supported for an extended period of time before they were completely refuted.

This simple children's story demonstrates many of the cultural views on children and their relation to race. In one sense, children are seen as the members of society who will carry on the laws, customs, and beliefs that will ensure white superiority. *The Hole Book* teaches children how to think about race, specifically when it deals with the inferiority of African Americans. White children are taught to see themselves as the more refined and intelligent members of society who must maintain the gap between themselves and African Americans. Childhood, therefore, is seen as the stage in which children are not aware of their racial superiority and must be taught about it. The book also shows African American children how they are regarded and valued by the white culture in America. African American children are viewed as ugly and unintelligent when compared to the white children who are treated with more respect and care. They are reminded to view themselves with the same amount of regard that white people have for them. African American children, therefore, are undervalued by society as a whole.

This book and others like it also give people the opportunity to see what was considered harmless and politically correct and compare and contrast it to the views of society today. *The Hole Book* was not initially regarded as a book that deals with issues of race and white supremacy; today, people are horrified by the broad racial stereotypes and white supremacy that can be detected within the pages of the story. This type of racially charged literature is among the

most dangerous due to the audience that it addresses. By targeting the young and malleable minds of children, the story takes on a role that enables it to teach children what to believe about the role of racism within society. Books that fall under Jim Crow Children's Literature only serve to spread the racist beliefs and feelings of the time period by filling the minds of young people with ideas of their own racial superiority and the inferiority of others; they are dangerous for children and for the advancement of society as a whole.

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