

Empathy and Sentiment in Postbellum American Boys' Fiction
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Accounts of postbellum 19th century boyhood typically depend on a few tropes: though ultimately good-hearted, the boy flaunts proprieties, resists the constraints of domesticity, gets into scrapes and then gets himself out of them with native good sense. The persistence of these tropes in scholarly accounts is due in part to the handful of texts that scholars turn to as evidence--the postbellum "boy books" of Aldrich, Howells, Garland, and others, but most particularly the work of Mark Twain. As historian Steven Mintz notes, Huckleberry Finn "has served as a remarkably malleable emblem of childhood" (5).

In this paper, I argue that this now conventional conception of boyhood was not the only one promulgated to boys. By examining a selection of novels by James Otis and Horatio Alger, Jr., both widely read authors of the 1880s, I will sketch an alternative boyhood presented to readers, one that has much in common with the trope of the Angel in the House in that it embraced domesticity, empathy, and sentiment.

My argument will extend the work of Ken Parille and provide a more nuanced account to those offered by Anne Scott MacLeod, Kenneth Kidd, and Sarah Wadsworth, among others. In focusing on authors who were popular during the post-bellum period, the paper will broaden our understanding of the role of popular literature in cultivating models of development for boys, particularly the ways in which empathy and sentiment are as important as courage and athleticism.

Works Cited

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