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Empowering Girls: The Liminal Spaces of Schools in 19th-Century Trans-Atlantic Literature for Girls

In the latter part of the 19th-century, British and American literature for young women and girls highlights how school gave young women access to liberating spaces between the domestic sphere and the wider world. This essay analyzes school spaces in 19th-century Trans-Atlantic literature as liminal space that provided a crucial site of autonomy for young women across racial and national divides. In the U.S., Bildungsromane such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1877) portray schools as liminal sites where women can escape the confines of home and develop an empowered sense of subjectivity. Though Wilson's Frado is a Black indentured servant and Phelps' Avis is privileged white young woman, in school, both learn about themselves removed from the stifling domestic sphere. In England, popular girls' school stories such as Agnes Loudon's "The Moss Rose" (1850) and L. T. Meade's *Betty, A Schoolgirl* (1894) privilege the private, less-regulated spaces of the school as crucial to girls' identity work, reflecting how girls could define and perform scholarship, friendship, and defiance, even as school aimed to train them to adhere to broader cultural norms. Each of these texts feature school spaces as privileged spaces, yet they also challenge the normative representation of school as only a place of book learning, particularly *Our Nig*. While these fictional girls do receive traditional educations, they also use school spaces to test the boundaries that limit girls to the domestic sphere. Thus, these works suggest that, in schools, girls could shape their own experiences and begin to claim their own subjectivities. Overall, throughout this wide range of texts, the 19th-century Anglo-American school is represented as a potentially liberating interstitial space for young women and girls despite its ostensible nature as a disciplined and regimented environment intended to acculturate students.

Biographies

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