

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

British and U.S. literature for young women and girls of the late 19th-century highlight how schools could give girls access to liberating spaces between the domestic sphere and the wider world. In 19th-century school fiction, for girls, the shift from home to school is often portrayed as arduous. Focusing on works by four seemingly disparate authors, Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Agnes Loudon, and L.T. Mead, we argue that schools are liminal spaces that provide a crucial site of autonomy for girls across racial and national divides. In texts by these authors, girls use school spaces to test the boundaries that limit them to the domestic sphere and to engage in personal growth in ways unplanned by adult authority figures. Thus, these works suggest that, 19th-century schoolgirls actively shape their own experiences and claim their own subjectivities. Further, through considering a variety of educational spaces, it becomes clear that the school as a whole can function as liminal spaces. All of these school spaces are similar because they provide an alternative to the domestic sphere, freedom from dominating authority figures or peers, and crucial educational opportunities for girls, including the chance to learn about girls from other backgrounds. Across these diverse educational and liminal spaces, girls develop in autonomous ways: they come to know themselves. Overall, the 19th-century Anglo-American school is represented as a potentially liberating interstitial space for girls despite its ostensible nature as a regimented environment.