

“It’s My Secret”: Swamp Revelations in the Fiction of Eleanor Frances Lattimore

In *Shadow and Shelter*, Anthony Wilson suggests that for antebellum southerners the morally dubious swamp not only posed a threat to aristocratic control, but also presented a danger to the ideals of white southern womanhood (17-18). In this essay, I argue that the children’s fiction of Eleanor Frances Lattimore often investigates the twentieth century inheritance of these beliefs about the swamp. Focusing on her texts which invoke the preparations for, survival of, and aftermath of water-based natural disasters which threaten her child characters’ ways of life, I explicate how these events open up possibilities for transformative encounters and subsequent revelations. Indeed, what distinguishes Lattimore’s narratives rest in how they implement the child’s perspective into the workings of the plantation system to demonstrate that not only do these children divine more than the adults around them ascertain, but that through these swamp encounters, they intuit what others have tried to shelter them from, in order to preserve their purported innocence. Instead, they begin to perceive *through* these occluded histories of racial oppression the foundation upon which the ideal of white innocence that both shields and constrains them is based, as well as precisely what patriarchal authority figures have in mind for their future. In this sense, they use race as a prism through which both their privilege and their own place in the order becomes clear—their futures are tied to and depend upon white adults subduing these histories. These concealed thoughts and experiences, when contrasted with adult characters’ storytelling, formulate a social critique— that these histories must be suppressed in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the plantation order. The child, no longer unaware of these shrouded oppressions, instead comes to understand how s/he is implicated in the order, and begins to comprehend that the ideal of innocence which offers shelter is produced through subordination of other bodies within the southern social matrix.