

“Water of Life”: Charting a Secret History of Alcohol in Cultural Texts of Childhood

Cultural associations between alcohol and water are many. The term whiskey, for instance, was first used in the 18th century and is an abbreviation of *obsolete whiskybae* a variant of the 16th century Irish and Scottish Gaelic *uisge beatha* or “water of life” (“whisky”). This paper charts out how the “water of life” flows through children’s literature and media. Indeed, alcohol features prominently in many texts of childhood, including board books like Lisa Brown’s *Baby, Mix Me a Drink*, literary classics such as L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, comics like the *Moomin* series and animated cartoons such as *The Simpsons*. While these examples suggest alcohol as a familiar feature, its uses and abuses in children’s texts remains an understudied topic.

Expanding on Susan Cheever’s argument that a “secret history” of alcohol defines American society, I consider representations of drinking within cultural texts for and about the child. I trace one strand of this history, how drinking serves as a rite of passage for men and boys, analyzing works such as Tove Jansson’s *Moomin* comics and the animated cartoon series *The Simpsons*. In the popular *Moomin* comics, Moominpappa is consistently represented as a masculine adventurer with a penchant for whiskey, while in *The Simpsons* Bart’s underage drinking works in tandem with Homer’s imbibing to celebrate the merits of childish masculinity. Across these examples, I illustrate how alcohol is the conduit for lessons about gender that complicate easy assumptions about childhood, adulthood, excess, addiction, pleasure, and masculinity.

Works Cited

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