



Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature

Carol J. Singley

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American literature abounds with orphans who experience adoption or placements that resemble adoption. These narratives do more than describe adventures of children living away from home. They tell an American story of family and national identity. In literature from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, adoption functions as narrative event and trope to recount the American migratory experience, the impact of Calvinist faith, and the growth of democratic individualism.

The literary roots of adoption appear in the discourse of Puritan settlers, who ambivalently took leave of their birth country and portrayed themselves as abandoned offspring. Believing they were chosen children of God, they also prayed for spiritual adoption and emulated God's grace by extending adoption to others. Nineteenth-century literature develops from this idea of adoption as salvation and from simultaneous attachments to the Old World and New. In fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, adoption also reflects the importance of nurture in childrearing and the nation's increased mobility. Middle-class concerns over immigration and urbanization appear in the form of orphanhood and are addressed through adoption. For some, adoption signals a fresh start and the opportunity for success without genealogical constraints. Other times, particularly for girls and children of color, it suggests dependence, reflecting contemporary gender and racial biases.

A complex signifier of difference, adoption gives voice to concurrent and sometimes contradictory calls to origins and new beginnings; to feelings of worthiness and unworthiness. In writings from John Winthrop and Cotton Mather to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, and Edith Wharton, Carol Singley reveals how adoption both replicates and challenges genealogical norms, evoking ambivalence and playing a foundational role in the shaping of many of our most dearly held national mythologies.

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