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Civitas 395 Essay: Citizenship and Subversive Children's Literature

How does the topic of subversive children's literature relate to Civitas' mission of citizenship? It may not be immediately apparent how my topic of research relates to citizenship, but our engagement (or lack of engagement) with literature often reflects our involvement with the world around us. Authors write and disseminate their works with the hope that readers will connect with their messages and their way of viewing the world. I would argue that more than any other type of author, authors of subversive children's literature want their messages to be absorbed into the collective consciousness of society and want to challenge a culture's prevailing conservative attitudes. They want people (not just children, their target audience, but adolescents and adults as well) to examine and question how society operates. Through their writing, they encourage their readers to become active citizens—citizens not only of their local communities but citizens of the world in general.

Central to the Civitas program is the exploration of citizenship and what it means to be a citizen. 'Citizenship' can be a localized term referring to the way we are all citizens of communities or certain institutions. For example, I am a citizen of Augustana College and, more generally, a citizen of Sioux Falls. However, I could also say that I am a citizen of Sartell, Minnesota, because this is my home town. I could say I was once a citizen of Stoughton, Wisconsin, or even briefly Edina, Minnesota, where I was born. Because many of us are not stationary and live in different places at different times in our lives, we can all claim citizenship to multiple places. Thus, 'citizenship' is really an all-encompassing term that describes our relationship to all the spaces we occupy and identify with throughout our lives. What is most important to remember is that the spaces we occupy are all microcosms of a much larger space—the world. In this sense, we are all also citizens of the world. Studying literature is important in this respect because literature is a medium that has the potential to communicate to people all over the globe (the *Harry Potter* series

is a prime example of this), so the themes and messages that are explored in literature have the power to shift the perspective of not only individual readers but of whole societies. This is the goal authors of subversive children's literature hope to achieve.

In creating Alice, Tom, and Harry, authors Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, and J.K. Rowling (respectively) provide readers with characters who embody empowerment and initiative. These characters are among the most quintessential and celebrated characters of children's literature. Of all the characters in the field of children's literature (from the mid-1800s to the present), these are characters that have triumphantly withstood the test of time. There is a reason that these characters, not characters like Martha Mary Sherwood's mindless and obedient Fairchild children, are often regarded as some of the best characters ever produced in the field of children's literature. These characters (unlike Sherwood's Henry, Emily, and Lucy) are characters who actively engage in their worlds. They are critical thinkers and are not submissive. When some force or person they encounter is corrupt, they confront and challenge the source of the corruption, even if the source of the corruption is an authority figure. In other words, these characters exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Authors like Carroll, Twain, and Rowling recognized children not as sub-citizens but as citizens on equal level with adults. Their driven, headstrong characters provide a model of empowerment for their readers. Those who feel oppressed, those who lack self-confidence and feel worthless, and most importantly those who feel powerless are reminded when they read these stories that they too have rights and privileges; they too are citizens not only of a local community but of the world, and as such, they should not be made to feel powerless. They have a right to action, a right to advocate for change in the world. In identifying themselves with a character such as Alice or Harry, child readers begin to recognize that they, too, have a voice that shouldn't be suppressed. When adults treat them in an inferior and condescending manner, it can make them feel as if they are second-class citizens. By upending the traditional power relationship between adults and children (adult as powerful superior and child as powerless inferior), subversive

children's literature affirms that children have the same rights as any other citizen and appeals to adults to allow them these rights.

At the risk of further disrupting the formal, impersonal tone of normal academic writing, I think my point about how subversive children's literature can empower children and make them engage more with the world as active citizens may best be served by telling a brief personal story. I grew up with horrible social anxiety. It's always been a part of my life, and when I was young, it made me feel alienated and unaccepted by my peers. Because of my social anxiety, I lacked self-confidence, and I felt inferior to the people who had no trouble talking to others. When I started reading books and became an avid reader, though, I was able to identify with some of the characters in the children's books I read. The first children's book character I can remember identifying strongly with was Bilbo Baggins of *The Hobbit* (who, although he is not a child, is certainly child-like by virtue of his size). Bilbo, like myself, is by nature meek and quiet. He hates crowds, as is evident by his distress when he is unexpectedly visited by a horde of dwarves, and he would much rather keep to himself. Yet Bilbo, as he naturally evolves throughout the novel, finds his value and place in the world of Middle Earth. More than any other real person in my childhood, Bilbo—a fictional character—showed me that despite my own brand of disability, I too have a value and a place in the world. This is not to say that children's literature 'cured' my social anxiety; it is still with me, albeit to a lesser extent, in my life today. Nevertheless, I do partially attribute my greater engagement in society and the world around me as I aged to the empowering messages and values I learned from subversive children's literature like *The Hobbit*.

As an adult, I am still fascinated by subversive children's literature and return to these texts whenever I am in need of empowerment. I think texts like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Tom Sawyer*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *The Hobbit* not only resonate with children but can resonate with adolescents and adults as well. The uncertainty of one's value and place in the world is not something that we grow out of as we leave childhood behind. There will inevitably be times in our

lives when we will feel powerless, and returning to the strong and confident protagonists of subversive children's literature is one way to wrestle with and overcome this sense of powerlessness. Although the target audience for subversive children's literature is by definition children, the empowering messages characteristic of subversive children's literature transcend any age group and are helpful to anyone struggling with the idea of what it means to be a 'citizen of the world.' Therefore, I think that the exploration of subversive children's literature matches well the mission of the Civitas program: to explore what it means to be a citizen in one's local community and in the global community itself.

In relating my own work and research to the mission of the Civitas program, a program whose expressed values are rooted in the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is necessary that I address how my field of interest relates to Bonhoeffer's teachings. In *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores the concept of vocation (Bonhoeffer 256). To Bonhoeffer, our vocations are our places where we respond to the call of Christ, and I believe strongly that the field of children's literature is my calling and my vocation. The Writing for Children course I had the opportunity to take at Roehampton University when I studied abroad in London last spring solidified in my mind that what I really want to do with my life—not merely to make a living but to make a contribution to the world—is to be a part of the process of producing literature for children. While people who regard themselves as having more 'practical' majors (a.k.a. non-Humanities majors) may fail to see the importance in the pursuit of English and literature study, I firmly believe that it is an important pursuit with practical implications. Andrew Slack's (Director and Founder of The Harry Potter Alliance) visit to campus this past fall opened up my eyes to the positive impact children's literature and literature in general can have on society. Andrew Slack has demonstrated with his founding of the HPA, a non-profit organization whose “mission is to empower our members to act like the heroes that they love by acting for a better world” (The HP Alliance), that literature can effect social change in the world. I believe I've embraced the HPA's goal by starting up a college literary organization, Dumbledore's

Army, this past September. The DA has become one of the many worldwide chapters of the HPA, and since we have become a chapter, I have been continually impressed by the stories I hear about HPA chapters all over the globe and the impact they've made in their societies and communities. As far as our own Augustana HPA chapter is concerned, we've involved ourselves in the Sioux Falls community by reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to children at Oak View Library. We've also involved ourselves with the HPA's worldwide efforts by contributing to their campaigns ('Not in Harry's Name', which involved a petition against slave trade chocolate, and 'Accio Books!', their annual chapters book drive). I believe that, through the DA, I have developed a better understanding of what it means not only to be a citizen of my community but a citizen of the world. People can develop their role as citizens through research (biological, sociological, psychological, etc.) or through a variety of other means. I happen to have found my citizenship—my place in the world—through literature.

Another essential part of citizenship, Bonhoeffer states, is genuine responsibility. Genuine responsibility, he says, is our responsibility to other human beings as we encounter them in our daily lives (deputyship). Bonhoeffer calls his readers not just to 'love thy neighbor' but to love everyone we meet because Christ is in all of us—not only in the people closest to us but also in the people farthest and the most distant from us (Bonhoeffer 248). I believe that empowering literature can inspire a sense of genuine responsibility in its readers. Authors of subversive children's literature give child readers characters that they can easily identify with, and thus, reading these kinds of books enables children to develop an empathy that they can use to engage with others in real-world situations. It is especially important to communicate a sense of genuine responsibility to the younger members of a society because to instill this value in a child is to help him/her grow into his/her role as citizen of the world. Children are not just our future, a generation whose power is postponed to an indeterminate point far from the now; children should be allowed to be active citizens in the present. Subversive children's literature not only gives children permission to be

active world citizens (to make a difference in the world) but it encourages them to do so. As powerhouse author J.K. Rowling said in her 2008 Harvard commencement speech, “We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better” (Rowling 2008). This is not a unique message communicated by Rowling during one specific instance on June 5<sup>th</sup> of 2008; this is a message communicated more implicitly to children all over the world whenever they crack open the spine of a book like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *Tom Sawyer*. Through the exploration of subversive children's literature, readers (children and people like me revisiting a source of empowerment from their childhood) are reminded of their role as a citizen of the world.

#### Works Cited

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