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The Orphan Train Adventures Series: The Kelly Siblings' Trek to Responsibility

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Orphan Train Adventures Series: The Kelly Siblings' Trek to Responsibility

By

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Abstract

The *Orphan Train Adventures*, a series of historical novels by Joan Lowery Nixon (1927-2003), is concerned with the responsibility exercised by its child characters during the antebellum and Civil War periods. This thesis examines how Nixon, by illustrating the positive effects of responsibility through her child characters, suggests the value of cultivating responsibility in children of the contemporary period. Nixon's use of the mid-nineteenth-century setting and the rearing practices associated with this time allows her to demonstrate positive acts of responsibility in her main characters—six siblings sent west from New York City on the “orphan trains.” This study finds that children are capable of exercising responsibility and that a sense of responsibility is necessary for children to develop into successful adults. Through her characterizations Nixon suggests that familial relationships actually have a strong effect on one's development of responsibility and that family members are essentially accountable for the development of responsibility among each other. Nixon thereby suggests that even as the American family has undergone many changes in the contemporary period, children and parents should combat these changes to successfully develop responsibility. In fact, this study works to understand the characterization of responsible siblings in children's and young adult literature and offers new ways to understand responsibility and the contemporary child.

Key Words: children and responsibility, young adult literature, rearing practices, Joan Lowery Nixon, historical fiction

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Chapter I: Introduction

Prize-winning young adult author Joan Lowery Nixon (1927-2003) wrote the *Orphan Train Adventures*, a series of novels that follows six orphaned siblings who were sent West in 1856 by the Children's Aid Society of New York, in the late twentieth century. During the antebellum and Civil War periods in which the novels are set, children were expected to work, do household chores, and even care for their younger siblings, especially among the working class. The child characters of Nixon's series demonstrate varied understandings of responsibility through these expected obligations. Ultimately, Nixon's series demonstrates the ability of children to take responsibility for their families while also being held accountable for their own actions. By exploring the temporal setting of Nixon's series, the responsible child characters, and the effects of familial relations on those characters, this study reveals Nixon's reflections on the positive effects of cultivating responsibility in children. In fact, this study works to understand the characterization of responsible siblings in children's and young adult literature and offers new ways to understand responsibility and the contemporary child.

The analysis of children's and young adult literature is a developing academic field. However, many scholars still believe that children's literature is irrelevant for analytical study because "it is too simple and obvious to read critically"; it is "pure, innocent and uncontroversial," and interpreting it critically "takes the fun out of reading children's literature" (Hintz and Tribunella 2-3). In *Reading Children's Literature*, Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella combat these assumptions. First, children's literature is generally written by adults and can, therefore, be "linguistically, thematically, and

formally complex even while appearing otherwise” (2). Also, children’s literature often depicts parts of children’s lives that are mature, such as sexuality and violence (2).

Reading children’s literature critically can increase one’s pleasure in the work by helping the reader to understand its implications (3). Most importantly, adolescent literature is relevant to understanding children and childhood and is therefore worthy of critical attention.

In short, there is more to children’s literature than entertainment and pleasure; such literature can also inform and educate. Nixon’s series, for example, might be used as a tool in a classroom to help children understand the importance of responsibility. The young adult *Orphan Train Adventures* series is also a work of historical fiction—fiction set earlier than the period in which it is written. Not only can historical fiction be entertaining for a reader, but it also can teach its readers about historical settings; thus, it is a flourishing and popular genre with educational benefits (Hintz and Tribunella 235).

While Nixon’s series can be educational to its target, young adult audience, it is also worthy of critical attention. However, Joan Lowery Nixon’s series of historical fiction, though widely read, has been the subject of limited critical treatment. Those few scholars who do treat her work generally focus on the accuracy of her historical representations. For example, Celia Catlett Anderson argues that the Western, or dime novels, to which Nixon’s series alludes are more legendary than factual (3). Marilyn Fain Apseoff finds that while Nixon’s portrayal of the series’ settings was more or less accurate, the children placed in the West were often far less successful than the *Orphan Train* protagonists (28). While these observations are intriguing, my project is less concerned with the accuracy of Nixon’s texts than with her representation of responsible

child characters. As young adult literature, Nixon's series can inform its readers about children and childhood. In fact, Nixon's use of a specific historical setting to demonstrate responsible siblings offers insight into the understanding of the contemporary American child. For example, Nixon places her characters in a setting where responsible actions are valued and expected. Thus, the child characters are able to express their capacity for responsibility, allowing Nixon to suggest that children can and should be responsible.

The characters in Nixon's series are affected by the "Placing-Out System," designed by Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children's Aid Society in 1853. The Placing-Out System sought to remove orphaned children from New York and deliver them to families in the West on "orphan trains." According to Miriam Z. Langsam, Brace developed the Placing-Out System with the help of the society (*Children West* 21). The system started by sending children west at the request of individual people, especially farmers who used the children for work. However, large numbers of orphans were eventually sent to western cities due to the immense number of orphans in New York and the demand for them in the West. The main characters of the series, the Kelly siblings, first live in poverty in New York City with their widowed mother, Mrs. Kelly. The older children must work to help provide for their family, and one is even driven to commit crimes. Although her children are not technically orphans, because of their poverty and other circumstances, Mrs. Kelly sends them on the orphan trains to the West.

Charles Loring Brace was considered an American philanthropist generally concerned with the welfare of poor or orphaned children in New York. He gained support for his endeavors through published texts that praised the success of the Placing-Out System. Brace argued that the system could have a positive effect on the expansion of the

West. Many Americans hoped the West would expand, and they used their children to help cultivate this dream. Historians Elliot West and Paula Petrik find that children's involvement in farm work on the frontier was important because the expansion of the plains was "most significant, both in numbers and in sheer impact upon the region, [among] the farming and ranching families" (28). Since children play a vital role in the success of their families' farms, their work is significant to the expansion of the West. In fact, rearing practices would have included teaching children how to be "productive" members of farm life (27-28). Brace could easily argue that adopting children would give families more manpower for the growth of their farms. Brace and his contemporaries used the expansion of the West and children's usefulness towards it to "sell" the Placing-Out System.

In the appendix of his short text, *The Best Method of Disposing of Our Pauper and Vagrant Children*, Brace includes "Letters from Gentlemen in the West on the Work of the Children's Aid Society." One respondent writes, "bring on these poor friendless children to our state. Here is plenty to do, plenty to live on, and a fine chance to become useful members of society" (20). The writer also acknowledges that the "farmers who get those boys are enabled to produce a greater amount annually by their help [so] that if the children are here, they are producers for the New York market, instead of being a tax to the city" (21). Thus, the children are no longer a burden to anyone and are in fact valuable for their potential to produce. The children are not being reared with just their well-being in mind but also with the interests of the people in the West and in New York. The title of Brace's work makes use of the phrase "disposing of." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "dispose" in its transitive sense as to "put or get (anything) off one's

hands; to put away, stow away, put into a settled state or position; to deal with (a thing) definitely; to get rid of; to get done with, settle, finish” (def. 8b). Therefore, the poor and orphaned children of the city are something “to deal with” or “get rid of,” according to Brace and his supporters. They are also being “put into a settled state,” which suggests that children in the city were not valuable but could become valuable, or “settled,” in the expansion of the West.

Nixon’s novels, while published between 1987 and 1997, are set between 1856 and the end of the Civil War in New York City and the American West. Historians suggest that during the nineteenth century, most working class and some middle-class children were expected to work and serve as a source of income for their families. Secondary sources suggest that the rearing practices of parents had an impact on their children’s understanding of responsibility. For example, working-class parents depended on their children for the survival of the family; thus, children often had the responsibility of providing for their parents and siblings. According to historians, children in the West were expected to work at home and in the fields to provide for their families. Therefore, children in America, especially working-class children, were expected to be responsible. Nixon places her characters in this temporal setting and uses the historical expectations of children to express the Kelly siblings’ sense of responsibility.

Various sources agree that the idea of “the child” is an evolving one. In particular, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, we have seen a transition from the idea of the “working child” to that of the “sacred child” (Hintz and Tribunella 22). The sacred child represents the child that is admired and protected by his or her parents. Formerly, the sacred child was observed in upper and some middle class American families, but

changes in child labor laws and a growing emphasis on education developed the treatment of the sacred child into a norm that cut across class lines. Although there are exceptions, of course, children today are less frequently viewed as a source of income for their families. In fact, most children in modern America are expected to be educated and cared for without working outside of the home.

In order to explore the idea of responsibility and its implications in Nixon's series, I will perform a character analysis on the most developed of the siblings: Frances Mary, Megan, Michael, Danny, and Peg. Frances Mary is the oldest sibling. She becomes co-head of the family alongside her mother and takes on the responsibilities of a parent. Megan is the second oldest child. She takes on motherly duties in her original home while her mother and Frances Mary work. Megan's understanding of responsibility is tested when she is adopted in the West and becomes an only child. Michael is the third oldest child and perhaps the most relevant to the study. Nearly three of the novels are dedicated to his experiences. He also has the largest effects on his siblings and has three different sets of parental figures throughout the narrative. Danny and Peg each have one novel dedicated to their experiences. The brother and sister are adopted together and have effects on each other that influence their understanding of responsibility.

Through an exploration of rearing practices in the mid-nineteenth century and the effect of familial relations on children in the series, this study examines how and why Nixon focuses on children who are able to become responsible members of their families. Nixon implies, through her series, that children of the contemporary period can express and understand responsibility even under tough circumstances—indicating that her series can also be read as didactic fiction for young adult readers. Through the representation of

her parental characters, Nixon is also suggesting that parents should expect responsibility from their children. Each of the following chapters examines various aspects of Nixon's work, including rearing practices observed in the series and the effects of familial relations on the responsibility of the child characters.

Chapter II: Rearing Practices in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The *Orphan Train Adventures* series is set between the years 1856 and 1866 in New York and various places in the West. In order to understand the idea of the responsible child in Nixon's work, it is necessary to identify the rearing practices of parental figures and expectations for children in this historical period. Historians agree that in the series' temporal setting, children were frequently valued for their ability to work outside of the home to help support the family, to perform household chores, and to care for younger sibling(s). In fact, children were actually thought of as miniature adults, especially among the large working-class. According to historian Christine Stansell, "the working poor did not think of childhood as a separate stage of life in which girls and boys were free from adult burdens, nor did poor women consider mothering to be a full-time task of supervision" (303). Poor children were expected to care for themselves and their families at young ages. Stansell explains that parents "expected their children to work from an early age, to 'earn their keep' or to 'get a living' . . . Children were little adults, unable as yet to take on all the duties of their elders, but nonetheless bound to do as much as they could . . . circumscribed by economic and familial obligations" (303-304). While adults realized that children were at a physical disadvantage, they were still expected to "earn their keep" and help support the family unit, thus branding them with the burden of being responsible for themselves and others.

This expectation seems to have led, in some cases, to delinquency among and acts of criminality by children. In fact, in the eyes of many, the streets of New York City had become a breeding ground for moral irresponsibility among children. Writing in 1859,

Brace actually uses the possibility of lowering crime rates in New York to earn support for the Placing-Out System (*The Best Method* 12). Brace claims that his system would be beneficial for the “destitute child, or even for the child guilty of only petty offenses” (11). Nixon demonstrates this issue directly through her treatment of the oldest male sibling, Michael Kelly. In the series’ first novel, Michael is caught stealing and then taken to jail where he is tried for his petty crime. However, a man named Brace—clearly modeled after Charles Loring Brace—steps in for Michael, explaining that the child was only trying to provide for his family and thus to act responsibly towards them. The judge allows Michael to leave under the agreement that all of the Kelly children will be sent west. While the situation in the novel is fictitious, Nixon is directly dealing with Brace’s idea that sending children west will limit the amount of crime in New York and allow children to develop true moral responsibility.

Some historians suggest that the rearing practices of working-class parents actually encouraged criminal activity by children if it meant ensuring the family’s survival. According to Stansell, for example, “by sending children to the streets, laboring-class parents implicitly encouraged them to a life of crime” (306). Another historian writes that working-class “families expected their children to contribute to the family’s income any way they could” (Nasaw 97). In contrast to these views, the character of Mrs. Kelly expects her children to take responsibility for themselves and the family, but she does not tolerate her children being unlawful. She is sympathetic to Michael’s plight but is not content with his actions: “our struggle has been difficult, and my children have been exposed to the temptations of the street . . . it’s unable I am to both feed them and protect them from danger” (*A Family Apart* 43-44). Michael’s actions

convince Mrs. Kelly that she is unable to care for her children. She decides to send her children west as “orphans.” This act of sending the children away to discourage criminality suggests that Mrs. Kelly expects responsibility from her children and holds them accountable for understanding the law, regardless of their family’s economic situation. Through this example, Nixon is implying that parents should expect their children to be responsible while also being accountable for their actions. Nixon is also suggesting, though, that parents are responsible for teaching moral responsibility to their children. In fact, those parental figures who allow children to commit criminal actions without repercussions are themselves behaving irresponsibly

While economic stability was a major influence in nineteenth century rearing practices, other forces, such as death in a family, also created expectations between parents and children. For example, Mr. Kelly dies before the events chronicled in the series even begin. Therefore, the children have to fill the role of their father to maintain some economic stability. According to David Nasaw, working-class mothers lacked the resources for servants and “had to look to their daughters for assistance” (105). Mrs. Kelly’s eldest daughter, Frances Mary, becomes co-head of the household in the absence of her father. Frances readily takes the position: “I want to work with you...we’ll take care of the little ones together,” she tells her mother (*A Family Apart* 17). Frances Mary’s eagerness to help her mother is representative of her characterization as a responsible child. Her eagerness also suggests her familiarity with the expectation that children will work and behave responsibly towards their families. Working children were “hardly precious objects to be coddled” and were thought of as “necessary and useful contributors to the household, as practical additions to families, and as a source of labor” (Hintz and

Tribunella 20). It therefore makes sense that Frances Mary did not expect to remain at home but to rather do what was necessary for the family's well-being and their financial situation.

Since Mr. Kelly's death leaves the family with a large financial burden, Mrs. Kelly must leave her household responsibilities to work outside of the home. Again, responsibilities within the family unit are shifted and the second oldest child, Megan, is expected to care for the younger children and the home through cleaning, shopping, and preparing meals. Mrs. Kelly tells Megan, "I'll be going . . . You know what to do for the little ones" (*A Family Apart* 38). Mrs. Kelly leaves her home with the expectation that Megan will care for the "little ones." Therefore, Megan has assumed her mother's responsibilities of child rearing while Mrs. Kelly and Frances Mary work together to secure the family's finances. Though Mrs. Kelly must work, thus changing her traditional role as a mother, she is representative of a working-class woman in New York City at the time. She did not have the financial ability to maintain her home and six children after the death of her husband. However, it is interesting to note that even in her shift in role as wife and mother to "bread-winner," she earns money through sewing and cleaning homes, both duties she would have been expected to perform in her own house without financial gain.

The genders of the child characters in the series also influence expectations of responsibility. Just as men and women had different responsibilities in the family based upon their genders, boys and girls did as well. For example, poor boys were usually expected to work on the street, offering various services to wealthier men and women or to scour "the city's dumps, alleyways, and open-air markets for food, fuel, and items to

sell” (Nasaw 98). Two of the Kelly siblings, Michael and Danny, shine shoes and do other odds and ends on the street to help their family. Girls, on the other hand, “were never as numerous as the boys at these work locations” (Nasaw 98). In fact, according to Brace, writing in 1872, “vagrant” girls of the street were more inclined to become prostitutes and could not redeem themselves once they had taken this immoral path, unlike boys who worked the streets (*Dangerous Classes* 115-116). Therefore, girls had the responsibility of maintaining their moral worth. Nasaw suggests that girls were expected to stay home and do house chores, such as caring for the younger ones, cleaning, and even helping their mothers with their work (105). As mentioned earlier, Megan fulfilled these roles for her mother, while Frances helped her mother replace the funds the family so desperately needed. While Frances, Michael, Danny, and Megan were expected by their mother to perform their parts to support the family, each also had the responsibility of working within the realm of their own gender. In other words, the responsible actions of each were limited by his or her gender.

In the West, Michael Kelly is adopted to become a farmhand and is expected to be useful on the farm to provide for his new family. According to West and Petrik, children “generally labored at a wider variety of tasks than either mothers or fathers . . . [these] jobs inevitably brought a broad range of responsibility” (30-31). Michael, of course, was used to working to support his family; however, his adopted father keeps him working all day at various chores, and Michael has the responsibility of adapting to a larger and more physical workload. West and Petrik argue that “the diversity of physical chores and their responsibilities demanded considerable adaptability” (31). A case study by West and Petrik follows one family and their eight children to a homestead where each child’s

“world of work expanded” (31). Therefore, it is very plausible to imagine a child character from the city having to adapt to work on a farm, just as Michael does: “he had promised Ma he was going to work hard and do his best... ‘I’ll make you proud of me yet, Ma,’ he vowed” (*Caught in the Act* 7). Michael is humbled by his brush with the law in the city and is devoted to adapting to a responsible life on his new family’s farm.

After she becomes an only child under the care of Emma and Ben, Megan Kelly must also learn to adapt within her new family: “There was much for Megan to learn about the farm, and she loved each discovery” (*In the Face of Danger* 42). Megan must adapt from life in a city caring for her home, brothers, and sisters to helping her adopted parents run a farm. Unlike Michael’s new family, Emma and Ben are very patient with Megan, and, with her previous experience in household chores, she easily manages tasks with Emma and quickly learns how to help Ben with his chores as well (42-43). Megan admits, though, that she “don’t know much about any kind of animal,” and Ben assures her that “this is a good place to learn” (34). Megan is expected to learn how to help her new family survive and to adapt to a new lifestyle under new rearing practices. Instead of either being sent to work or left all day to care for the home and younger children, Megan is expected to work alongside her adopted parents within the house and on the small farm. She, like Michael, must adapt to new responsibilities in the West. Since each child succeeds, the text implies that children are adaptable and can manage new and demanding responsibilities.

The child characters in Nixon’s series rarely display responsibility towards their educations. In the city, the Kellys cannot afford the time they would spend at school and are taught by Mr. and Mrs. Kelly. Frances takes on the teaching of her younger brothers

and sisters when Mr. Kelly passes away—again illustrating her fulfillment as co-head of the household and her “mini-adult” status. Marilyn Holt, who studies the effects of the orphan trains and the Placing-Out System, suggests that parents in the first half of the nineteenth century believed teaching children too young could be damaging; however, by the middle to late nineteenth century, “professionals had revolutionized educational theory” and children were being taught at an earlier age (16-17). However, mandatory education did not exist for some time. Megan Kelly did not get the attention she needed through the sparse teachings of both her parents and Frances, so she was unable to read or write. Once Megan goes west, her adopted mother, Emma, teaches her at night because the family lives too far from town for Megan to go to school. Emma is able to teach her since she has the ability to give her more attention, as well as new books, pens, and paper. Still, though, Megan was only taught in the evening hours once all of the chores were completed for the day. Nixon’s representation of education in Megan’s life suggests that to the working families of the cities and the farming families in the West, education was a privilege or luxury, secondary to the family’s financial needs. Therefore, children were expected to perform responsibility through work but not necessarily towards their education, at least through Nixon’s representations. Nixon appears to suggest that parents must instill a desire for education in their children. Megan, for example, cared little for education until Emma gave her the attention she needed.

Nixon uses the mid-nineteenth-century setting of her novels to observe how the responsibilities of the child characters develop through different parental practices, new environments, and different expectations. Through her treatments of the parental characters and their rearing practices, Nixon implies that parents have a responsibility to

instill a work ethic and moral conscience in their children. For example, Nixon uses child criminality to demonstrate that it is a parent's responsibility to teach children right from wrong. Through other examples, she suggests that parents should have a hand in the education of their children, or it will not become a child's main priority. Her texts also indicate that parents can expect children to be adaptable to new settings and workloads. In the world of mid-nineteenth-century America as historians and as Nixon describe it, children were not only expected to be responsible, but they actually looked to their parental figures for a better understanding of responsibility.

Chapter III: Characterization and Responsibility

In the *Orphan Train Adventures* series, Nixon uses the sibling characters to illustrate the positive consequences of responsibility among children, and thereby suggests the importance of responsibility to a child's sense of self-worth, morality, and accountability. However, while many of her characters are able to "rise to the occasion" and display responsible thoughts and actions, some also perform irresponsible actions and must suffer the consequences. Nixon highlights the positive effects of responsible children but also acknowledges the negative consequences of irresponsibility to suggest that responsible children are ultimately more successful.

In 1899, Constance J. Foster published an advice booklet for parental figures titled *Developing Responsibility in Children*. Though published at a later date, this manual is relevant because the expectations for children had not yet changed from the series' setting. Foster writes that studies find the "happy, well-adjusted person is the one with a well-balanced sense of responsibility—towards himself and others. And the irresponsible person is likely to be unsure of himself and the world around him" (3). Nixon's depiction of Megan Kelly, who is able to gain autonomy and become successful through responsible actions in New York and in the West, suggests that the novelist shares this view. In the West, Megan must care for a sickly neighbor, Mrs. Haskill, an arrogant and rude woman. Instead of shying away from the work, though, Megan "takes on Mrs. Haskill as a responsibility, and she [is] determined to help the poor woman" (*In the Face of Danger* 83). Since her adopted mother and Mrs. Haskill are both confined to their homes, Megan is the only one available to nurse them and thus she feels responsible

for them. She also feels brave and knowledgeable in her endeavors because she is confident in working with the arrogant woman as she nurses her back to health. Megan, in turn, becomes a sort of hero to her adopted mother and gains a newfound confidence in herself. Before Megan uses her devotion to responsibility to care for her bed-ridden neighbor, she is very unsure of herself; her developing responsibilities give her confidence. In fact, several times throughout the series, Megan uses her understanding of responsibility to overcome her lack of self-worth and to gain power: “All of Megan’s shyness and unsureness disappeared when she comforted and nursed the younger children” (*A Family Apart* 143). Through Megan’s development, Nixon illustrates how responsibility can breed confidence in children. Megan’s responsibilities in her original family improved her autonomy, and she regains confidence when she establishes an important role in her adopted family through responsible actions.

While the series usually depicts responsible child characters and positive consequences, some characters must also face the consequences of irresponsibility. For example, Peg Kelly goes on a dangerous mission to help a friend—a young Union spy being held by Confederate soldiers. Nixon characterizes Peg as responsible and adult-like because she is willing to do what she believes is right. However, her actions put herself and others in danger: Danny Kelly must risk his life to save her, and in the course of doing so, he is hurt. Peg admits, “I had to make a decision. Maybe I made the wrong one if it’s hurt Danny” (*Keeping Secrets* 156). It is most interesting to observe that Peg is able to hold herself accountable for the result of her actions. Her mother responds that part “of being a woman is making decisions and accepting responsibility for them, whether they’re right or wrong” (156). Significantly, Mrs. Kelly considers her daughter a woman,

though she is only eleven. Nixon illustrates the consequences of Peg's decision but also demonstrates her accountability for her actions. Nixon suggests that responsibility to one's family, work, and chores are important, but that different kinds of responsibility exist, such as accountability. While one involves active duties, the other requires an awareness of moral consciousness.

Michael Kelly must also face the consequences of his actions but in a very different way than Megan. Michael's first adopted father, Mr. Friedrich, is a harsh man whose "only reason for adopting an Orphan Train child was to have an unpaid hired man" (*Caught in the Act* 3). As mentioned previously, Brace and the Society used the lure of unpaid help to gain support for the orphan train initiative, so it was presumably not uncommon for children to be adopted as farmhands. Since biological children were expected to work for their families, it can be assumed that children adopted as farmhands could be treated as part of the family. Michael is provided for as a son by the Friedrichs despite the purpose for his adoption. In fact, Mrs. Friedrich even states that he is "to live with [them] as a son" (13). This family is Michael's only option, though, because his past as a copper stealer has preceded him, and the other potential parents do not want to adopt a criminal (2). Since Michael must live with an unhappy family, one can presume that he is facing the consequences of his criminal actions in New York.

While Michael suffers from his past mistakes, Mr. Friedrich attempts to instill responsibility in him. Friedrich is the only parent in the series who uses violence to rear one of the child characters. For example, he says to Michael "if you steal again, you will be beaten. . . . I know how to handle boys like you" (*Caught in the Act* 6). Mr. Friedrich believes violence is the best way to "handle boys" like Michael. Later in the novel, Mr.

Friedrich beats Michael and tells his wife that a “good beating will help Michael to learn how to behave” (22). While the fact that Michael lives with the Friedrichs suggests that he is paying for his past actions, the novels do not condone violent parenting. In fact, the subject of using violence to teach and discipline children was the topic of nineteenth-century parenting manuals. One manual is Jacob Abbott’s *Gentle Measures in the Management and Training of the Young*. The text was published in 1871 and advises parents on how to rear their children without violence. Abbott argues that while children do not have an instinct to obey their parents, they possess the capacity to learn obedience (22). Therefore, measures must be taken to have children conform to the desires of their parents. Abbott concludes that parents are responsible for the disobedience of their children, since it is their responsibility to teach children how to behave (23). Mr. Friedrich beats Michael to discourage further disobedience. However, Abbott argues against violent discipline. In fact, he argues that punishment can be gentle and effective simultaneously (25).

Constance Foster also argues against the use of violence as punishment and believes that when “an adult has to punish a child, he really should punish himself—for failing” (27). Both Abbott and Foster assent that the use of violence in punishment is ineffective and that it is a parent’s duty to instill responsibility in his or her children. After reading *Caught in the Act*, one learns that Mr. Friedrich has lost a son because of the son’s criminal actions. Foster suggests that the beating of a child is more likely a reflection of a parent’s own fury towards his or herself (27-28). In this context, we could read Michael’s beatings as Mr. Friedrich’s attempts to take out his own anger towards himself for failing to instill responsibility in his biological son. The texts illustrate the

importance of responsibility among children and highlight a parent's roles in instilling this responsibility. Eventually, Michael leaves Mr. Friedrich and is adopted into a new family, where he is able to develop responsibility without parental violence.

In *A Dangerous Promise*, Michael Kelly joins the Union in the Civil War as a drummer boy. At the time, he is only twelve-years-old, so he lies about his age to join the war efforts along with his friend, Todd. Michael claims, "we're not children. We can help the Union win the war" (10). Michael identifies himself as an adult and feels it is his responsibility to serve the Union. However, when Todd dies in battle, he expresses regret and guilt. Psychology researchers Elizabeth Such and Robert Walker have studied the issue of accountability among children, finding that children "further demonstrated responsibility and moral agency in their discussions of taking the blame for 'wrong' acts, accidents or when talking about the consequences of risky behaviours" (237). Michael feels accountable for Todd's death, thus demonstrating his awareness of the "consequences of risky behaviours." His decision to join the army even though he was not of age could be considered a wrong act, and he is now suffering the consequences, as Such and Walker suggest. Michael confronts Todd's family and accepts his part in Todd's death, thus accepting blame and finding "moral agency." Through this example, the text illustrates children's ability to hold themselves accountable for actions and find moral agency through wrong doings. Again, Nixon is demonstrating the effects of responsibility and irresponsibility, thus emphasizing the importance of responsibility and moral consciousness to her readers.

The characters in Nixon's novels display not only the benefits of assuming responsibility through chores, thoughts, and actions but also the importance of a parent's

roles in instilling responsibility in children. She uses her series as a sort of educational tool to inform her readers about the benefits of responsibility and the possible negative consequences of irresponsibility, while also suggesting that one should look to his or her parents for further guidance and a stronger understanding of responsibility. The series' child characters prove their ability to "rise to the occasion" and hold themselves accountable for their actions and are rewarded with a sense of autonomy and respect from others, as well as a moral conscience.

Chapter IV: Familial Relationships and Responsibility

As observed in previous chapters, Nixon's series places an emphasis upon the relationships between the parental figures and the children, as well as between the siblings. In turn, these relationships actually influence the characters' performances of responsibility. Foster writes that "children are not *born* responsible" and children "don't develop responsibility by themselves," but that they learn it "from the care and treatment given [them] by the adults" (4; italics in original). Foster suggests that one's relationships can influence his or her understanding of responsibility. According to Jeffrey Kluger, author of *The Sibling Effect*, from "the time we're born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and our cautionary tales;" thus, the relationships between siblings are an influential part of a child's life (7). While each Kelly sibling in Nixon's series has been shown exercising responsibility, the extent of that responsibility is often dependent upon familial relations.

For example, Frances Mary, the eldest child, feels responsible for the younger children: Frances "glanced at her brothers and sisters, automatically checking to see that all were safe and accounted for" (*A Family Apart* 20). When Frances arrives home from work, she immediately checks on her sleeping brothers and sisters, suggesting that she feels responsible for their well-being. Furthermore, she becomes their teacher: "Frances had tried to pass on her father's teaching to [the] others" (*A Family Apart* 9). Finally, Frances Mary also takes responsibility for the discipline of her younger siblings: she "was the eldest in the family. If Mike were doing something that might get him into trouble, then she should find out and put a stop to it" (*A Family Apart* 30-31). Frances

believes that it is her responsibility to care for, teach, and discipline her younger siblings because, as the eldest child, she is the co-head of the household with her mother.

Since Mrs. Kelly and Frances's siblings need Frances to survive, her relationships with them inspire responsibility. If not for her efforts in the series' first novel, the family would not have survived; thus, she had to become responsible for them. However, birth order theory also helps to explain the actions of Frances Mary as the first born child in the family. Kevin Leman, author of *The Birth Order Book*, claims that the typical first born can be characterized as "reliable . . . self-sacrificing, people pleaser, [and] self-reliant" (61). Since Frances willingly works for her family without complaint, she is presumably reliable and self-sacrificing. She is also a people pleaser, doing what her mother desires of her: you're "a good, dependable girl love. Do your job. We need the money" (*A Family Apart* 38). Leman argues that first borns have "only adults for models [and] they naturally take on more adult characteristics" (63). One can see Frances using the influence of her parents to perform more adult qualities. For example, she works as her mother does and teaches her brothers and sisters as her father once did. The dependence of her family and the relationship Frances has with them as the eldest child enforces her characterization as highly responsible.

To further emphasize Frances's adult-like understanding of responsibility, it is interesting to note that when Mrs. Kelly sends the siblings west, Frances tells her, I "promise that I'll do my best to be mother to these children in place of the mother who doesn't want them" (*A Family Apart* 48). Frances has already filled her father's shoes and is now filling those of her mother by becoming "mother to these children." Indeed, Frances understands a mother's responsibility so well that she appears to actually chastise

her mother for relinquishing the responsibility of her children. Through the death of her father and as the eldest sibling, Frances has taken on parent-like responsibilities. Her mother tells her that it is “special care this littlest one will be needing . . . and it’s you I’ll be counting on to give it” (*A Family Apart* 48). While Frances was expected to work and help care for her younger siblings before, now that they are being sent west, Mrs. Kelly has placed the responsibility of the children on Frances. According to Leman, first borns are successful and powerful, but they also experience pressures forced upon them from their parents and must mature quickly (69, 71, and 75). Here, the reader can see this adult pressure being exerted onto Frances Mary as she works to replace her father and then takes over her mother’s responsibilities. Her characterization as a mini-adult with parental influence is also observed when she acknowledges that she “had to be strong as Ma would have been” (*A Family Apart* 98). The relationship Frances Mary has with her siblings and mother as the eldest child creates a sense of responsibility within her that can be compared to a parental figure or an adult.

Danny Kelly is also interesting to observe because he originally lives under Michael’s shadow, and his understanding of responsibility is influenced by observing Michael. Kluger indicates that elder siblings “learn to nurture by mentoring little ones” and younger siblings “learn about wisdom by heeding the older ones” (7). Danny obtains his “wisdom” from Michael. In fact, since “Mike was a thief . . . Danny, because he idolized his older brother, wanted to be a copper stealer, too” (*A Family Apart* 32). The influence of siblings on one another adds another dimension to responsibility among children. In other words, older siblings have the responsibility of modeling good behavior for their younger siblings. Danny’s sense of responsibility is dependent upon his brother,

even if Michael's example leads Danny to a misunderstanding of responsibility—thievery to provide for one's family. Following the death of Mr. Kelly, Danny must turn to Michael for male support: "After Da had died, Danny had clung to Mike as though he were a father" (*A Family Apart* 25). Michael thus becomes both a model as an elder sibling and a surrogate father to Danny. However, he influences Danny in a negative way by demonstrating irresponsibility. Michael and Danny are separated once adopted in the West. The literal separation of the siblings implies that Danny has to be separated from Michael in order to develop his own sense of responsibility and appropriate moral understanding.

Once Danny is adopted in the West and is removed from the original family unit, Nixon allows him to develop a new understanding of responsibility. He becomes the eldest sibling in the family and feels responsibility towards his sister Peg. For example, he commands her to act correctly, taking control as first borns theoretically do: "Stop sniveling, Peg," he ordered. "You don't have to be afraid anymore" (*A Place to Belong* 5). Not only is Danny comforting Peg, but he is also attempting to discipline her. This attempt at discipline is made clear through phrases such as "stop sniveling" and "he ordered," which echoes Frances Mary's disciplinary actions. Like Frances Mary, Danny, as the eldest sibling, must learn to accept responsibility not only for his chores but also for the care of Peg. However, he struggles with this newfound responsibility. For example, he fails to comfort Peg when their adopted mother dies. Unlike Michael, though, Danny also influences Peg in positive ways by demonstrating his own sense of responsibility towards her instead of modeling negative behavior. Danny's relationship with Michael limits his expression of positive responsibility. His relationship with Peg,

though, helps him to develop his sense of responsibility towards others, especially towards a sibling.

After the death of his adopted mother, Danny feels responsible for his adopted and original family. He convinces his adopted father to bring Mrs. Kelly to the West and possibly marry her. While the plan does not work as Danny had hoped, the reader can see a new sense of responsibility within Danny. While he is originally characterized as only being a shadow of Michael, in this series of events, he is characterized as feeling responsibility towards his biological mother, adopted father, and Peg. In other words, Danny becomes responsible for his sister when he becomes the eldest child in the family, and he develops a sense of responsibility for his family when his adopted mother dies. It is also interesting to note that he is crafty in his responsibilities and a little mischievous, which suggests that some of his characterization is derived from his relationship with Michael and Michael's own mischievous expressions of responsibility. In fact, Danny is able to hold himself accountable for his actions: "I know it was wrong" (*A Place to Belong* 138). Following Michael's example, Danny is able to apologize and right his wrongs. Now that Danny has developed his own sense of responsibility, he is able to take positive influences from Michael, such as holding himself accountable for his actions and realizing that becoming a copper stealer is wrong.

Other instances in the series illustrate a child character deciphering between positive and negative influences. For example, Michael's adopted brother, Gunter, plays tricks to get Michael into trouble: "Often Mike caught Gunter glaring at him through slitted eyes with such hatred that he stayed on guard, waiting for Gunter's next mean trick" (*Caught in the Act* 57). It is likely that Gunter's character is used by Nixon to serve

as a contrast to the positive relations in the book between siblings and the importance of gaining only positive influence from siblings. Gunter is a negative influence on Michael and continuously attempts to provoke him, but Michael maintains his sense of responsibility to his chores and to his family members, resisting the influences of a negative relationship.

Peg Kelly remains a younger sibling in her old and new families. She is constantly coddled and taken care of by her parental figures and her older siblings, thus the need for her to understand and perform responsibility is delayed. However, as the series continues, she moves back in with her biological mother and essentially becomes an only child. According to Leman, only children are like mini-adults, since adults are their usual companions (81). Through her relationship with her mother, Peg develops a sense of responsibility that culminates in her desire to be treated as an adult by Mrs. Kelly. This desire is revealed through an internal dialogue: "*She [Ma] sent me off on purpose so I wouldn't hear. She treats me as if I'm a child. And I'm not! I'm close to becoming a full-grown woman!*" (*Keeping Secrets* 7; italics in original). While Peg wishes to take on adult responsibilities, her desires falter when she essentially causes Danny's death. She takes responsibility for his death but attempts to relinquish her adult responsibilities: "Right now I don't want to be a woman. I'd rather be a child" (*Keeping Secrets* 156). Peg's contribution to Danny's death changes her views on responsibility. While Peg is influenced by her relationship with her mother, it is the effect she has on her brother that ultimately influences her understanding of responsibility.

Kluger writes that sibling relations can be complicated but "can be educational, too" (9-10). Not only are the older siblings in Nixon's series expected to care for the

younger ones, but they are also responsible for modeling good behavior, thus teaching them responsibility. However, when siblings negatively influence one another, the siblings must develop their own sense of responsibility. Also, while parental relations have an influence on a child's sense of responsibility, the actions of the sibling characters ultimately suggest that sibling relations actually have the largest influences on one another. In fact, the plot of the series actually reveals that relationships between siblings are possibly the most important and influential relationships one will experience, especially as an adolescent.

Chapter V: Conclusion

As I have suggested, Joan Lowery Nixon's *Orphan Train Adventures* series is concerned with the idea of responsibility in children. Using the mid-nineteenth century setting to treat this theme in a twentieth century series, Nixon offers commentary on the idea of responsibility in the contemporary American child. To better understand this concept, it is first necessary to identify the differences in the American family from the series' temporal setting to modern day America. While the precise changes over time are beyond the scope of this project, historians and social scientists generally agree that children are expected to be less responsible for the survival of their families now than during the period in which the series is set. Many advice books, history books, and social science articles address recent developments in the idea of the American family, such as *Small Worlds* by Elliott West and Paula Petrik, as well as *Pricing the Priceless Child* by Vivian A. Zelizer. These and other writers generally agree that children in modern day America spend less time with their parents, rely more on technology for guidance, and also spend less time with siblings.

Nixon illustrates child characters who are expected to work and perform an understanding of responsibility. However, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a divergence from the idea of the working and profitable child to the idea of the child as "sacred." According to Hintz and Tribunella in *Reading Children's Literature*, the sacred child is "understood as precious and fragile... aesthetic objects to admire rather than as practical tools" (22). The child moved from being profitable in a family to being admired and "sacred," due in part to child labor laws and mandatory education statutes. West and

Petrik claim that children were removed from the work place to “be shielded from adult vices and be tutored properly in personal and civic virtue” (*Small Worlds* 39). Thus, the idea of the working and responsible child that Nixon illustrates began to deteriorate a half century before her publication of the series.

Through child characters and their evolution, Nixon uses the historical context to illustrate a child’s capacity for responsibility. However, the child characters are still able to enjoy a childhood. For example, the characters read stories, own pets, and play with their siblings or friends. Nixon may be suggesting that children can be responsible while simultaneously maintaining a childhood through play and adventure. According to Zelizer, some Americans in the 1980s argued that the sacred child was unaffordable and began searching for ways to have children more involved in the home through “helping out” (209). On the other hand, Zelizer also acknowledges that the change from the sacred child to the valuable child through household chores upset many who believed that children were not able to have childhoods if they were expected to take on adult responsibilities (215-216). Nixon appears to be combatting this assertion through her depiction of responsible children who still enjoy play and adventure.

Nixon implies through her series that parental figures should take part in developing responsibility in children. The parental figures in Nixon’s series expect and foster responsibility in the children, while often serving as role models. Nixon is suggesting that time spent with parents and even older siblings can be very important to the development of responsibility among children. However, as indicated above, researchers generally agree that parents are spending less time with their children today. One reason for this is that children and parents no longer work alongside one another.

Generally, children attend school during the day while parents work away from the home. Nixon chooses to situate her characters in a setting where children and parents spend an abundance of time with one another. While in the city only Frances Mary worked alongside her mother, in the West the children work at the home with their adopted parents as they develop stronger senses of responsibility. In fact, as mentioned earlier, *Orphan Train*'s Megan Kelly becomes better educated with her adopted mother because she is able to spend more time with her.

Technology has also been recently targeted as a reason for the changing American family and the decreasing time spent between parental figures and children. Researchers generally agree that technology, such as the television, can have a negative effect on the responsibility of children. For example, if children are spending more time watching television and less time with their parents, they are unable to learn more responsibility from adult figures. In fact, the technology might even become a larger source of information than parental figures for many children in the contemporary period. Nixon chooses a temporal setting where technology has little effect on the daily lives of her characters, perhaps as a way of hinting that modern technology is detrimental to a child's development of responsibility in themselves and to their families. Certainly, Nixon suggests that time with family, especially parents, is vital to the development of responsibility among children.

Researchers generally agree that siblings are also spending less time with one another in the contemporary period, again due to increasing reliance on technology and different daily schedules. Nixon's sibling characters heavily affect each other's understanding of responsibility. The siblings in her series feel responsible for one

another, work to provide for each other, and are put into situations that test their loyalty towards one another. According to Such and Walker, responsibility “is embedded within children’s relationship with others” and “is also understood as a need to consider the feelings of others, including siblings” (240). Nixon, like Such and Walker, illustrates that siblings are beneficial to a child’s development of responsibility, especially since the sibling characters affect each other in various ways throughout her series.

While time spent with and influences of family members benefit the development of responsibility in her child characters, Nixon still chooses to make them accountable for their actions. She especially demonstrates accountability for criminal activities through the *Orphan Train*’s Michael Kelly. As discussed previously, child crime in mid-nineteenth century America was sometimes seen as an accepted part of life among working class children and was punishable with little contingency upon age. Nixon makes no reference to leniency on child criminals even though Michael steals only to provide for his family. In fact, throughout the series Michael is plagued by the criminal actions of his past and takes full responsibility for his wrongdoings. Nixon illustrates that children are capable of accountability for their actions even at a young age and regardless of the reason for their actions. Michael does not serve prison time but is still held accountable, and he becomes more responsible as a consequence. Children, Nixon suggests, should not only be held accountable for their actions, but they can also develop a moral conscience from this sense of accountability.

Michael Kelly is not the only character that Nixon allows to grow through his performance of responsibility. Many of the child characters actually develop positively from their understanding and performance of responsibility. Such and Walker find that

children have the ability to be responsible in their daily chores, through work, and in relationships with family members and peers. As well, they are more likely to hold themselves accountable for wrong acts and find moral agency through these experiences. In fact, Such and Walker believe that facing responsibility actually creates the “moral self.” Many of Nixon’s characters must face the consequences of their wrong actions. However, the characters tend to grow from these experiences and develop a sort of moral understanding because of them. Like Such and Walker, Nixon seems to imply that if children maintain responsibility and are held accountable, they will actually develop into responsible and accountable adults with moral consciences.

Given Nixon’s concern with the positive effects of cultivating responsibility in children, her series can be read as having a didactic purpose. Didactic literature is defined as works “of fiction, poetry, or drama designed to communicate a practical or moral lesson” (Hintz and Tribunella 66). Although there are didactic strains in children’s and young adult literature today, didactic fiction for children was even more common in the nineteenth century. According to Daniel Rodgers, one of the forces that affected the development of children in the nineteenth century included “fiction written to shape and satisfy the imagination” (120). Throughout the nineteenth century, didactic fiction for children impacted “the meaning of work and adult responsibilities” (121). In fact, fiction for children “often talked of work . . . but showed it as an act of heroism” (Rodgers 125). For example, Jacob Abbott is the author of parenting advice manuals and the Rollo Books, moralistic children’s works published in the nineteenth century that were used widely to teach children (Berry 100). Abbott is most known for his work that

“consistently promotes the virtues of obedience, industry, duty and order,” similar to Nixon’s promotion of responsibility among children (Berry 100).

Interestingly, Nixon actually incorporates an episode that suggests how novels can influence children. Long before getting on the orphan train, Michael Kelly loves reading. But rather than reading books like Abbott’s, Michael devours “dime novels” depicting glorified adventure in the West (*A Family Apart* 23-24). When the Kelly siblings are on the journey west, their train is robbed. Emulating the adventures he finds in his novels, Michael Kelly wrestles one of the robbers and manages to save some of the passengers’ items (*A Family Apart* 83). However, when Michael “steals” from the outlaw, he drops his novel into the outlaw’s bag to replace the weight and admits to Frances that the “tales in those novels about brave, daring outlaws are wrong” (84). While Michael has attempted to live the adventures from his books, he is also acknowledging that he does not want to live as an outlaw or a thief. Michael is conscious not only of his own irresponsibility, but also that his beloved novels wrongly glorified thievery.

Even though some passengers on the train “praised Mike for his bravery,” Michael disposes of his novel and admits that the descriptions of adventure were inaccurate (*Caught in the Act* 3). The text seems to indicate that the “heroic” based novels of the series’ setting are inaccurate guides for teaching children how to behave. Michael’s disposal of the novel is representative of his commitment to a different, more responsible life. Nixon’s series creates characters and situations similar to the nineteenth-century works in children’s literature described by Rodgers as glorifying heroic actions; however, the series focuses only somewhat on heroism in characters and more on the responsibility

of children and its importance to their well-being. More like Abbott's books than the dime novels, Nixon's series encourages modern day children to behave responsibly.

Nixon's use of a mid-nineteenth-century setting allows her to demonstrate responsible children in a time and place where responsibility was not only expected and applauded but also necessary to survival. Through this setting she is able to illustrate the positive consequences of the performance of responsibility as well as the negative effects of irresponsibility. Her texts suggest that children need responsibility to become successful adults, and it is a parent's duty to cultivate this trait within his or her children. Furthermore, siblings can have a positive effect on one another, so older siblings should feel responsibility to model good behavior for younger siblings. However, some familial relations can have a negative effect on a child's understanding of responsibility; therefore, it is important to decipher between positive and negative influences. More importantly, though, it is interesting to acknowledge that in the contemporary world, more pressing negative influences exist, such as reliance on technology and less time spent as a contributing member of a family. Therefore, it is essential that children and parents acknowledge that responsibility cannot be sufficiently developed without combatting contemporary changes in the American family unit.

Through this study, one can observe Nixon's views that cultivating responsibility in children through work and positive familial relationships is a positive factor in their development. In fact the *Orphan Train Adventures* series has relevance to modern times that Nixon might not have anticipated. For example, future research could investigate how responsibility in children's literature relates to "helicopter parents," children who suffer from "affluence," and the effects of blended families. "Helicopter parents," for

instance, are parents who attempt to micromanage their child's life. In a sense, the parents take over the responsibilities of their children. Also, adolescents who suffer from "affluence" are supposedly so coddled and protected that they cannot be held accountable for their actions, thus relinquishing responsibility. Blended families create changes in parental and sibling relations, thus influencing children's understandings of responsibility. Another area of additional research that might add to this scholarly conversation is the examination of whether being a contributing member of a modern-day family influences a child's sense of belonging and self-worth, as was observable through Megan Kelly's development in the series. Certainly, *The Orphan Train Adventures* series, as a work of didactic fiction and through its temporal setting, holds within its pages many opportunities for young adults to compare themselves to the Kelly children and to learn from their experiences. Not only is the series valuable as literature that can be used to understand changing views of childhood, but it can also be used as an educational tool to teach the importance of responsibility among children.

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