

Infantilizing Adults: Amelia Bedelia's Anachronistic Journey Backward

Since its introduction in the 1960s, Amelia Bedelia has become a classic in children's literature. It is known by many people as one of the first books they were able to read and enjoy on their own, due to the fact that the piece is designed as an Easy Reader, with big font, bold illustrations, silly humor, and small life lessons, all through which the inimitable Amelia Bedelia takes things a little too literally. Her wit and child like demeanor can be seen throughout her books, even though until recently she has been portrayed as an adult. Which begs the question: as childlike as she is, could Amelia Bedelia have ever been a child? Could she have ever been even less equipped for the nuances of the English language and living life in the socialized world? What is Amelia Bedelia's origin story? Asking these questions seems reasonable given the origin story treatment children's literature has a history of giving famous teen and adult literary characters. Characters like Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and various superheroes have origin stories to further explain how those characters which we have become so accustomed to came to be. While many origin stories tend to be chronological and make sense of the character's present, Amelia Bedelia is the exact opposite: her story is anachronistic; an illogical context in that it ultimately makes her more realistic by making her hyper-literal self a product of personality, not age. In other words, Amelia Bedelia is made to seem as if she has no ability to grow or change, but is instead a helpless sort of Peter Pan character who may grow in size but never in mental acuity.

In the world of literary studies, there is a theory known that provides context for a large issue that children tend to have with verbiage, specifically this theory explains why some children have a hard time understanding the meaning of a verb, when the verb is also associated with a noun, a bias which scholars refer to as "The Amelia Bedelia Effect," named appropriately for the

maid that is known for taking things too literally. For example, when asked to “ice the fish,” clearly meaning to put the fish over ice, Amelia Bedelia put actual cake icing over the fish, thinking Mrs. Rogers meant to ice them like a cake (Parish 7). Studies indicate that, “children generally adopt productive learning strategies when learning words with noun and verb forms. However, there have been no previous studies that explore the idea that children over extend the goal interpretations to conventional source verbs” (Srinivasan 433). The “Amelia Bedelia Effect” that scholars discuss explain why children tend to take things so literally (regardless of whether they have read Amelia Bedelia or not). Scholars like Srinivasan work to explain why children often “misinterpret ‘milk the cow’ to mean ‘put milk on the cow,’ rather than ‘take milk out of the cow’” (Srinivasan 433). Due to this common misconception, scholars have developed two main theories of how children might overcome this bias.

First, some children might require direct, specific evidence. So, if children know that milk comes from cows, they may not construct the adult like meaning of “milk the cow” until they receive direct evidence of its meaning. Second, relevant knowledge may not be sufficient for children to overcome the language bias, so instead they require additional learning about how world knowledge relates to syntactic structures...the child might need to contract a rule to learn how to use their knowledge pragmatically (Srinivasan 435). No matter which of these strategies is chosen, they all have the same effect on attempting to correct the mindset that has been caused by the bias placed on children. These three ideas move to in a way reverse the “Amelia Bedelia Effect.” In most cases, the scholars say, kids will outgrow these linguistic challenges by the time they are nine years old.

This linguistic problem is present throughout all Amelia Bedelia novels, both original and adaptations, showing that Amelia herself seems to have this bias. However, as linguistic word play

with an unreal, outside of the real world context, Amelia Bedelia is meant to be understood as a fantasy figure and nonsensical. But to imagine Amelia Bedelia as a child- who thus always had this this linguistic bias- is to recreate Amelia Bedelia as a figure of pathological disability. The fact that she has not been able to overcome it through the years, furthers the argument that Amelia's sense of literalism did not come from nonsense and play, it came from her personality all along. Since this effect has to do with children and early speech acquisition, and how children overcome these deficiencies, it is ironic that if we are to believe the original story, Amelia Bedelia never overcomes these deficiencies. She has the same issues as an adult as she had as a child, making her more human by giving her a childhood, but this origin story actually makes Amelia Bedelia diagnosable as having a disability, rather than letting her be an absurd figure outside of reality and real world rules. The solutions mentioned above would have no affect on her due to the fact that the mistakes she makes are simply a part of her. The solutions proposed are meant for a child, and showing that Amelia suffers from a bias placed on children, it shows how largely her character is infantilized, even when she is portrayed as a full functioning adult.

By its very definition, an origin story can be defined as, "a narrative that explains how a culture or character came about" (Rosenburg 1). Though the definition sounds simple, the origin story is something that tends to be very complex, and reveals a great deal about a particular character's past, most likely to explain the events of their present. They tend to be most commonly used within the superhero phenomenon to explain, "the exact moment when a normal guy goes from being just like us to being somehow better, faster, stronger" (Rosenburg 1). Within early readers they are used for the same sole purpose: explanation. Origin stories tend to be a very large category, due to the simple fact that children like to read about other children, making the characters more relatable to their own lives. These origin stories allow for the

infantilizing of the adult characters that scholars and readers all know so well, and let the readers get a peek into what their lives were like as a child, in order to make connections to what traits the character possess in the present day. The stories tend to contain characters being made into 5-8 year olds, and have the rest of the characteristics of an early reader in that they contain simple stories in order to give young readers a sense of who this character was as a child.

Many examples of these origin stories have come about in children's literature since the introduction of the category. *Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew* is a series of books written by Carolyn Keene as a look into how the super sleuth Nancy Drew came to be in the novels that many have read and enjoyed over the year. There are around 40 books in the series, all mysteries low stakes enough to be solved by third grade Nancy Drew. The origin stories introduce Bess and George, Nancy's always trusty sidekicks, as well as introduce other characters well known in the original novels, such as Nancy's father and friend Ned. Continuing with origin stories for sleuths, the well known Hardy Boys also have a series that give a look into their childhood. *The Hardy Boys: The Secret Files* are Franklin Dixon's take on the sleuthing origin story, allowing readers to get a peek into the childhood of the Hardy Boys, similar to that of *Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew*. Both book series are known for using their "simple chapter book language and deductive reasoning to piece together the mysteries. The [novels] will appeal to boys and girls, junior mystery buffs, and chapter book readers alike" (Fischer 3). Overall, these novels provide a chronological look into the lives of these children, providing key details that allow readers to make connections to present day novels. The key factor that makes these origin stories so successful is that they are chronological. They make sense, and include details that tie into the later novels, allowing the audience of young readers to become connected and invested in the stories. Amelia Bedelia, however, does not do that.

While all the novels mentioned above were made sense of by their origin stories, Amelia Bedelia is the opposite. Amelia Bedelia is best known for repeatedly misunderstanding various commands of her employer by always taking figures of speech and various terminology literally, causing her to perform incorrect actions with comical effect...she almost always manages to win everyone over at the end by baking a delicious pie or cake. Much of her employment is as a maid for a wealthy couple known as the Rogers, who are astute enough to realize her literalism, and to work with it (Sweat 3).

While many of us know Amelia Bedelia's story, none of us know how she gained the sense of literalism that she is so famous for. When looking at the early readers that were written about Amelia Bedelia, many readers would expect that it would give some sort of insight into how she obtained the idea of how to take everything literally. But, when reading the early readers, it is clear that Amelia Bedelia has always been the same, if not less literal as a child.

The category of origin story is meant to provide meaning to the present day character in some sort of chronological way, but Amelia Bedelia's story does the exact opposite: she almost moves backwards when it comes to her knack for taking things too literally. For example, in the original books, Amelia Bedelia is hired to be a maid and given tasks to do while the family is out, such as "change the towels in the guest bathroom, draw the drapes when the sun comes in, and dress the turkey for dinner" (Parish 16). She has actual responsibilities to do, and while she does them all, she does them incorrectly due to the way she takes the commands literally. But in contrast, the chapter books show a slightly more mature side of Amelia Bedelia if possible. She still has the same knack for taking things seriously, but in a less high stakes way. For example, in the early reader *Amelia Bedelia Means Business*, Amelia is asked to meet her dad halfway on something. Rather than knowing that that means compromise, she, "slid[es] off her chair, walks exactly

halfway around the table and stood there...waiting for her father to get up” (Parish 19). While she still has the same qualities, she uses her literalness in her everyday life with things such as “meeting someone halfway” by actually walking towards them or “shaking someone’s hand” a little too hard. These things are very low stakes and she has no one relying on her to do the tasks correctly. In the early reader, she has the true qualities of a child, so her literalness makes sense. But what is so different about this early reader is that it truly is not an origin story like so many would think. Many people agree that “when it is describing Amelia’s childhood...there is a disconnect between these books and the original” (Coleman 3). It does not offer any details on why Amelia’s mind works this way. The readers are able to meet her family in the early readers, but they offer no insight into her qualities either, seeing that they seem to understand figures of speech. So rather than explain the way that her actions come about, the early readers show Amelia at a time where she was almost more capable of understanding speech than she is in the original books.

Due to the fact that the early reader offers no insight, it can not truly be labeled as an origin story, but rather be labeled as a work of “realistic fiction” which is defined as a genre consisting of stories that could have actually occurred to people or animals in a believable setting. These stories resemble real life, and fictional characters within these stories react similarly to real people. Stories that are classified as realistic fiction have plots that highlight social or personal events or issues that mirror contemporary life, such as falling in love, marriage, finding a job, divorce, alcoholism, etc. They depict our world and our society (Gottschall 1).

So while what Amelia Bedelia early readers display may not tell us where she came from and may not explain how she became the way she is, they do portray Amelia as a child, who can just take things a little too literally sometimes, making her more relatable to younger audiences than ever.

They show that Amelia grows into the silly housemaid that she does not because of time, but solely because that has been her personality from the beginning.

Contrary to Amelia Bedelia's anachronistic story, most children's novels tend to be chronological, especially in the category of early readers. Early readers are a growing genre that attempt to reach the audience of younger generations who are just beginning to read. Early readers can be defined and explained as a body of text that

usually have a standard form and appear in series, have large print, short sentences, and a limited amount of text per page. For the younger end of the age range, books have one illustration per page; for the older end, there is one illustration per double page spread. The vocabulary can be, but is not always, controlled and is generally limited to sight words, words of few syllables, and a familiar spoken vocabulary. (Miskec and Wannamaker 14)

Aimed at newly independent readers, these books are, "mass-marketed commercial ventures: paperback copies of brightly colored series...which fill the shelves of bookstores, toy stores, drug stores, and even gas stations (Miskec and Wannamaker 12). In short, this type of work is fast paced, relatable, and full of qualities that appeal to children in specific. Due to all of these qualities, early readers as a category tend to be overlooked, often seen as something that is a silly, stepping stone type of novel which children may fly through in order to make their way to more serious literature. Although this category tends to be overlooked at times, it is beginning to prove its worth. For example, early readers are becoming more and more integrated into childhood classrooms and are being published at greater volumes to be mass produced and out into bookstores. It is a continually growing category that is benefitting young readers more than ever before. Through much discussion throughout the years of whether or not the field should be

legitimized, scholars are slowly making the transition into believing that early readers are a category of children's literature that

deserve much more scholarly attention and careful thought. Significantly, they are, for many young readers, their first opportunity to engage with a work of literature on their own, to feel a sense of mastery over a text, and, ideally, to experience pleasure from the act of beginning to read independently. They shape, perhaps permanently, a child's relationship with the written word. (Miskec and Wannamaker 15)

Through research and validation, the category is continually growing and is even beginning to develop sub-categories, such as the origin story.

Contrary to early readers is a different category known as "easy readers". These are what most of the original Amelia Bedelia stories are written in, and they are most of the time meant to be read before early readers. Both easy and early readers will often be adaptations of original stories, in order to make them easier to read for children of a younger age. According to adaptation theory, adaptations are best described in the literature environment as, "a strategy of participation...rather than develop wholly new works, audiences take ownership over existing [works] and change them to what they most identify with" (Hutcheon 26). This can be seen and studied as "a formal entity or product, a process of creation, or a process of reception" (Hutcheon 26). One of the most important factors in adaptation theory is that it assumes the same "essence" or "core" of the original (Stam 57). When it comes to the adaptation that was made for Amelia Bedelia, it does not follow the correct form. Adaptations can take many different forms in literature, whether it be an early reader becoming an easy reader, or even a full novel becoming an early reader. Either way, the adaptations are supposed to further inform the reader about a particular story, just tell it in a slightly new or different way.

Many people, especially in literature, think of adaptations as something that will give more information to the audience about characters, such as their childhood, or even their future. In the case of Amelia Bedelia, the exact opposite is done. In fact, in order to understand the early reader adaptation of Amelia Bedelia, one must first read the originals to get a context of who Amelia Bedelia is and how she functions. By taking it backwards, it creates something that is psychologically unrealistic. In general, someone would read something such as *Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew* first, due to the fact that that is not only what is at their reading level, but it is what they have the mental capacity to understand at that age. They would then go on to read the later *Nancy Drew* novels, thus creating a full circle of literature. The order of those novels makes sense because *Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew* falls within the category of early readers, which leads to the original novels in higher reading levels. When it comes to reading Amelia Bedelia, it is almost impossible to read the adaptations first because you would have no background on who Amelia was. It doesn't make sense in the literary world to have an easy reader that is meant to be read first and an adaptation of a story that is an easy reader that won't be read by children until later in their time as readers.

Due to the fact that the context of Amelia Bedelia's origin story doesn't make sense, nonsense is created through her stories. Nonsense can be defined by

an outrageously brief and extraordinarily faulty definition: nonsense literature is a kind of structured, playful subversion of language and logic, or as a parody of sense, and thus, it is far from being inconsequential, meaningless, or simple (as opposed to complex) silliness. It maintains a balanced tension between meanings and lack of meaning, skirting "sense" in many ways, but creating it in other, unexpected ways. (Stewart 4)

Although nonsense doesn't necessarily mean a bad thing, it sometimes takes away from the sophistication of the story, which happens in the case of Amelia Bedelia. The language is stripped of its meaning; thus the sophistication of the story is taken away. An origin story is meant to lead forward, and the stories meant to be an origin for Amelia Bedelia do not; they lead backwards. As an adaptation, Amelia Bedelia's story does not make sense, and cannot be classified as an origin story.

Amelia Bedelia has been known since its start for a young woman with a witty personality and child like demeanor. The books became an instant classic, and are known by everyone in the literature world. If Amelia is known for one thing, it is her inability to differentiate figures of speech between real commands. While her qualities are very well known, no one knows quite where they came from. Literary scholars have coined this "The Amelia Bedelia Effect," showing that children have this problem too, but unlike Amelia, they have the ability to grow out of it. The original works of Amelia Bedelia have been adapted into early reader books based on childhood Amelia's experiences. Based on origin story patterns and adaptation theory, many assumed that the early readers would be a look into how Amelia developed her knack for taking things a little too literally, but unlike popular works such as *Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew* and *Hardy Boys: The Secret Files*, the early readers were not made into the popular category of origin stories. Instead, the chapter books were made into just the opposite. The early readers were made into novels that did not provide any insight into how Amelia developed her "condition," and in a way only made scholars more confused as to how she became who she is today. The novels contribute to a sense of nonsense and do not make sense in the psychological context of language development. Amelia Bedelia is stuck in a hyper-literal state, and while many believe she must have become that way somehow, it was always a part of her. Whether it be through an easy reader,

early reader, origin story, or even work of “realistic” fiction, the anachronistic tale of Amelia Bedelia and the nonsense and illogical context that comes along with her prove that her condition has all along been a product of personality, not age.

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