



Horatio Alger Jr.

Alger, Horatio, Jr. (1832-1899)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Long associated with the triumphant rags-to-riches story of young men who succeed financially by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, Horatio Alger, Jr. created an enduring American myth. However, his life belied the myth that his writing inspired, and the revelation of his involvement in a pederastic scandal has caused his interest in adolescent boys to be viewed with suspicion.

Alger authored more than one hundred juvenile novels, most of which featured adolescent boys, who were also his chief readers in the late nineteenth century. His formulaic plots rarely featured a young man who struck it rich independently. Rather, Alger's fiction presents a world in which destitute street urchins or poor farm boys in rural Eastern towns are befriended by older men who mentor them into middle-class respectability.

For example, in *Ragged Dick*, which was first serialized in 1867 in *Student and Schoolmate* and published as a book in 1868, Alger tells the story of a poor young bootblack, Dick, who through good fortune meets a merchant who encourages him to pursue a more respectable life. Despite Dick's circumstances, his fundamentally good character gives him the drive to educate himself and slowly rise in the social order. Yet in typical Algerian fashion, the kind mentoring of an older man serves an important catalyst for this transformation.

This mentoring appears repeatedly throughout Alger's fiction, serving as a sort of formulaic tic, and arguably represents his own displaced affection for boys that animated his own erotic orientation, if not sexual identity.

Alger was born on January 13, 1832, to Horatio Alger, Sr., and Olive Augusta Alger (née Fenno) in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a coastal village north of Boston. His father was the minister of Chelsea's Unitarian church, and his mother was the daughter of a successful local businessman who owned a substantial amount of farmland in the area.

Ordained in 1829, Alger, Sr. dedicated fifteen years to his parish, but after the birth of Horatio, the oldest of the six Alger children, the family began to struggle financially. After supplementing his income as postmaster, state legislator, farmer, and grammar school teacher, the elder Alger eventually declared bankruptcy and was forced to relocate to Marlborough, Massachusetts, where he served another fourteen years as the regular pastor for the Second Congregation Society.

Despite a sporadic early childhood education and suffering from ill-health, near-sightedness, and asthma, Alger, Jr. proved to be an avid student, especially once the family settled in Marlborough. In 1848, he entered Harvard, where he excelled in his studies and published his first literary works. Upon graduation in 1852, he intended to pursue a literary career.

Unfortunately for Alger, a literary career proved elusive. He did publish a handful of stories and several poems in the years immediately following graduation, but was unable to make a living through his writing.

This in part prompted his return to Cambridge to enroll in the Theological School in 1853, although he quickly dropped out of classes to pursue a number of writing and teaching positions, many of which proved less than successful. Even so, Alger was able to publish two books--one a collection of poetry and fiction, the other a satirical poem--and a number of stories and poems in the Boston weeklies.

But after four years of trying to live off of the limited income from his writing and teaching, Alger reconsidered his decision to leave the ministry and re-entered the Cambridge Theological School. In 1860, he graduated from divinity school and subsequently traveled to Europe before returning to the States in 1861, a few months after the outbreak of the Civil War. Rather than enlist in the Union Army, he began preaching and tutoring students privately in Cambridge.

Throughout these years, Alger appears to have manifested little interest in women. Indeed, as his biographer, Gary Scharnhorst, suggests, some of his early writing "reveal the author's ambivalence toward normal adult heterosexuality." Despite a scarcity of surviving personal documents--after his death, Alger's sister followed his wishes and destroyed those in her possession--Scharnhorst has reconstructed key moments from the writer's young adulthood that point to his probable homosexual orientation though it is unlikely that he would see his same-sex sexual desires as the defining element of his identity.

Poems that Alger wrote in the 1850s testify to the importance that same-sex desire played in his life and make constant reference to an absent companion. Scharnhorst suggests that in 1853, after a year of struggling to become a professional writer after graduating from Harvard, Alger "returned to Cambridge not so much to attend divinity school as to rejoin a friend."

A year later, Alger was apparently rejected by his friend, and he wrote a poem from the point of view of a woman who mourns an unrequited love. In the early years of the Civil War, Alger used a similar device to reflect his sadness resulting from the enlistment of a sixteen-year-old friend, Joe Dean, in the Union Army.

These early possible markers of Alger's homosexuality were reinforced in March 1866, when at the age of thirty-four, Alger was involved in a scandal that changed the course of his life.

Having served for almost a year and a half as the minister for the First Unitarian Church of Brewster, Massachusetts, Alger resigned his position after two boys, ages thirteen and fifteen, accused him of molesting them.

The committee charged with investigating Alger concluded that he had practiced "deeds . . . too revolting to relate," and Alger admitted that he had been "imprudent" with the boys. The confrontation left him so embarrassed that he quickly left town, fleeing to his parents' home in South Natick, Massachusetts.

In their final report, the committee concluded that Alger was guilty of "gross immorality and a most heinous crime, a crime of no less magnitude than the abominable and revolting crime of unnatural familiarity with boys."

From our contemporary perspective, it is unclear exactly what transpired between Alger and these two boys, but considering the vehemence of his accusers' parents and his own confession and terrorized flight from Brewster and the ministry, it is likely that Alger acted in some way on his same-sex desires. As a result, he was effectively banned from ever again leading a congregation.

After this incident, Alger retreated from the ministry and turned to writing the juvenile novels for which he is famous. He moved to New York City, where he became active in the Children's Aid Society that Charles Loring Brace sponsored. Committed to the social reform of destitute youth, he opened his home to many young boys and adolescents, using them as models for his fiction. He even took in a few as his official

wards, enacting the very role that he portrayed in much of his fiction.

After the initial success of *Ragged Dick*, which was his only best-selling novel, Alger spent the rest of his life writing less inspired imitations of his early work. Even when he turned to new settings--such as the American West, especially the California or Colorado mining camps--to reinvigorate his basic theme of self-reform and the achievement of middle-class respectability, his novels failed to impress the critics and ultimately proved less than financially successful.

In a way, it is ironic that Alger's name is now synonymous with the myth of exceptional economic prosperity achieved through hard work, for although he was able to make a living through his stories of middle-class restraint, he certainly never lived the life that his name magically conjures.

Alger's mythic stature came in part from a resurgence of his books' popularity in the years after his death up through about 1920, when publishers reprinted them cheaply. Scharnhorst cites a statistic that in 1910 alone, Alger's books sold over a million copies, far more than were sold during his entire life. Appealing to the sentiments of the Progressive era, Alger's novels idealized the morality of the country's fading, pre-industrial past.

Alger contributed to this image, in part, through the careful preservation of his privacy. No word of his pederastic indiscretions in Brewster ever appeared in print during the rest of his life. Not until 1971, when documents that revealed the real reasons for his resignation from the ministry were unearthed, did his interest in adolescent boys come under suspicion.

Despite the incongruity between the myth and the actual life that inspired it, the revelation of Alger's same-sex sexual desires has forever transformed our understanding of his work and role in shaping nineteenth-century American culture.

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