

Rags to Riches:

The Horatio Alger Theme in Adolescent Novels about the Immigrant Experience

“Only fools laugh at Horatio Alger, and his poor boys who make good. The wiser man who thinks twice about that sterling author will realize that Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks.” (Nathanael West and Boris Ingster, 1940)

In 1867 Horatio Alger’s story of *Ragged Dick* began as a twelve-part serial in the magazine *Student and Schoolmate*, but it became so popular that he eventually published it as his first novel. Alger went on to write over one hundred novels in the second half of the nineteenth century using the formula he worked out in *Ragged Dick*. While he never achieved the literary fame he sought, his stories struck a chord in the dreams of the American people. Edward Stratemeyer, who started an influential syndicate of children’s series books in 1883, read Alger’s novels as a young boy and set out to write similar stories which continue to be highly popular even today (Johnson 33). E.D. Hirsch included Horatio Alger in his 1987 list of ideas that form part of our cultural heritage in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, and the “rags to riches” theme shows no sign of losing its attraction. Like an archetypal fairy tale, Alger’s story of how a poor boy can move from the fringes to become a respected member of society lives on in contemporary young adult stories depicting the struggles of immigrants to the United States. This “rags to riches” theme provides the basic plot and character motivation in two recent young adult novels, *Breaking Through*, by Francisco Jiménez (2001) and *Double Luck*, by Lu Chi Fa (2001).

The Horatio Alger Hero: *Ragged Dick*

In *Ragged Dick* Alger made a homeless orphan into a hero who became the prototype for the hundreds of heroes Alger created in the next thirty years. The novel covers the hero’s transformation from a ragged, homeless boy of the streets to a respectable clerk with a salary of ten dollars per week. Dick’s fortunes improve because he follows advice, works hard to acquire an education, and takes advantage of every opportunity. He also has the essential prerequisite to success—good character. The narrator describes Dick:

He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one and had saved him from all mean faults (43-44).

Dick puts the welfare of others ahead of himself. He helps other homeless boys like Johnny Nolan, who doesn’t have enough money for food; Henry Fosdick, who needs lodging and clothing; and Tom Wilkins and his mother, who are being evicted.

In addition to his virtue, Dick has “a frank, straight-forward manner” (40) that leads people to trust him despite his shabby appearance. Such trust helps him get shoe-shine customers as well as other opportunities. For example, a gentleman asks him to guide his nephew around the city for a day because he likes Dick’s honest looks (57). His wit and ability to laugh at himself and his circumstances also put people

at ease. He tells one of his customers, "I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun up on Fifth Avenoo, that I can't afford to take less than ten cents a shine" (41). When asked about his ragged clothes, Dick says, "This coat once belonged to General Washington [. . .] . He wore it all through the Revolution, and it got torn some, 'cause he fit so hard [. . .] if you'd like it, sir, to remember General Washington by, I'll let you have it reasonable" (41).

Dick is enterprising when it comes to business. He has "street smarts" which save him from being duped, although he has no formal education. When asked if he has read the Bible, Dick says, "I aint much on readin'. It makes my head hurt" (72). But Dick has aspirations. He tells Frank Whitney, a patron's nephew who became a friend, that he doesn't always want to be a shoe-shine boy. "I'd like to be a office boy, and learn business, and grow up 'spectable" (73). Frank advises Dick, "A good many distinguished men have once been poor boys. There's hope for you Dick, if you'll try" (75). Dick is willing to work hard, but Frank advises him that he must work in "the right way." Frank says, "You began in the right way when you determined never to steal, or to do anything mean or dishonorable, however strongly tempted to do so. That will make people have confidence in you when they come to know you. But, in order to succeed well, you must manage to get as good an education as you can" (89).

Dick is also modest. He readily admits that he doesn't have the manners required in "genteel" society and never puts on airs. After Dick risks his life to save a child who has fallen in the river, he feels uncomfortable when the father praises him. The narrator writes, "Our hero was ready enough to speak on most occasions, but always felt awkward when he was praised" (210). Because of his self-effacing modesty, Dick benefits from the advice of young Frank Whitney and his uncle and sets out on a course of self-improvement. He strikes a bargain with Henry Fosdick, another orphan, to become his tutor. Dick says, "I can't read much more'n a pig; and my writin' looks like hens' tracks. I don't want to grow up knowin' no more'n a four-year-old boy. If you'll teach me readin' and writin' evenin's, you shall sleep in my room every night" (135). Dick studies with the same diligence and good humor he applies to his daily living. According

to the narrator, Dick "had perseverance, and was not easily discouraged. He had made up his mind he must know more, and was not disposed to complain of the difficulty of the task" (139). All this hard work pays off. When a grateful father wants to reward Dick, he learns about Dick's difficult history and recently acquired ability to write and calculate figures. The father hires Dick as a clerk, and he takes his first step towards financial success.

Alger's moral in this story is clear. Luck doesn't take the place of good character, initiative, and an education. According to Gary Scharnhorst, Alger used the same basic outline in all his stories, drawing heavily on the models of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Dickens's novels. In a typical story, the hero is

forced to struggle for a livelihood [. . .] enters the City, both a fabled land of opportunity and a potentially corrupting environment, where he [. . .] [struggles] to maintain his social respectability, to clear his or another's name of false accusations, to gain a measure of economic independence [. . .] . At length, the hero earns the admiration of an adult patron who rewards him with elevated social station, usually a job or reunion with his patrician family [. . .] . (67-68)

Forced to fend for himself in an unsympathetic world, the hero must have drive and a ready wit. At the same time he should be modest, responding to his circumstances with bravado, but not looking for credit. He may have moments of despondency, but he does not become alienated, nor does he let circumstances defeat him. He transforms his difficulties into opportunities to prove his character—his courage, bravery, and resourcefulness. In Alger's stories heroes succeed in going from "rags to riches" because they are essentially good.

Alger hoped that the stories of poor and homeless boys would move people to support charitable institutions for such boys and would also inspire the boys themselves to persevere and to develop habits of good character and ambition (Kanfer). He created a mythic rite of passage that connects the pursuit of success with good character. This idea of success continues to inspire writers of adolescent fiction including in recent multicultural fiction when the heroes comes from other cultures. In the end, just as in *Ragged Dick*, the struggles of these heroes become an emblem of the gospel of success.

Character and Hard Work Pay Off

In his autobiographical novel, *Breaking Through*, Francisco Jiménez shows how the hero's character and hard work pay off with the opportunity to pursue an education. Francisco, although not an orphan like Dick, is homeless in a symbolic sense because he is an illegal immigrant in the United States. He faces deportation, and lives "in constant fear" (1). But what Francisco fears most of all is not being able to attend school. He says, "As I got older, my fear of being deported grew. I did not want to return to Mexico because I liked going to school [. . .] I knew there was no school in El Rancho Blanco" (2). So even when the family teeters on the brink of economic disaster, Francisco works harder, takes on another part-time job, and dedicates himself to his studies.

Like Alger's heroes, Francisco has strong moral character. When he and his family are forced to live across the border for a short time, Francisco steals a chunk of fool's gold. He was fascinated by "The shape and color of the stones [. . .] . They looked like gold nuggets" (10). Immediately, he is sorry. He thinks about throwing the rock away, but decides to return it as quickly as possible and is glad he did the right thing.

In school Francisco wants to be accepted but most of all he wants the respect that comes from being at the head of the class, so he applies himself diligently. Even when he is at work after school, he studies spelling words or memorizes poems taped to his broom handle. He finds a copy of *Dr. Doolittle* at the dump and reads five pages every night. Francisco is a young Ben Franklin, intent on a program of self-improvement. Entering high school, he tells his guidance counselor that he doesn't want to follow the typical vocational program; he wants to be a teacher. This is the first time he learns about scholarships. "So, if I get good grades, I can get free money to attend college?" I wanted to make sure I'd heard him right" (75). Like *Ragged Dick*, Francisco has a clear goal and follows his teachers as guides. Seeing his algebra teacher, Mr. Coe, multiplying double-digit numbers in his head, Francisco says, "I decided to write down double-digit multiplication tables on postcards and memorize them while I worked. I wanted to be as good as Mr. Coe" (79). When he is a sophomore in high school, his English teacher encour-

ages him to work on his writing. She tells him, "[If] you continue working as hard as you have, you're going to succeed" (99). She also introduces him to a love of reading when she assigns him to read *The Grapes of Wrath* and, identifying with the characters, he finds he cannot get the novel out of his mind (102).

In his senior year Francisco is elected student body president. He dreams of continuing his education even though it seems that Francisco's dreams are no match for economic realities. How can a Mexican, an illegal alien, achieve success? How can he afford to go to college when he needs to help his family? Just as in *Ragged Dick*, a patron steps in—his high school counselor shows him scholarship and loan applications and secures his father's permission to proceed. Francisco's determination and work have not gone unnoticed. When he is accepted to college and gets scholarship money, his father affirms the gospel of hard work (179). Francisco's life is a moral emblem. His character, determination, and resourcefulness have led to success.

Strong Character and a Dream of Coming to America

Double Luck: Memoirs of a Chinese Orphan, also autobiographical like *Breaking Through*, tells a similar "rags to riches" story. Chi Fa faces unbelievable obstacles, but in the end he is rewarded with success, the opportunity to immigrate to America. Chi Fa is an orphan. His first memories are the deaths of his father and broken-hearted mother which left him homeless and alone: "[T]he bad fortune of two untimely deaths left me an orphan, a small boy in a world where no one wanted me" (5). He is passed from one family to the next, until he is sold by the wife of his eldest brother to "a Communist chief, for five hundred pounds of rice" (13). When cruel treatment makes him miserable, he dreams of escape: "I dreamed I was flying on the back of a dragon. It was a big, strong dragon. I rode on the winged beast's back all night. I felt safe and powerful in my dream" (19). Chi Fa has only this fantasy to sustain him through a long series of trials. Chi Fa says, "To keep my dying hopes flickering, each day I searched the skies for dragon clouds" (155). When he learns about America, he decides that his dragon will carry him away to this better place. Many years later when Chi Fa is finally

flying to America, he sees dragon clouds in the sky—a good omen that his luck is about to change (198).

Throughout his difficulties, Chi Fa shows good character. When he was three years old, his sister made him promise, “[N]ever forget that you are a good boy” and believe that “you are lucky. Good fortune will find you” (7-8). This is his mantra. When his Communist father accuses him of wrong-doing, he recites these promises to himself. He knows what he needs and accordingly he knows that poor people should be helped. While the Communists in China rally to take over political power, Chi Fa thinks, “*If thousands of people are starving [. . .] we have to help them [. . .]*. I was just a boy, but I knew how it felt to have an empty belly. I [. . .] couldn’t understand how people could cheer because others were starving and suffering” (26-27). Later he gives freely of anything he has to help others. He cares for an epileptic man shunned by other villagers and gives the man his mother’s quilt, his only treasure, to help the man endure his troubles. When he is in a refugee camp, he gives rice to a hungry, old man but doesn’t want to be repaid. He says, “We are all hungry. We must help each other” (148). Even though his eldest brother treats him cruelly, Chi Fa tries to be sympathetic and forgiving. He says, “I swallowed his harsh words and accepted each bitter beating in silence. And after every attack, I tried my best to forgive Brother. My thinking was this: *Brother is not angry with Chi Fa. Brother is angry with his position in life*” (109).

From childhood on Chi Fa learns resourcefulness and the ability to do all kinds of work. At nine, he says, “Long ago I had learned how to work hard. Many times each day I walked to the canal with a big jar and filled it with water and carried the heavy load back to the house [. . .] I kept the room scrubbed and everyone’s clothes washed and folded. Each morning and night, I cooked the rice and washed the dishes” (106-107). At eleven, when Chi Fa and his brother’s family are refugees in Hong Kong and totally destitute, he learns different Chinese dialects, Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese, so he can beg for the family’s rice. He calls out, “Double luck [. . .]. If you give this hungry boy a coin, it will be double luck. Lucky once because you will feed a starving child, and lucky twice because it will bring you good fortune” (153).

All the time, Chi Fa dreams of a better life. When the family is admitted to Taiwan, Chi Fa hopes to get

an education and make a new beginning. He says, “If wanting something very badly could make it happen, I knew I could learn to read” (163). He dreams of going to America, which he has heard is a land of plenty. He says, “I often heard stories about America, and although the dream seemed to get further and further away, with each passing day I longed more and more to go” (188). Finally, his persistence and patience are rewarded. Through a chance meeting, Chi Fa finds a patron, Mr. Ching. He pours out his dreams and misfortunes, and Mr. Ching, “listening with his heart,” agrees to help him get a visa to the United States. There all his suffering, hard work, and good character are finally rewarded. We learn in the Epilogue to the novel that Chi Fa becomes the successful owner of a restaurant in California, and he says, “Over the years, I have found America to be everything that I had heard as a child and much more. I eat three times a day, and, indeed, I am too full to swallow sorrow” (206).

In the Footsteps of Horatio Alger Heroes

Francisco and Chi Fa follow in the footsteps of Ragged Dick. Their stories like his, which on the surface read like biographies, are actually moral allegories. Dick, in his “down and out” condition looked for success in New York, a city fabled for opportunity. In these two novels about immigrant experience, the United States is the land of opportunity, the place where potential success awaits these boys. The main characters are outsiders, actual or figurative orphans, who are searching to carve out a new identity. Just as Ragged Dick worked to recreate himself as a clerk, so these boys seek to make themselves into Americans. They hope to change their current economic or social condition, either through education or a job. But the moral of all these stories is the ethic of hard work and perseverance. Luck helps—being at the right place at the right time, or having a helpful patron—but in the end, it is strong character and hard work that lead to success. Horatio Alger’s notion that these stories would inspire ambition and achievement in the very boys whose difficult condition he was describing continues to inspire modern day writers, especially those writing from a point of view that values assimilation into American culture. The rags to riches theme, a manifestation of the American Dream and its promises of rewards and possibilities,

continues to be a staple of young adult novels in modern times. On a deeper level, perhaps it teaches the values of good character and the possibilities for success open to all who are willing to work hard to achieve their dreams. Such didactic messages about character and possibility have always been a staple of children's literature. It is no wonder that the Horatio Alger theme continues to be a vehicle for these ideas in contemporary adolescent novels.

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