

Emily Katona

Professor Ings

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### A Ragged Freak

“I’m glad of that. I don’t want to be ignorant. I didn’t use to care, but I do now. I want to grow up ‘spectable” (Alger 68). In Horatio Alger’s novel *Ragged Dick*, the character Ragged Dick is a shoe shiner who wants to earn a respectable living. Through social connections, education and pure luck Dick goes from a homeless shoe shine to a respectable boy with an honest profession. Throughout the book, Horatio Alger portrays the message that in order to become successful one has to get a good education and work hard to get what he wants. My understanding of the novel however, after reading Hildegard Hoeller’s essay, *Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P.T. Barnum and the Art of Humbug*, became quite different. In the essay, Hoeller discusses that Ragged Dick became successful because of his ties with P.T. Barnum and even states that Dick is a freak himself. I have now realized that Dick has obtained his successes in a different way than I originally thought. Reading the essay has diminished my views on the novel by showing Ragged Dick as one of P.T. Barnum’s freaks, the contradictions Alger has about entertainment, the similarities of Barnum and Alger and pointing out that in order to have the American Dream one has to become a freak.

In his essay, Hoeller discusses how Dick's customers do not pay for the shoe shine, they pay for the show. Ragged Dick entertains his customers, who become enamored with his clever banter and witty remarks, as Alger writes, "'This coat once belonged to General Washington,' said Dick comically. 'He wore it all through the Revolution, and it got torn some, 'cause he fit so hard. When he died he told his widdler to give it to some smart young feller that hadn't got none of his own; so she gave it to me'" (Alger 4). By putting on this show for his customer, Ragged Dick has become a freak exhibit like the ones in P.T. Barnum's Museum. Hoeller makes comparisons of Ragged Dick to Tom Thumb. Both are small, slight boys who use their wit and charm to succeed in life. According to Hoeller, Dick's jokes about his size might implicate that he is viewed as a midget, even though he is still a child (Hoeller 258). Tom Thumb was put on display as a midget when he was still a child. Hoeller writes, "Ragged Dick is, like Tom Thumb, a charming miniature man, and his poverty and homelessness become curious and entertaining within this reduced scale" (Hoeller 255). By putting on a show and becoming a freak, individuals can look onto Ragged Dick's life without feeling guilt about his situation. He is not seen as a poor boy living on the streets, but seen as a form of entertainment. If Alger had not made Dick into a sideshow attraction, people would feel uneasy around him, as Hoeller writes, "It prevented audiences from resenting or exposing the humbug as actual fraud; it alleviated any discomfort audiences might have felt when looking at a disabled person as a curiosity" (Hoeller 260). This diminishes the point Alger had for the novel, which is to promote the help of the poor boys living on the street. If people can look onto these boys as pure entertainment, then these boys are not getting the help or recognition they need to get out of their situations.

Hoeller also points out the different contradictions Alger writes in *Ragged Dick*, such as his hypocritical views on entertainment. In the beginning of the novel, Ragged Dick spends all

of his money on entertainment, which is one of the reasons why he has to live on the streets. In the novel, in order for Dick to become successful, he has to stop going to pleasure spots such as The Old Bowery and start studying and saving his money. Once he stops seeking out entertainment, he gets a room, starts saving money and gets an education, which leads up to Dick becoming a respectable citizen. Hoeller finds the fact that in order for Dick to become successful he has to drop entertainment from his life ironic because Dick himself is a form of entertainment. Without entertainment, particularly P.T. Barnum's form of entertainment, Dick would have not risen to the social status he obtains at the end of the novel. Dick gets his connections by charming different influential men with his wits and sarcastic charm. Without this unusual knack for entertainment, Dick would have never made these connections and might have always lived life as a shoe shine. Dick needed entertainment to get success, yet he also has to stay in at night to study with his tutor. Hoeller writes, "Alger implies that Dick's rise to respectability means not only abandoning the low theatres but also cutting his ties to Barnum's museum. This last implication, though, seems ironic in the light of the fact that without his knowledge of Barnum's museum Alger's hero might never have risen in the first place" (Hoeller 256). Because Hoeller has found these contradictions, Alger's writing has lost some of its credibility. Alger says one thing, but his writing is quite different.

Hoeller also hints that Barnum and Alger have many characteristics in common. Both made themselves "self made freaks". Holler states, "Alger after his scandalous dismissal from the ministry for having molested boys had become in many ways a freak. (P.T. Barnum also exhibited himself in his own museum as an amazingly respectable 'freak') (Hoeller 269). He goes on to say that Alger put himself on display to make himself respectable, much like Barnum. Barnum and Alger are very much puppet masters in their own professions, Barnum controlling

his freaks and Alger controlling his characters to make himself a respectable reputation, as Hoeller points out, “Like P.T. Barnum Alger tried to remain in control of the show, exhibiting both himself and his novelistic hero as freaks who were able to overcome many obstacles and reach a curious, wondrous, freakish respectability” (Hoeller 269). After reading this part of the essay, my reading of the novel changed in many ways. I felt that Alger was trying to make himself a respectable name after his actions tarnished his reputation instead of trying to help these boys. Alger put himself on a freak display to make himself respectable, which is very similar to what Ragged Dick did in the novel. Alger used these boys and their situation to try to help his situation, much like how Barnum used his freaks to make a profit and help him make a name of himself.

Hoeller finally writes that not only is Dick a freak, but the American Dream in itself is a freak event. He goes on to say that even though Alger’s novel seems to be centered on achieving the American Dream, the novel does not seem very clear about it. Not everyone in the story could obtain the American Dream, only freaks like Ragged Dick can. Hoeller writes, “As Alger’s own American Dream boy, Dick rises in a world in which ‘energy and industry are rewarded’ (10), while Johnny Nolan and many others are left behind” (Hoeller 267). Hoeller suggests that in order to have the American Dream, one needs to make themselves into a freak. Alger’s books were used to promote the American Dream, rags to riches story. Since Hoeller finds the flaw in Alger’s story that the American Dream seems to be a freak event, the story has a new meaning. Alger has isolated Ragged Dick into being a special exception to the American Dream. Dick is the only one who has the ambition, motivation and instinct to rise above his surroundings and become a respectable man. Hoeller hints that, “Perhaps this is so because Alger’s juvenile fiction/humbug offers a version of the American Dream that no middle-class

American needs to fear” (Hoeller 276). Hoeller hints at the fact that many Americans are uneasy about the rags to riches story, which is why Alger’s story is so popular. Because it was one freak act that could not be easily repeated, people can feel rest assured and feel at ease with the story.

When first read, *Ragged Dick* seems a simple rags to riches story about a young lad who merely wants the American Dream and tries to obtain it through hard work and an education. Hoeller goes further to explain that the American Dream can only be obtained through a freak event. He explains that Ragged Dick makes himself a freak in order to make connections and become a respectable individual. He further shows the contradictions in Alger’s writing, such as the entertainment factor. The comparison between Barnum and Alger further explain the freak events that led up to both Barnum and Alger’s successes. Finally, Hoeller explains that the American Dream is a freak even that everyone cannot obtain. Hoeller has altered the interpretation of *Ragged Dick* by portraying aspects in a different light. By pointing out that Ragged Dick is a freak, the story takes on a whole new meaning. Dick uses his freak show to move up in life, not education or hard work that Alger seems to portray. Hoeller’s essay makes a reader dig deeper into the rags to riches story of Ragged Dick, and opens new doors of possibility with the story. He diminishes not only the story, but the credibility of Alger and his intentions for the novel.

### Work Cited

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