

Mammy, can't you tell us sump'n'to play?:

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Children's Play as the Locus for Imaginative Imitation and Cultural Exchange in the Plantation Novels of Louise Clarke.

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 **"Mammy, can't you tell us sump'n' to play?": Children's Play as the Locus for Imaginative Imitation and Cultural Exchange in the Plantation Novels of Louise Clarke Pynelle**

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Abstract

This essay examines the importance of children's play on the Southern plantation in *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot* and *Miss Li'l' Tweety* as Louise Clarke Pynelle's novels reveal play's complex psychosocial significance. The children's stories, language, and imaginative play both replicate and challenge their plantation world,

*"Mammy, can't you tell us sump'n' to play?":
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Plantation Novels of Louise Clarke Pynelle*

Joyce E. Kelley

Imagine, for a moment, the curious scene: it is Christmastime in the American South in 1903.¹ A gray-haired and rather infirm woman of modest means ventures out to shop at a local Birmingham department store. As she makes her way down one of the store's aisles, she abruptly trips and falls over a large box waiting to be unpacked, and several store clerks must come to her assistance. Only when the somewhat shaken but unhurt shopper and the salesclerks converse do they fully realize the irony of the situation before them: the woman is children's author Louise Clarke Pynelle, and the large package she has tripped over contains new reprints of her 1882 novel *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot; or Plantation Child-Life*.² Although Pynelle herself had been somewhat forgotten, her little book based loosely on childhood memories of her family's cotton plantation had taken on a life of its own and was preparing to outlive her. As the *Montgomery Advertiser* proclaimed on the day of her burial in 1907, "Many a child has been made happy as that child read her story of 'Diddy (sic), Dumps, and Tot.' Many a grown person has read the story with pleasure and it will keep the memory of the author bright for years to come."³

Today, Louise Clarke Pynelle is seldom the subject of any historical or scholarly investigations; only two full-length studies of Pynelle's life and work exist: a master's thesis written in 1930 by Sue Alice Sample and a short biography compiled by William and Addie Hoole in 1982. Nonetheless, in the early twentieth century her contemporaries considered Pynelle to be "in the front rank of Southern prose writers" (Knight 355). Her most successful work, *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot*, depicted the playtime adventures of three young white daughters of a Mississippi planter, ages nine, five, and three, and captured their interactions with the black slaves on their plantation. The book became an instant success, praised for its portrayal of Southern childhood and



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