

Growing Up: Childhood

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Historical stereotypes notwithstanding, the Victorian era did not “discover” childhood. The tendency to define childhood as intrinsically different from adulthood had been growing over many decades before the teenage queen ascended the throne, evinced by the attention given to child psychology and the training of the young by such figures as John Locke (1632–1704), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), and educationists Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817) and his daughter Maria (1849). These theorists’ ideas about the developmental significance of environment and empirical experience shaped Victorian views, and indeed still resonate today. Not the Victorians be credited with having invented children’s literature. What is termed the first picture book for children, Johannes Amos Comenius’s *Orbis Sensu Pictus*, appeared in 1658, while the eighteenth century produced much didactic poetry aimed at the young, and today’s scholars continue to argue the place of children’s reading in earlier cultures: medieval Europe, classical Rome, even ancient Sumer.

But even while we concede that the Victorians inherited from older generations their interest in childhood, and some of their ideas about it, we may legitimately contend that Victorian conceptions of childrearing, of the state of being a child, of the emotional importance of children to a society dominated by adults took on weight as to represent something new in Western history. Never before had childhood become an obsession within the culture at large – yet in this case “obsession” is not a strong word. Sociologist Charles Booth concluded from census data in 1886 that every decade from 1851 to 1881 children under 15 made up slightly over 35% of the population of England and Wales, outnumbering both adult males and females (see Jordan 1987). In Carolyn Steedman’s phrase, “Mid-Victorian society a society of the young,” and their elders knew it.

Childhood, then, was omnipresent, especially since compulsory schooling gradually removed children from adult notice during the day; the 1851 edu-

not in school, and Henry Mayhew estimated in the same year that some 10,000 children were scratching a living on the streets of London, very much in the public eye. But adult attitudes toward childhood varied. For some Victorians, it was a threat, a stage during which desire outstripped self-control and animal nature proved the ineffectuality of civilization. For many others, it was the arena within which a better society might be engineered, whether through adept molding of the malleable young or through the reform of men and women whose hearts were to be softened by contact with childish innocence. For a third group, it was a reminder of personal and social injustices endured in youth that continued to shape their adult lives, as Charles Dickens’s enforced sojourn in a blacking warehouse at age 12 resurfaces throughout his fiction. And for still others, childhood was a commodity to be marketed, in forms ranging from child labor to the sentimental greeting card, giving rise to both profit and protest. In short, the range of Victorian responses to childhood is far too wide to be covered adequately here; this chapter can only summarize, emphasize, and suggest the development, boundaries, and repercussions of nineteenth-century Britain’s fascination with childhood real and imagined.

Real Children I: The Privileged

While Victorian writers on domesticity stressed the wonders of the parent–child bond within the privileged classes, in practice children belonging to those classes often had minimal contact with their parents. Small children were cared for by nursemaids, older ones taught by governesses, who had some 50,000 children in their charge in 1851 (see Jordan 1987); boys aged seven and older were increasingly likely to be boarders at preparatory or public schools. Many Victorians, then, saw childrearing as a matter for specialists – not necessarily trained professionals, as teachers and childcare workers retained a certain amateur quality until comparatively late in the century, but certainly individuals who devoted all their time to the effort. Perhaps as a result, a major genre during the period consisted of works relating to raising the young. Housekeeping manuals offered advice for supervising nursemaids, outfitting nurseries, ensuring children’s health; domestic writers exalted the gentle influence of the middle-class mother, which was to permeate the schoolroom and impart morals to her offspring; scientists and philosophers, from Charles Darwin to Herbert Spencer, theorized about the mind of the infant and the training of the growing child.

Much of this outpouring of articles and treatises concerned education, especially that of boys. Beginning in 1828, when Thomas Arnold became headmaster of Rugby, the British public schools underwent substantial reorganization and reconceptualization, and the century also witnessed the founding of many new schools after the Arnoldian reforms gained a foothold. Whereas eighteenth-century public schools had pursued a policy of purposeful neglect, leaving pupils outside the classroom to their own, often anarchic, devices, Arnold sought to institute a tighter

tion census suggests 55% of boys and 62% of girls aged 3–15 were

discipline and a nobler outlook among his boys turning Rugby into an educational establishment

where the godly middle classes would be happy to send their sons. Moving on to govern other schools in their turn, Arnold's disciples expanded on his principles, especially by using athleticism as a pivotal force in the attempt to breed manly Britons. Curricular reforms – the introduction of subjects other than mathematics and the classics as important to boys' education – were secondary to the reform of identity, which became so central to the public schools' project that many educators claimed that even wealthy, leisured parents were incapable of raising sons well. To be sure, the schools themselves were not beyond reproach; the findings of Parliament's Public Schools Commission in 1864 were largely uncomplimentary, and commentators throughout the century continued to note educational failings, although headmasters gained significantly in the public esteem over the century. Nevertheless, attendance at a public school was increasingly an unwritten requirement for admission into England's ruling elite.

This linkage of formal education and public power helped to motivate the changes that took place in the way middle-class girls were educated during this period. The mid-century agitation for higher education for women encompassed also a drive for better secondary schooling for girls. Reformers launched a major effort to found girls' schools that would function as equivalents to the great boys' public schools and raise the status of women associated with these institutions as teachers or as graduates. The campaign was highly successful. By the time of the Bryce Commission on Secondary Education in 1894 there were at least 218 endowed and proprietary schools for girls, most of them founded since 1870 (see Pedersen 1987). More numerous still were private schools, which differed from "public" endowed and proprietary (joint-stock) institutions in that they were the property of an individual or a family. Through them passed an estimated 70 percent of those girls enjoying a secondary education at the end of the century. Like Victorian headmasters, female educators saw themselves as training character as well as intellect; they also often congratulated themselves on enabling the continued reshaping of gender relations and of women's role in the England of the future.

Real Children II: The Poor

Working-class childhood presented a darker picture. Although modern research suggests that working-class households usually accepted middle-class morality and ideas about marriage and parenthood (see Gillis 1985), many nineteenth-century commentators painted family life among the lower working classes as damaged and damaging, dominated not by loving domesticity but by brutishness or ignorance. Working-class mothers were criticized as unversed in housekeeping and child nurturance, so that their offspring grew up puny and unfit; working-class fathers were characterized as abusive drunkards incapable of normal husbandhood and fatherhood. Such views increasingly led to a sense that the nation should step in to care for the "children of the state." Over the course of Victoria's reign, more and more legislation was aimed at the

children of the poor, especially the urban poor; these laws were designed both to protect and to control.

Thus, from the 1830s onward, especially in London, we notice new and vocal anxiety about "street children" – a category that might include children with homes and parents as well as waifs, children who earned money by boot-blackening or flower-selling or tumbling as well as children who seemed to be running wild. Just as some writers considered even middle-class boys a more "primitive" species than adult men (the dichotomy did not typically apply to females), the children of the urban poor were often described as "savages," implicitly establishing the responsibility of the ostensibly more highly evolved to bring these children to civilization, by force if necessary. Because they were often associated not merely with poverty and ignorance but also with criminality, with their own offenses present and future and with those of their parents, creating new laws to affect them seemed a logical response.

These laws typically sought to remove children from the power of individual adults, who were presumed likely to misuse their authority, and to place them under the control of the state. Over a lifetime of philanthropic effort, Anthony Ashley Cooper, seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, paid particular attention to the young; causes to which he lent his name included legislation for the protection of the "climbing boys" apprenticed to chimney sweeps and of child acrobats, the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (founded in 1884, the year before his death), and Thomas Barnardo's work with homeless children, in addition to an assortment of building and sanitary reforms designed to promote the well-being of the working-class family as a unit. The scope of Shaftesbury's concern mirrors the range of issues with which Parliament occupied itself over the period. Children in mines, in factories, in theaters, on farms, even in their own homes gradually came under the eye of what its opponents dubbed "grandmotherly government," just as children from wealthier families involved in custody disputes were increasingly seen as belonging not to their fathers (who would once have gained custody almost automatically) but rather, in a sense, to the judicial system, which had new power to determine their disposition.

Since Parliament was reluctant to intrude into the internal affairs of the home, legislation affecting the relationship between employer and employee was easier to enact than that affecting the relationship between parent and child. Nevertheless, child labor did not disappear during Victoria's reign. The working classes could not afford that middle-class luxury, an extended childhood; their offspring entered domestic service, agricultural labor, apprenticeships, and other employment at ages when their richer peers were deemed incapable of supporting themselves or of contributing to the family exchequer. If the regulation or the economic decline of a particular industry lessened the chance of a child's employment in it, the presence of the young in other jobs might swell. Thus, for instance, only about half as many children worked in the mines in England and Wales in 1881 as had done so in 1841, before the enactment of various pieces of legislation – but during the same period, the number of children working as servants nearly doubled (see Jordan 1987). Numerous commentators welcomed the idea that working-class girls, in particular, would be exposed to

middle-class housekeeping practices and removed from the potentially noxious influence of their own parents; domestic service could be seen, conveniently, as a missionary endeavor in which the "converts" did all the work.

In this regard certain forms of child labor might serve the same functions as more official means of separating endangered children from their parents. Consider the Victorian interest in reformatories for young delinquents, "Ragged Schools" for waifs, and group homes for children whose parents had died or proved unworthy; all these institutions were intended to redress the faults of domestic life among the lower orders by substituting a loving and responsible discipline for the chaotic and probably criminal parenthood that the children in question had presumably experienced. Accustomed to the idea that their own boys might be best raised in boarding schools, the privileged classes had no qualms about making this decision for their social inferiors as well. Sending a delinquent boy to a reformatory, wrote W. R. Greg in the influential *Edinburgh Review* in April 1855, shortly after the passage of the Reformatory Schools Act, "is the greatest kindness you can render him," because the reformatory is "more healthy, more kindly" than the boy's family is likely to be, "softening and training, not crushing or terrifying." Similar theories were applied to destitute children who had committed no crime; whereas until 1853 such children were usually remanded to workhouses, along with destitute adults, after 1853 they might go to "barrack schools" or "industrial schools," there to be taught the life skills and mores approved by middle-class reformers. In addition to getting intellectual and moral instruction, girls would learn to perform housewifely tasks, while boys would receive manual training. By such means, the children of the lower working classes could be used to inject bourgeois ideals into the proletariat, and (so ran the theory) future crime would diminish accordingly.

In this formula, children are both the object and the vehicle for social reform. And although most Victorians saw a wide gulf between the undeserving poor – criminals, vagrants, drunkards – and the respectably employed deserving poor, whose children were unlikely to require institutional care, we may nonetheless discern in the push for compulsory schooling a desire to colonize or convert even the latter group. At the beginning of the century, voluntary or charity schools played the leading role in the effort to educate the working-class child; especially important was the eighteenth-century institution of the Sunday school, which instilled in children sufficient literacy to permit Bible reading and emphasized character training through religion. Sunday schools expanded dramatically in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, at their height enrolling nearly six million, but reformers deemed their efforts inadequate. As Charles Booth argued in an unpublished article of 1873, state-supported education could exert a much-needed "humanizing influence" upon the working classes (see Himmelfarb 1991). Parliamentary inquiries indicated that working-class children were profoundly ignorant. In slow response, a series of Education Acts from 1802 onward extended the categories of children required to attend school and the number of hours each day to be spent in the classroom, while the average number of years of schooling rose correspondingly. Until it was superseded in 1902, the Act of

1870 was the most influential. Upon its passage, 26 percent of school-age children were attending classes; ten years later that number stood at 46 percent, while the number of elementary teachers went from 13,729 in 1870 to 94,943 in 1896 (see Bergen 1982). The point of instituting these changes was not merely to provide England with a more literate workforce, but also, as many commentators pointed out in the pages of prestigious periodicals, to redress the inadequacies of the working-class family, even among the respectable poor. Again, children were the key to social reform.

Imagined Children I: Literature for Children

One result of increasing literacy – and also of improvements in printing technologies and transportation networks for the distribution of commercial products, to name only two other factors – was to expand the market for children's reading over the course of the nineteenth century: more potential readers existed, and books and magazines might be produced and shipped more efficiently, than ever before. The boom in Victorian periodical publishing, for instance, was as evident in the nursery as in the smoking-room or boudoir; by Diana Dixon's (1986) count, the five children's magazines extant in England in 1824 had ballooned to 160 by 1900. By the end of the century, children's periodicals could afford to specialize, aiming at the urban working-class boy or girl as well as at middle-class consumers such as the public-school boy, the Tractarian young lady, even the young vegetarian or Theosophist or anti-smoking enthusiast. Other forms of children's literature proliferated as well, perhaps most notably the illustrated book. Under the stimulus of newly inexpensive and effective color printing techniques and the new right of illustrators to copyright their work, scores of elaborately bound gift books destined for the middle class appeared on the Christmas market, adorned with glowing pictures by such artists as Randolph Caldecott and Walter Crane – and later by Kate Greenaway, Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and other luminaries of this "Golden Age of Book Illustration."

If the quantity of books available and the quality of their design changed dramatically over Victoria's reign, so too did their content. Early nineteenth-century children's literature typically emphasizes either Evangelical religion or secular rationalism. Often described as the first work of Victorian children's literature, Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1838) offers a new priority, fun. To be sure, religious sentiment is not lacking, in that the virtuous older brother of feckless Harry and Laura dies a saintly death for the joint edification of his siblings and the reader, but the primary focus lies on the entertainment rather than on the serious messages hidden beneath it. As Laura cuts off her hair and Harry sets fire to the nursery, the reader is more likely to enjoy the children's attack on domestic order than to worry about whether they are doomed to perdition.

In this sense, Sinclair bridges two apparently unrelated forms, the Evangelical moral tale and Victorian nonsense writing, since the great exemplar of the latter, Lewis Carroll, likewise based *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) on an undermining of the nursery regimen. The antididacticism of the *Alice* books, suggested a contemporary reviewer, was the secret of their popularity. And the idea that there is pleasure to be found in identifying with the child who subverts conventional domesticity – usually characterized in these texts as rigid or otherwise inadequate – continues through a host of mischievous literary “pickles” to the end of the century, with Rudyard Kipling’s wolf-boy Mowgli and E. Nesbit’s energetic Bastables.

But we cannot well argue that the difference between Victorian children’s literature and what preceded it is the difference between the amoral and the moral. After all, a major function of children’s literature is to explain to the young the principles, ethical as well as practical, by which the society that has produced it works or should work. We might rather postulate (although such judgments are necessarily subjective) that much – not all – Victorian writing for children attacks what the author perceives to be the established order, emphasizing the ideal over the status quo. Working-class children were not the only objects of social engineering during this period; through their pleasure reading, middle-class children too could be indoctrinated with ethical and political views of which their parents might not always approve. Beneath the apparently innocent surface of many stories and poems for the young, critics have discerned radical statements on three overlapping principles in particular: religion, social class, and gender and sexuality.

Pre-Victorian religious tracts for children focus largely on what the child must do to achieve salvation. Examples of error abound – the eponymous Sluggard of Isaac Watts’s verse, too lazy to read his Bible; Mary Martha Sherwood’s Augusta Noble, interested only in the trappings of privilege, who burns to death when her frock catches fire, unprepared as she is for God’s judgment. In contrast, Victorian religious works for children often locate error not in the protagonist but in the surrounding adult population. Take the best-selling novel *Jessica’s First Prayer*, written in 1867 by “Hesba Stretton” (Sarah Smith). Jessica is a street child, the daughter of an alcoholic actress; her religious education and her general well-being have been utterly neglected. Yet it is she who brings the main adult character to salvation, not vice versa. Her innocent trust in God both indicts middle-class society, which is more interested in respectability and in avoiding unpleasantness than in fulfilling the divine will, and establishes the waif as an object of emotional interest: Stretton’s short work touched off a boom in waif fiction, some religious, some secular, all sentimental in tone and activist in implication.

Religious fiction for the young might also concern itself with the educated classes, as the work of the prolific Tractarian writer Charlotte Mary Yonge shows. A protégée of noted Anglican divine John Keble, Yonge specialized in family sagas and historical novels that brought moral and doctrinal questions into daily life. The answers to these

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questions, as so often in Victorian women’s fiction, involve self-sacrifice and not “putting oneself forward”; at the same time, the novels insist upon the importance of the flawed individual, who plays a central role in the story. Similarly, Yonge’s adored father sanctioned her writing only if it was intended as an offering to God and not as self-aggrandizement – yet this dutiful daughter wrote herself into the position of best-selling author, magazine editor, and role model for untold middle-class girls with High Church leanings.

The paradox of Charlotte Yonge, an antifeminist whose works teem with strong-minded and interesting women, informs many Victorian children’s novels by female authors. On the one hand, the nineteenth century saw childrearing as a primarily female duty. Since entertaining children, understanding them, and training them through gentle moral suasion were considered well suited to women’s capabilities, few people would complain that a woman who wrote children’s books was improper and unfeminine, which helps to explain why so many female writers talented and untalented entered this field. On the other hand, as today’s feminist critics have noted, children’s fiction by women often quietly subverts established gender mores. Dinah Mulock Craik’s *The Little Lambe Prince* (1875) is a good example, in which the feminized title character is barred by his physique from the world of male prerogative yet derives moral strength from his physical weakness. Male authors, too, might employ children’s literature to suggest female superiority, as in the case of the important Scottish novelist George MacDonald, a supporter of women’s higher education whose fantasies feature goddess figures astonishing for their wisdom, virtue, and power.

Predictably, boys’ literature also has much to say about gender, and as various critics have argued, it offers an excellent way to chart changes in ideals of manliness over the Victorian period. The two major genres within Victorian boys’ fiction are the public school story and the adventure tale; the one reached its peak after the Arnoldian reforms established moral training as a goal of the middle- and upper-class educational system, the other after Britain became accustomed to thinking of itself as an imperial power. The school story, whose popularity was set in 1857 with the publication of Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, a story of Arnold’s Rugby, tends to describe self-mastering within a system in which one begins as an inferior (a new boy, a younger child, and so on). In contrast, the adventure tale often focuses on reaching some exterior goal – discovering pirate treasure in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), slaughtering three dozen gorillas in R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861), triumphing over a foe in countless military or naval dramas. Even so, this outward object typically confers upon its possessor new maturity and manhood; readers understand that an inner victory has been gained as well.

Boys’ stories suggest a redefinition of manliness over the second half of the nineteenth century, a movement away from emotionalism and androgynous virtue and toward a more hard-bitten, stoic, and physical ideal. Children’s magazines and textbooks sought to shape young empire-builders, particularly boys, by instilling a set of attitudes toward the inhabitants of India, Africa, and China that would prepare

serial after adventure serial in the late-Victorian years minimized introspection in favor of action and unquestioning belief in British superiority. Writers such as G. A. Henty chronicled dozens of military campaigns without wasting ink on character development, signaling to readers that history is about derring-do, not feelings. Yet even while this form dominated boys' fiction, other writers upheld an older version of manliness involving passionate same-sex friendship, doubts, tenderness, and soul-searching. If girl's stories often covertly asserted the superiority of the feminine over the masculine, directly or indirectly supporting the feminist cause, boys' stories often suggested that manliness, too, could benefit from embracing womanly ideals.

The strategy of two magazines published by the Religious Tract Society, the *Boy's Own Paper* (founded 1879) and the *Girl's Own Paper* (founded 1880), mirrored that of Victorian children's literature overall. First, both titles stressed audience appeal, quickly becoming the most popular adolescent periodicals of the late-Victorian age, with weekly sales of around 200,000 copies each; since children typically shared copies, actual readership was considerably higher (see Drotner 1988). Second, their primary goal was neither entertainment nor profit – indeed, the more high-minded members of the Society found the magazines' financial health dismaying – but social engineering. The founders' object was to offer young readers an appealing but clean alternative to sensational literature, then as now often considered socially destructive, in order to improve the moral tone of the rising generation in the upper working class and above. But in order to sustain the entertainment value necessary to keep the attention of the desired audience, both magazines had to submerge their didactic intent. Overt religious messages are often lacking, while messages about the nature of manliness or womanliness, appropriate gender roles, imperial responsibilities, and the like derive much of their interest from their ambiguity. In this regard these periodicals serve as a synecdoche for the children's literature of their era, which combines instruction and delight – but often in such a way as to turn the instruction into something surprising, even potentially radical.

Imagined Children II: Children for Adult Consumption

Arguably, nineteenth-century adult literature is as morally and politically didactic as its counterpart for children. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to assign a particular work to one category or the other, especially since much fiction and poetry was intended for, and enjoyed by, a multigenerational audience. Take Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862), a poem about adolescents that was aimed at an adult audience but that found its way into school anthologies by the end of the century; by the 1970s, it was simultaneously available in the United States in picture-book format and in *Plays* (see Kooistra 1997). This crossover appeal characterizes other Victorian poems of *féry* for adults, such as William Allingham's "The Fairies" (1850) and Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman" (1849), and indeed the scholarly, artistic, and

popular fascination with "the Little People" after the middle of the century bears a strong kinship to the simultaneous scholarly, artistic, and popular fascination with those other "little people," children. Similarly, Victorian poetry for children such as Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) has always given considerable nostalgic delight to adults, and the parodies and nonsense verse of, say, Edward Lear and Hilaire Belloc defy classification along generational lines.

Such "cross-writing" is facilitated in Victorian fiction by nineteenth-century adult authors' fondness for using child characters. Jacqueline Banerjee (1996) observes that such child figures serve a variety of purposes: to exorcise their own childish unhappiness, to escape to a golden past, to mourn dead offspring, to improve the lot of living children, to experiment with new ways of depicting human consciousness. We may even see a correlation between an author's interest in childhood and his or her status in our own day, since the novelists most likely to appear on a late twentieth-century university syllabus – Dickens, the Brontës, George Eliot – are also those fascinated by childhood and by the detailed description of children's thought processes.

The *Bildungsroman*, or novel about maturation, was a popular form among Victorian authors following upon Thomas Carlyle's 1824 translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–6), a novel that Steedman (1995) identifies as seminal to nineteenth-century conceptions of the child. Thus, there are many Victorian protagonists whose recorded histories end in adulthood but begin in childhood or even at birth: David Copperfield and Pip, Jane Eyre, Heathcliff, Maggie Tulliver, Henry Esmond, Ernest Pontifex, Molly Gibson of *Wives and Daughters*, Lyndall of *The Story of an African Farm* – the distinguished list continues. For many of these fictional characters, and perhaps for their creators as well, childhood is an intensely frustrating time, shaped by loneliness, boredom, abuse or neglect, and shame at their own inadequacies or misdeeds. Adulthood has its miseries, but insofar as it brings some authority over the self, it usually seems preferable to youth.

The cumulative effect of such narratives, especially when taken in tandem with such major exercises in the writing of real lives as Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), is to produce an indictment of adult attitudes toward childhood much more scathing than is to be found in most children's literature. Victorian children's fiction about social injustice typically suggests that children can soften the hard hearts of their seniors, as Jessica does for Daniel Standring and as little Lord Fauntleroy does for his curmudgeonly grandfather; indeed, this trope seems to have had still more appeal for adults than for child readers. Victorian adult fiction may use the same plot trajectory, often in strikingly similar ways, when the protagonist is the adult and the child exists primarily as a device to explain radical character change: witness *Silas Marner* (1861), the story of a misanthropic linen-weaver redeemed by adopting a foundling girl. But adult fiction about injustice or the abuse of authority offers a bleaker picture when the narrative focuses closely on the feelings of the child, instead of treating that child

iconically. Jane Eyre fails to stir the affections of her Aunt Reed or of Mr Brocklehurst, although both love their own children. Florence Dombey wins the hearts of all the good people she encounters, but cannot gain her father's love until she is an adult and he a broken man; Oliver Twist makes a lengthy odyssey from workhouse to undertaker's establishment to thieves' den before finally achieving the middle-class security and affection that are his birthright. Maggie Tulliver, daughter of a fond father, nonetheless never manages to conform to the rules laid down for girls within her rural society. The happy endings that mark Victorian children's fiction are, at best, harder to achieve within novels for adults.

In an era fascinated by education and child development, the misery-filled lives of these fictional children suggest that the most serious charge leveled against the adult world is not outright sadism, which is comparatively rare, but rather neglect and an inability to fathom childish needs. Appropriately, one popular sentimental novel of 1869, by Florence Montgomery, takes as its title the single word *Misunderstood*: adult incomprehension, Montgomery charges, may prove lethal even to the children of wealthy, aristocratic, and normally conscientious adults. Given the frequency with which such literary accusations were made, it is not surprising that the later decades of the century saw a backlash in the form of sugary magazine fiction about intensely loving relationships between golden-haired moppets and older men who, like Silas Marner flattened to unidimensionality, devote their lives to surrogate fatherhood.

Such stories indicate that although the Victorians were taking steps to curtail child labor, children were still often contemplated in light of what they could do for the adult world, and not merely what the adult world could or should do for them. A major function of childhood in the mid- to late-nineteenth century was to serve, in rhetoric if not always in fact, as a kind of spiritual palate cleanser – a dose of innocence and purity protecting adult men, in particular, from the moral dubiousness of the public sphere. In earlier centuries, children's major value was often economic: they performed work of real monetary value to their parents or other employers, or they were used to cement alliances between two powerful families, for instance through betrothal. In the nineteenth century, raising a child within the middle or upper classes meant considerable expense, not profit. Nevertheless, children could be seen as assets not only in terms of conspicuous consumption (the parent who can afford many costly sons and daughters must be wealthy) but also because of their emotional and iconic value. So, at any rate, went the rhetoric that was current in Victorian society, which worked hard to turn children into panaceas for adult malaise.

Recent scholars, notably James Kincaid (1992), are eloquent on what they see as the pedophilic tendencies of Victorian society, with its emphasis on the beauty and desirability of young girls and boys. To a great extent, however, this now-disturbing imagery was intended not to open childhood to adult contamination, but to open adulthood to childish purity. In a culture greatly concerned by sexuality and its repercussions, middle-class children – often presumed to be nonsexual – were seen as

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pointing to a solution, not as part of the problem. Late-Victorian sex-education manuals, for instance, typically assume that the careful parent can both enlighten children's ignorance and preserve their virtue, helping to create a culture of social purity; similarly, the man who forms loving bonds with children is establishing for himself an emotional life centered on innocence, purifying his own existence retroactively. And in a culture distressed by the undesirable side effects of money-making, middle-class children, who operated outside the economy, suggested that life has other purposes than financial profit. That working-class children appeared to be implicated to a greater extent than their more affluent peers in issues relating to sexuality, money, and the public sphere in general helps to explain the anxieties they aroused in reformers, and why those reformers should so often have concluded that it was vital to import such children into the bourgeois sphere of influence.

In an era of rapid change, social instability, and religious doubt, adults felt the need for faith. One kind of faith was furnished by the wave of sentimentality that washed across the century, emphasizing the healing power of emotion and promising ready access to human virtue, since to feel one's heart touched is to confirm that one still has a heart, that the harshness of the modern world has not destroyed one's finer self. And to a great extent, sentimentality invoked the image of the child. Illustrations and greeting cards, paintings and photographs, verses and novels and advertisements, offered up children for adult consumption. Such fictional – or fictionalized – children share certain important characteristics: they are depicted as infantile, with large heads or rosebud mouths or lips, and thus as innocent; as vulnerable, in need of adult protection; as trusting, perceiving only the good in the world.

The tendency to use children as instruments for social engineering, then, worked in two ways. On the one hand, we see behind the reformist rhetoric of the era a conviction that children could be acted upon. *Tabulae rasae*, they might be shaped and molded to middle-class adult specifications to create a new society. The eugenists of the end of the century sought to approach perfection in future generations by cleansing the gene pool, encouraging the fit to breed and the unfit to remain childless; the moral reformers who busied themselves with reclaiming delinquents or with instilling ethical concepts through children's fiction sought to accomplish this utopian end by psychological rather than biological means. On the other hand, we see simultaneously a conviction that children could themselves accomplish the reformation of their elders, serving as the instrument rather than as the object of character change. If many works of art achieve their emotional power by portraying the child as unable to elicit sympathy from the surrounding adults, this power depends on the assumption that the work's adult *audience* can and will feel the understanding and concern that the adult characters do not provide; the real world is to profit morally from the flaws of the fictional one. The Victorian obsession with childhood becomes the more explicable when we consider the importance of the tasks that many in the nineteenth century hoped to use children to accomplish.

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