

CHILDHOOD

A mythology of childhood was central to Victorian attitudes. The Victorian adulation of childhood, however, is not easily described: it is characterized by the conflicting doctrines of original sin and original innocence, the competing ideologies of Rousseauists, evangelicals, and utilitarians, and the stark contrast between sentimental notions of childhood and the brute realities of industrialization and poverty.

The Victorian exaltation of childhood was rooted in eighteenth-century theology and philosophy. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), with its emphasis upon reason and its suggestion that the mind of a newborn is a tabula rasa, did much to promote new interest in educating children and to counter the Puritan emphasis on original sin. His immediate followers, the rational moralists, urged rigorous training to quicken the child's reasoning abilities. From this group evolved nineteenth-century utilitarians, guided by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and James Mill (1773-1836). Utilitarians subjected children to an exacting curriculum of natural science, political economy, philosophy, and mathematics in order to shape the reasoning mind. Locke also influenced another group of serious-minded educators, the evangelicals. Sarah Kirby Trimmer (1741-1810) and Hannah More (1745-1833) deplored Locke's "godless" influence on young minds, but like the rational moralists stressed early and vigorous training to develop religious sentiments. Utilitarians and evangelicals in early Victorian Britain were decidedly unsentimental in their appraisal of childhood.

The work most crucial to understanding Victorian sentiments on childhood is *Emile* (1762) by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau, like his evangelical contemporaries, denounced the primacy of reason and distrusted

the sophistications of society. Yet his theories were even more disturbing to evangelicals than Locke's. Rousseau opposed the doctrine of original sin with his own claims of childhood's original innocence. Rousseau and his Victorian followers delighted in childhood, infusing it with all the glories of a vanished Eden or golden age. According to this view, the serenity, joy, and freedom of childhood revitalize all they touch; the child allowed to grow unstunted by earnest schooling is guided by nature, and therefore moral, instincts and feelings; the child's instinctive innocence serves as a model for adulthood; and in this way, one's childhood becomes a spiritual touchstone in one's later years. *Emile's* provocative doctrine of original innocence appealed enormously to those dissatisfied with a stern religion and a heartless utilitarianism.

Victorians tried to come to terms with these opposing ideologies of childhood, to synthesize the disparate beliefs of the preceding generation. In the early years, however, evangelical and utilitarian notions of childhood predominated. From infancy religious training reminded children of their sinfulness, of God's magnanimity in offering them salvation, of the certainty of immortality if they would subject themselves to his will. Parents scrutinized even the youngest children for a sign of growing religious sensibilities. Parents took children to deathbeds, to prisons, to executions to impress upon the young the high stakes involved when duty to God was shirked. Tract fiction, written primarily for children, presented idealized children who accept the seriousness of salvation. These exemplary children dramatize the evangelical ideology of original sin and stringent duty to God, usually trying to afford others grace. An evangelical childhood, then, offered little diversion or entertainment that was not directly linked to religion. Frivolous fiction seldom found its way into early Victorian evangelical homes.

Some middle-class children faced rigorous training in the classics and in modern sciences, languages, and mathematics to prepare for life in an increasingly complex and industrialized world. James Mill educated his son, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), to read Greek and Latin as a child, and to be well versed in the problems of philosophy, economics, and mathematics. The resulting enervation of such a driven childhood is memora-

bly described by J. S. Mill in his *Autobiography* (1873). Though J. S. Mill's earnest childhood occurred in the early nineteenth century, it epitomizes the utilitarian model of childhood that achieved great influence in Victorian Britain. Charles Dickens's satiric look at "Gradgrindism," in *Hard Times* (1854), documents the continuing sway of Bentham and Mill at midcentury.

Indeed, complaints that childhood was a fettered thing, bound by a strident evangelism on the one hand and by a serious-minded utilitarianism on the other, began to appear in prominent journals in the 1830s. To concerned minds, childhood was under assault by the ugliness of industrialization, the degradation of poverty, and the narrowness of Puritanism. From the 1830s onward, writers articulated a romantic protest against the corruption of innocence. Rousseau's exaltation of childhood took root; joy and imagination, essential terms of romantic writers like William Blake and William Wordsworth, won new acceptance; and a reevaluation of childhood occurred. Childhood itself became a potent and poignant symbol. From the publication of *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), Charles Dickens did more than any other Victorian writer to redefine childhood for his age. The Dickens child is often preternaturally innocent, a spiritual orphan confronted by a corrupt society yet somehow able to resist its evil. When childhood is perverted in Dickens's novels, the result is tragic. Dickens's juxtaposition of innocent childhood and cruel experience took on an archetypal significance. Dickens is also central in any discussion of Victorian childhood for his vociferous protests against evangelical and utilitarian excesses; his children are informed by a romantic benevolence and a gentle Christianity. His fictive renderings of society's sins against childhood wrenched the Victorian consciousness in a way that no parliamentary commission could equal. Dickens insisted upon the uniqueness, the joyousness, the spontaneity of childhood, and in this way helped foster the cult of childhood that flourished from the 1860s on.

Increasingly, then, Victorians sentimentalized childhood. Children as natural, spiritual beings proliferated in the pages of magazines and novels. Even naughtiness, the mainstay of evangelical moral tales, lost its horror. Child protagonists no longer faced death and dam-

nation for breaking rules; indeed, naughtiness was viewed as healthy, a necessary way for children to learn right from wrong and compassion for others. The energy of childhood was more tolerated in mid- and late-century literature. Adventure novels and magazines like the *Boy's Own Paper* glorified manly, active boys, and school novels idealized the playing fields of childhood. The emergence of a strong market for children's books bespeaks the special place childhood had in Victorian Britain. Indeed, by the last quarter of Victoria's reign, childhood seemed enshrined in its own glorious, secret garden. Yet serious writers for and about childhood tried to square its idealized portrayal with the realities of their times. Childhood mortality remained high, despite improved sanitation and lower birth rates after 1870. Poor children faced wretched living conditions, illiteracy, back-breaking employment, and the temptations of drink. Even in the sanctity of the middle-class home, children faced a confusing blend of affection and stern discipline. Moreover, William Acton's (1813-1875) and Sigmund Freud's studies of childhood sexuality clearly documented the underside of Victorian childhood. Childhood, then, became a rallying point for significant social change. The passage of the Factory Act of 1847 and the Elementary Education Act of 1870, the popularity and effectiveness of Dickens's child protagonists, and the emergence of a golden age of children's books all attest to the Victorian public's growing sensitivity to and tenderness for childhood.

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER

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