Picturing the Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature

The Artist, the Child, and a Changing Society

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The concept of the role of the child in nineteenth-century Western European and American society was different from our ideas and expectations of children today. What influences affected the illustrator of children, as portrayed in nineteenth-century literature? What changed in the course of the century? The answer may be found by examining nineteenth-century historical events, industrial development, and movements of social consciousness that shaped the art of the illustrators of children and how they rendered their small subjects on the drawing board.

I would like to present some thoughts on these influences and include examples photographed from the excellent antiquarian book collection of the late Ruth M. Baldwin, former head of the Baldwin Library of the University of Florida (UF). Her personal library of children’s books, donated to the university, initiated the core collection that makes up a part of the special collections archives of the UF library complex. The collection has grown to more than 100,000 volumes.

Vulnerability of Youth

The particular placement of children in a social order has been documented through the art of the illustrator who, within the visual medium, reveals a child’s standing in society. The power of the illustrator can enhance an author’s text or even reach levels of meaning beyond the text.

Diana Klemin notes in The Art of Art for Children’s Books that the illustrator was responsible for the mise en pages, and that a book was stamped with the illustrators’ individuality. “These [illustrators] are the creative persons who are masters of technique, can grasp the meaning of a book, are devoted to the art of illustration, and understand its relation to the story. They have visualization, imagination, and inner fire to make a meaningful graphic statement and to integrate it with the text until story and illustration are one.”1

Consider the popular early depictions of the child as a small adult. Even as late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, children wore scaled-down versions of the clothes worn by their elders, with boys in tricorn hats and girls in crinolines; all depending on the adult fashions of the time.2 Why were they consistently depicted as miniature adults? The answer is as complex as the society of the time period.

Prior to the twentieth century, the high mortality rate of children due to poor nutrition, work hazards, and disease played an important role in forestalling the recognition of a formal...
childhood. Joyce Irene Whalley, author of Cobwebs to Catch Flies, points out that “infant mortality was high [1700–1900] and the number of children surviving in any one family was usually small, [with] many infants dying before they were five years old.” She went on to express the gruesome reality in all levels of society that even the most gentle and loving parent shunned the thought of the vulnerability of youth.

Parents generally wished to accelerate their child to adulthood, beyond the deadly pitfalls of youth, even if it was only in a superficial fashion. The child had no childhood as we understand that period of development today. Clothing, work, responsibilities, and attitudes of children mimicked the adults. The sooner the child became an adult, or appeared to become an adult, the better.

The investment of love, attention, and a playful spirit was an emotionally risky venture when the object of that attention so often did not survive to maturity. Entire generations of a society tried to ignore the “dangerous period of youth,” as just stated, by drawing their children into the realm of adulthood as soon as was possible. However, that is not to say that children did not act childishly and find play in their own way. The creative processes of discovery, made manifest by “play” that is inborn in children from prehistory to the present is, and has always been, an integral part of the developing child. The earliest illustrators of children’s books mirrored the social mores and events of the day, including the emotional effect on the adults by reason of the infant and early childhood mortality rate.

The absence of a recognized childhood can also be attributed to the need for cheap labor brought about by the Industrial Revolution that was sweeping through Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. It is ironic that while child labor depressed the lives and risked the safety of many of the youngest citizens at that time, the children’s book publishing industry flourished. This can be explained by the economics of invention (encouraging the use of child labor in factory work) plus supply and demand (pleasure reading materials for children made possible by more efficient machinery in the factories).

In A History of Children’s Book Illustration, it is noted that “the Industrial Revolution continued to bring great prosperity to at least some classes of society, and the constant improvement of industrial products and techniques all made for . . . the flowering of illustration and to the production of some of the most outstanding children’s books ever published in England.” This flowering exacted a price that would eventually lead to a social revolution.

Fashion and Body Language

The nineteenth-century novels, chapbooks, and cautionary tales show illustrated examples of children of all social and economic levels demonstrating good and bad behavior. Little Goody Two-Shoes, the first storybook noted as being written exclusively for a readership of children, exemplifies the righteous example of a child of poor means rising in society while maintaining a good character. Many illustrators have depicted the rags-to-riches status of Margery by change of dress and of posture as well. Fashion and body language are tools of meaning that support and sometimes exceed the meaning in the text by the author. The artwork carries the message of these early works.

In contrast to Goody’s generous nature, a chapbook from the Baldwin collection, The Merchant’s Son, illustrates in both text and art a spoiled rich boy who is cruel to his sister and to innocent animals. The illustration and caption depicts the bad boy tormenting his sister and even kicking his dog. The illustrator indicates that he is from a wealthy background by dressing him in a top hat, carrying either a stick or a riding crop, wearing a ruffled collar, and a coat with formal tails. The affectations of adult dress would not be unusual to the eye of the early nineteenth-century reader.

The Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature includes an eyebrow-raising illustration from another anonymous story titled Going to the Fields (one of many little surprises in a box full of miscellaneous examples of anonymous chapbooks). John instructs his “weak little sister Jane” with an imperious pose. John is wearing tailored pants, buttoned vest, frilly lace collar, short jacket, and cap, and he carries what, again, looks like a riding crop. “Weak” little sister Jane is decked out in pantaloons with ruffled layers, a dress with a big sash, ribbon at her neck, and a hair ornament that, comically, keeps her hat perched precariously high on the back of her head. Within the rural setting of both examples there is no guesswork as to whether these children live in a poor country farmhouse or in a wealthy country manor house.

The nineteenth-century chapbooks of moral instruction gradually gave way to books of entertainment, and so we observe that the buying public began to lend importance to the genre of children’s books as pleasure reading. With this new direction in publishing, authors and illustrators were no longer anonymous; they were given credit for their creative work.

Revolution, Reform, Revolt

The moral instruction of the chapbook grew into more powerful forms of expression of social reform. A landmark nineteenth-
century book that addresses a call for reform is in the format of the Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Events in *Jane Eyre* were grounded in her true experiences at a church-sponsored school for girls of small means that she and, tragically, two of her sisters attended, and where they suffered cruelties to body and spirit.

The character of Mr. Brocklehurst professed a popular opinion of the time: “My mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven: these, I repeat, must be cut off.” The artist, as indicated before, can send many messages both through the clothing and the positioning of the figures. There have been several interpretations of the scenes from *Jane Eyre*, both in nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions that have produced variations on the theme of the suffering children. In presenting a nineteenth-century-era child, the illustrator of a book could have been as much a voice of social conscience as the author.

The illustrator, time and again, is shown to be an important indicator of society’s interpretation of childhood. A major turning point in the way children were presented coincided with the beginning of the Victorian period (1837) and the growing resistance to some of the horrors of working conditions as a result of the Industrial Revolution. What does this change have to do with the effects of the Industrial Revolution? Heading into the middle third of the century, society began to turn away from the dark constraints, warnings, and consequences of the morality tracts and cautionary tales to instead, embrace a period of childhood innocence as an actual stage of life. Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear contributed to producing children’s literature not solely as instruction and admonishment, but as entertainment for the pleasure of the child. The mood of children’s literature as a whole changed as other authors and illustrators followed suit.

Across the Atlantic, too, changes were taking place in the artistic and literary interpretation of the role of children and children’s literature. E. Jennifer Monaghan, in *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*, writes, “The broadening of children’s reading material was not just a matter of the growing availability of all books. It was, to some extent, the product of an alternative view of children. In England, profound shifts were occurring in cultural perceptions of childhood that affected the content of books for children.” The “profound shifts” accelerated later, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

**Cultural Barometers of Change**

Children were allowed to be children in this post–Industrial Revolution climate. The Pre-Raphaelite Revolt against the excesses of brutal working conditions was the wakeup call championed by novelists, poets, and artists. By the last third of the nineteenth century the image of the child was idealized. M. Ernest Chesneay, quoted in Bryan Holme’s *The Kate Greenaway Book*, said of the artist, “Miss Greenaway, with a profound sentiment of love for children, puts the child alone on the scene, companions him in all his solitudes, and shows the infantine nature in all its naiveté, its gaucherie, its touching grace, its shy alarm, its discoveries, ravishments, embarrassments, and victories; the stumblings of it in wintry ways, the enchanted smiles of its spring-time and all the history of its fond heart and guileless egoism.” The saccharine sentiments of Chesneay’s prose were embraced by the middle and upper class Victorian public.

Poet John Ruskin commented to Miss Greenaway, “You have the radiance and innocence of reinstated infant divinity showered again among the flowers of English meadows.” The change in the attitude of society is underscored by the term *infant divinity*.

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The change was dramatic. The resulting actions of the industrialists and politicians of the day were recorded by authors and artists for the public. The actions of reform (or the beginning efforts of reform) allowed a modern childhood as society drew back from the ugly realities of child labor, hunger, class warfare, and entered an idyllic land of the child as a special creature, Ruskin's infant divinity.

Art and literature can be seen as cultural barometers of change. Children's literature addresses attitudes and class standing as it reacts to social realities. Defenses of children in the face of the brutalities of child labor were subtly realized through the influence of the illustrator of children's books as presented to the reading public. Even though drawings were often of "pretty" young folk dressed in idyllic costumes of the preceding century, the pictures promoted the pre-Raphaelite movement simply by including the working child as worthy of being a subject in glorified renditions of youth.

Look at the illustrations by Reginald B. Birch from Sara Crewe (1888) to see yet another example of the changes, sometimes subtle, in the clothing and stance as drawn by the illustrator to accompany the descriptive text. Sara Crewe, published in the children's magazine St. Nicholas, was later expanded and reprinted as the novel A Little Princess.

Frances Hodgson Burnett describes Sara's appearance following news of her father's death. She is wearing an old black dress. It is too small and too tight, and her slip is showing. Sara is in poor straits, but her spirit is not defeated. Birch draws her with a direct gaze into the eyes of her tormentor, Miss Minchin, even as she clutches the hem of her dress in fear and uncertainty. The artistic rendition is powerful because it indicates two strong and differing emotional reactions simultaneously.

Later, Birch defines a character in more dire circumstances than Sara. The child Anne is barefoot, her unadorned dress is ragged and falling off one shoulder, she wears neither coat nor shawl nor head covering of any kind. The tattered clothing denotes her status as a child of the streets. The visual indicator of her self-concept is the fact that she does not turn her head up, but only raises her eyes as Sara offers the starving waif something to eat.

The illustrator responds to Burnett's text: "She [Anne] looked frightful in her wet and dirty rags. She was staring with a stupid look of suffering straight before her . . . the child started and stared up at her [Sara]; then she snatched up the bun and began to cram it into her mouth with great wolfish bites." The powerful scene created by the author is magnified through the artist's perspective. This action on the part of the artist brings us back to the opening points of this essay: How is the child defined in the society of the time? How does the illustrator send messages of intent regarding status and self-concept? What are the events of the day that contribute to shaping the social image of the child? What changed in the role of the child of the early nineteenth century and the late nineteenth century?

Roles and Attitudes

Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel promoted the noble working child in the developing ideal of childhood he illustrated in the early twentieth-century book Girls and Boys: Scenes from the Country and the Town by Anatole France. In this book, he depicts children laboring in a rural setting. Unlike so many pictures of working class children of the first part of the nineteenth century, defeat is not implied in their faces or posture. These children are dressed in a practical fashion; the girl with simple bonnet, shawl crossed over her chest and tied behind her back for work (as opposed to loosely worn over the shoulders), a functional apron and thick knit socks, not stockings, with her clogs; the boy is pictured in a plain cap and wearing a loose-fitting peasant shirt; and the smaller boy wears a child's cover-all pinafore, as was the fashion until the male or female child reached four or five years old—a common practice carried on into the early twentieth century. Oppression is not implied in their working status.

The long Victorian period filled two-thirds of the nineteenth century and spilled over into the beginning of the twentieth century. In this stretch of time, the custom of picturing more affluent children in top hats and other adult clothing gradually diminished, except in a lighthearted or exaggerated fashion. Books, cards, and department store advertisements often showed boys wearing top hats and girls with elaborate bonnets. The literature, following the trend of society, increasingly put the adult look for children in an anachronistic category. The
Picturing the Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature

The child pictured as a miniature adult was now tolerated merely as a cute affectation, not as a consequence, emotionally, of the mortality rate or any other social reason to cast them seriously as something other than a child. The adult dress for children became, simply, whimsical.

How else did the illustrator and artist portray the nineteenth-century child, besides by drawing on events, industrial development, or social movements of society? It can be described in one word: “attitude.” In the mid-to-late nineteenth century we find girls attire that is different from that of an adult. Children’s bloomers and looser fitting skirts free of crinolines are common. Additionally, and an important matter of note, the girls pictured are engaged in more strenuous situations than, for example, the previous description of “poor weak little Jane.” Girls are now shown playing with hoops, running, climbing, and jumping. Such activity demonstrates a healthy animated role of females as opposed to exclusively passive or emotionally dependant girls.

Visual cues to stages of development emerge in society and, as well, in children’s literature. As the century advances, boys are wearing short pants or knickers, and sometimes they are seen wearing a type of hat or cap that would not be worn by men. And, in a different sense from the increasingly active girls, the boys are more often shown in relaxed games and activities that have nothing to do with earlier common poses of boys listening to lectures from an instructor or working at the duties of an apprentice. The role, then, of both male and female children expanded to include engaging behavior that occurred in what became the realm of “childhood.”

More and more illustrators of children’s literature joined the movement toward placing children in their own world. This separate society promoted by the work of John Newbery and Randolph Caldecott, was realized by the nineteenth-century parade of pioneers of illustration in children’s literature, by a contingent of other artists (which would open this topic to a broader treatment). The power of the illustrator helped define this new concept of “childhood” through clothing, body language, and actions. The new concept was a visible part of the changes in society taking place in politics, science, education, and the economy of Western world literature.

New Age of Childhood

The illustrations by such artists as Boutet de Monvel reveal in presenting happy and active children. The artist acted as a bridge from the late nineteenth-century Victorian era to the pre-World War I blossoming of the arts throughout Europe and America.

Note the kinetic energy of the illustrator’s children as pictured riding a rocking horse on the cover of the book by France, *Girls and Boys: Scenes from Country and the Town* (1917). The children are not pictured as small adults here, in either dress or demeanor. They are, blissfully, children. They wildly ride the rocking horse. Their energy and total abandonment to the activity represents the new age of childhood that did not have a place in earlier literature—or society.

From post–World War I to the twenty-first century, social changes have made a geometric leap around the globe. The culturally diverse illustrators and authors presented by today’s publishing industry continue to be important in measuring the role of the child in our contemporary society. Conclusively, an important role was played by the nineteenth-century artist in the interpretation of the place of the child within the adult world. Social changes and developments throughout the nineteenth century shaped the imagination and art of illustrators of the day, in the context of children’s literature. The illustrators of children’s literature assisted the social evolution that extended throughout the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century and helped define the notion of a period called childhood.

References

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8. Ibid.

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