The Romantic Child, c.1780-1830

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An understanding of the prevailing attitude toward children in the Romantic period begins with William Wordsworth’s mythology of the infant as a “Seer blest”:

… trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature’s Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

(“Ode: Intimations of Immortality, ll. 64–76)

Embodying innocence, immediacy, and uncultivated vision, the Wordsworthian child is an idealized construction offering a model for the male poet seeking to redeem the dying-away of light and joy. But newborn babies trail many things besides clouds of glory, and the compulsion to imagine childhood as a state of paradise might be understood as a reaction against the pressure of a harsh world of experience. The figure of the child—a staple of Romanticism—represented qualities under threat in an increasingly commercial and urban society, such as autonomy, intimacy with nature, and an unmitigated capacity for wonder and joy.

Unguarded Innocence

“Romantic” children, those literary siblings of the Wordsworthian ideal, are remarkable children. Thus, despite being imprisoned by a tyrannical father all through adolescence, Elizabeth Inchbald’s angelic heroine Matilda, in A Simple Story (1791), somehow sustains a spotlessness of demeanor and generosity of soul. Similarly, in “Frost at Midnight” (1797), Samuel Taylor Coleridge portrays his infant son Hartley as a blest being whose closeness to nature endows him with heightened perceptive power. He thus imagines little Hartley wandering “like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain,” fully able to “see and hear/ The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible” of God’s “eternal language” (lines 54-60). Yet there is a tension in the poem between this fantasy of mobility and mastery and the reality of the sleeping, silent baby.
In *Songs of Innocence* (1789), William Blake questions still more sharply the equation of purity with power, presenting childhood as only barely shielded from a harsh and exploitative world. His chimney sweepers, heads shaved, maintain innocence as a sustaining fantasy: “Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head’s bare / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair” (“The Chimney Sweeper,” ll. 7-8).

**A Harsher Reality**

The disparity between the mythology of the Romantic child (often a masculine construction) and its reality is apparent in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818), where a misbehaved toddler nearly strangles the heroine, Anne Elliot. When, in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1760), the philosophizing Walter Shandy suggests to his wife the potential benefits of a Caesarean birth, he neglects to mention the fact that this almost certainly meant death to the mother; Mrs. Shandy turns “as pale as ashes at the very mention of it,” and the subject quickly drops. Forty years later, despite (or, perhaps in part, because of) the obstetric studies of men such as William Hunter and William Smellie, childbirth remained a terrifying and painful experience that often culminated in death for the mother. Survival meant the possibility of mourning an older, deceased child (as Wordsworth knew from experience). On average, one in four children died within a decade of birth, less than in previous generations but a stark reality nonetheless; rare was the family that hadn’t lost a child.

Against the Wordsworthian ideal, then, we might set the example of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. By the time she was twenty-five, two of her children had died and a third had been still-born; a fourth pregnancy had culminated in miscarriage. Her own mother, the eminent feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, had died of complications resulting from her own birth. It is no surprise, perhaps, that Shelley should have written a book about the horrors of childbirth and the tribulations of parenthood: *Frankenstein* (1818), which has been interpreted as the narrative of a lone parent who abandons his child after a traumatic birth experience.

**Adults-in-Training**

Although Frankenstein’s Creature embodies philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of natural innocence, Shelley simultaneously undercuts the Romantic habit of figuring the child as an attractively primitive figure. Desperate for companionship, the Creature at one point approaches William, a four-year-old boy whom he assumes will be “unprejudiced,” due to his having “lived a too short time to have imbibed a horror of deformity.” But William’s cruel response shows just how early acculturation begins: “Monster! Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me and tear me to pieces. You are an ogre. Let me go, or I will tell my papa.” The boy’s response, attuned as it is to the norm of aesthetic beauty (he recognizes the Creature as “Ugly”) and to the symbolic law of the father (his “papa” will set things right), indicates the various norms into which he’s been so effectively indoctrinated, even at so young an age.
This emphasis on indoctrination and acculturation was perhaps the defining characteristic of childhood in the Romantic period. For every writer who celebrated the child as a “Seer blest” whose visionary power could edify and enlighten its elders, many, many more adults participated in a burgeoning new educational industry which conceived of children as undeveloped subjects in need of training themselves. Whereas Rousseau and the Romantic poets believed that children needed to be protected from the adult, commercial world in order to remain uncorrupted, these enterprising educators aimed to enmesh children in the conventions of adult society, treating them less as children of Nature than as adults-in-training.

A New Market

Buoyed by technological developments, booksellers benefited greatly from this heightened concern with education. In the middle of the eighteenth century, children came to constitute an important new market for booksellers (or rather, the adults purchasing books on their behalf did). John Newbery began publishing children’s books in the 1740s, and by century’s end several booksellers were vying for share of the market in this specialized field. The emergence of new printing technologies made books cheaper at a time when rising literacy rates were expanding the reading market. As steel engraving made illustrations easier to produce, picture books for children proliferated, as well as abridged and illustrated stories from the Bible or Shakespeare.

This new industry was very much influenced by philosopher John Locke’s characterization of the mind at birth as a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, which suggested a subject awaiting acculturation. Young boys were subjected to a steady diet of biographies of Great Men, which incited them to explore, conquer, and reap profit from the outside world, while girls were most often encouraged to perform domestic duties and personify passivity, modesty, and compliance. Instructional literature for girls ranged from overtly prescriptive conduct manuals, such as Reverend James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) and John Gregory’s *Father’s Legacy of his Daughters* (1774), to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788; with engravings by Blake), to imaginative nursery tales like *The History of Little Good Two Shoes* (c. 1765). It even included sentimental novels, such as Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778), which taught reasonably well-to-do girls how to survive in a social world governed by intricate and often hard to discern rules of decorum.

The Game of Life

The merger of instruction and amusement is readily apparent in the culture of children’s games. A brief look at these games opens a lens onto the vexed nature of Romantic childhood. In his bestselling novel *Waverley* (1814), Walter Scott lamented that “The history of England is now reduced to a game at cards,—the problems of mathematics to puzzles and riddles,—and the doctrines of arithmetic may, we are assured, be sufficiently acquired, by spending a few hours a-week at a new and complicated edition of the Royal Game of the Goose.” As Scott indicates, there were games to teach just about everything, from codes of conduct to astronomy. This was in line with a trend away from corporal
punishment (though this remained common) and toward the cultivation of internalized discipline.

A nationalistic agenda was invariably in play. For instance, John Harris’s *Geographic Recreation* (1809) personifies, on both its slipcover and on the board itself, the four corners of the world with idealized Europe clearly on top (figures 1 and 2). A detail from the same game juxtaposes images of French and British “eaters”: the Frenchman (space number 24) eats “soup-meagre, frogs, and salad” (players who land here must “Pay two to the pool”); the Englishman (number 25) “regales on roast beef and plum pudding” (players who land here “Receive one from the pool”). Nationalism could be made fun, and this is an important aspect of such games: as in the exploding popularity of nursery rhymes, the stress was on the compatibility of amusement with instruction.

But if games made learning fun, they also were a training ground for finding one’s way in a brutally competitive world. *The Game of Human Life* (1790), later to provide inspiration for an American entrepreneur named Milton Bradley, laid out the harshly realistic course of development for British children, from “Manhood” at thirteen through “Decrepitude” at sixty-one. Like novels, games offered safe simulations of real life, demonstrating without any pain how, in a commercial society, life itself was as contingent and unpredictable as a game of chance. One could in fact go so far as to say that such games taught children how to lose. Unlike the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, which featured attachment to particular individuals, games reinscribed competitiveness, with several players competing against each other for happiness in “life.”

Game publishers were themselves masters of entrepreneurial competition, savvy businessmen who had mastered the ins and outs of the book trade. The rule-booklet accompanying *Geographic Recreation* begins with an advertisement for 17 other games issued by the same publishing house and closes with a list advertising books that “may be deemed useful Appendages to THIS GAME,” plus 40 additional books sold at his shop. The winner of *The Royal Game of British Sovereigns* (1820), arriving at the board’s centerpiece, was instructed “to proceed immediately to the Publishers to purchase another game equally instructive and amusing”!

**Teaching Virtues**

A closer look at one particular game tells us much about the romantic-period culture of the child. *The Mirror of Truth: Biographical Anecdotes and Moral Essays calculated to Inspire a Love of Virtue and Abhorrence of Vice* (1811), a lavish hand-colored engraving mounted in twelve sections on a piece of linen, consisted of 45 spaces, each keyed to an historical anecdote in an accompanying pamphlet (figures 3 and 4). A player landing on a space titled “Selfishness,” for instance, had to go back five spaces to “Generosity,” where he was to stay put for a turn. “Disinterestedness” is keyed to a story about a man who, having been offered money to save a family stranded amidst a flood, rows out to them, plucks them from certain death, and then astonishes the gathered crowd by rejecting the proffered reward, declaring: “I will not sell my life, my labour is sufficient to support
myself, my wife, and children. Give your money to this poor family, who have lost their all, and are in greater need of it.” The player landing here was rewarded with tokens.

The morality could also be ambiguous, as indicated by the game’s representation of “Integrity,” as embodied by Sir Thomas More. When his wife pleads with him to acknowledge Henry VIII as the supreme head of the Church for the sake of his children, More rejects the notion. Refusing to exchange eternity for an additional twenty years of life, he is beheaded, “the victim of an inflexible integrity.” The example indicts such an “inflexible integrity” yet reinforces the conventional belief that men act in a public world while women concern themselves with the home and children, often serving as deterrents to public virtue.

The Cost of Innocence

If, on the one hand, the Romantic emphasis on idealized childhood suggests anxiety about industrialization and its effects on human consciousness, it might also be a response to the processes of acculturation and indoctrination that we see in the popularization of children’s games. In his “Ode,” Wordsworth’s “Seer blest” exists in a provocative tension with a rather different image of the child as the “little Actor” he is to become, “fit[ting] his tongue / To dialogues of business, love, or strife” (ll. 97-102). And in book five of The Prelude, the child prodigy “Engendered by these too industrious times” is monstrous, “no Child, / But a dwarf Man” who “can read lectures upon innocence” (ll. 312-13). The Wordsworthian counter-image occurs immediately afterward, in the figure of the Boy of Winander, suspended in a state of vibrant imaginative possibility amid a responsive Nature: “sometimes, in that silence, while he hung / Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise / Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents” (ll. 406-9). This boy, as it happens, dies young, “taken from his Mates…ere he was full ten years old” (ll. 414-15)—a reminder that Romantic childhood only sustains its fantastical purity at the cost of existence itself.

Recommended Reading


