

# **The Victorian Child, c. 1837-1901**

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In 1799, children's author and educator Hannah More reacted against the revolutions that had recently taken place in America and France in terms that tell us a great deal about the child's place in British society at that time. Denouncing Thomas Paine's radical insistence that all men are created equal, More argued that recognizing the "rights of man" was an absurd idea. Next, she scoffed, reformers would begin to discuss the rights of women, and then (even more ridiculously) "our enlighteners [...] will illuminate the world with grave descants on the rights of youth, the rights of children, the rights of babies" (Walvin 45).

The idea that children have rights that the state should protect may have seemed silly at dawn of the nineteenth century, but by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, it had gained significant support. Beginning in the 1830s, the Victorians passed a variety of laws aimed at protecting the wellbeing of children at work, at school, or in the home. This activism was motivated in part by a growing acceptance of the Romantic idea that children are innocent creatures who should be shielded from the adult world and allowed to enjoy their childhood. As the century wore on, writers and artists began to produce increasingly sentimentalized images of children, emphasizing their angelic, adorable qualities. Yet despite such rhetoric, real reform did not come quickly. High infant mortality rates, inadequate schooling, and child labor persisted right to the end of the century, suggesting that many Victorians remained unconvinced that childhood should be marked off as a protected period of dependence and development.

## **A Nation of Children**

Victoria's England was a child-dominated society. Throughout her long reign, one out of every three of her subjects was under the age of fifteen. The population explosion that occurred during this period was accompanied by a tremendous amount of industrialization and urbanization; by the end of the century, a vast majority of children lived in towns rather than rural communities. Families tended to be large, although the birth rate declined a bit over the course of the century as more information on contraception became available. The rapid growth of towns quickly outstripped affordable housing, leading to overcrowding and shockingly poor sanitary conditions. Coupled with infectious diseases and impure milk and food, these factors contributed to very high infant and child mortality rates.

Poor children who survived infancy were often put to work at an early age. In the 1830s and 40s, many children labored in textile mills and coal mines, where working conditions often proved deadly. Girls as young as five went into domestic service as nurses or maids to wealthy families. Rural children worked on farms or in cottage industries, while thousands of urban children worked as street hawkers, selling matches or sweeping

crossings (see figure 1). Child labor was not new, but as industrialization continued it became more visible, as masses of ragged, stunted children crowded the city streets.

### **Calls for Reform**

Philanthropists, religious leaders, doctors, journalists, and artists all campaigned to improve the lives of poor children. In 1840, Lord Ashley (later the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury) helped set up the Children's Employment Commission, which published parliamentary reports on conditions in mines and collieries. The shocking testimony contained in these reports inspired Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous protest poem "The Cry of the Children" (1844). Shaftesbury went on to become president of Ragged School Union, an evangelical organization which established hundreds of schools for the poor. Famous child-savers like Mary Carpenter and Dr. Thomas Barnardo taught in Ragged Schools before opening their own institutions for destitute youths. Dr. Barnardo described some of his missionary efforts in the *Children's Treasury* (see figure 2), while investigative reporters like Henry Mayhew tirelessly documented the dire conditions endured by many working-class families.

The novels of Charles Dickens, the most popular author of the Victorian era, also reveal an intense concern about the vulnerability of children. When Dickens was twelve, his father was imprisoned for debt and he was sent to work in a blacking factory, an incident that haunted him his whole life. His novels are full of neglected, exploited, or abused children: the orphaned Oliver Twist, the crippled Tiny Tim, the stunted Smike, and doomed tykes like Paul Dombey and Little Nell. Like Barrett Browning, Dickens was galvanized by revelations of real-life horrors facing the poor. *Oliver Twist* (1837) was written in response to the draconian New Poor Law of 1834, which had been inspired by the theories of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. This law relegated the needy to prison-like institutions called workhouses, splitting up families and subjecting them to repugnant living conditions and hard labor.

Similarly, in creating the pathetic character of Jo the street-sweeper in *Bleak House* (1852-3), Dickens was inspired by the testimony of a real child laborer interviewed in an 1850 law report. Both boys admit, under questioning, that no one has ever bothered to teach them anything, not even the shortest prayer. Jo's dramatic death scene enables Dickens to fulminate on the fate of such forlorn waifs:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (Chapter XLVII)

### **Baby Steps**

It is easy to interpret the outraged activism of writers like Dickens as indicative of a transformation in public sentiment about children. But such protests were fuelled by the fact that many people still believed that children did not need to be shielded by the state from adult responsibilities. Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert spoke for many when

he argued that the working man's children were "part of his productive power," an indispensable source of family income (Horn, *Town Child* 100).

Thus, although legislation aimed at regulating and reducing child labor was passed throughout the century, there was no attempt to outlaw it completely. Loopholes in laws like the 1833 Factory Act and the 1867 Workshops Act, coupled with a lack of local enforcement, meant that many children continued to work. As late as 1891, over 100,000 girls between the ages of 10 and 14 were still employed as domestic servants in England and Wales. That same year, the British government dragged its feet at raising the minimum age for part-time factory work from 10 to 11, even though they had promised to extend it to 12 at an 1890 European congress on child labor.

Education reform also proceeded at a slow pace. In the early 1860s, the Royal Commission on Popular Education declared that compulsory schooling for all children was "neither obtainable nor desirable." If the child's wages are crucial to the family economy, they wrote, "it is far better that it should go to work at the earliest age at which it can bear the physical exertion than that it should remain at school" (Horn, *Town Child* 74). Another powerful impediment to the creation of a public school system was religious; dissent between the Church of England and nonconformists over the content and amount of religious instruction stalled legislative efforts until 1870, when the Elementary Education Act finally created a national network of primary schools. A similarly provision for secondary education was not passed until 1902. Middle- and upper-class families could employ tutors, or send their children to private schools, but these were unregulated and varied widely in quality. Girls were worse off than boys, since many people believed that domestic skills and basic literacy were all they needed to learn.

What explains the sluggish pace of reform? The rise of industrial capitalism created a huge demand for cheap labor, which children certainly were. Responding to this boom, Victorian economists and politicians embraced a *laissez-faire* approach which involved keeping state interference to a minimum. Forced to fend for themselves, many families endured such extreme poverty that their children's wages were indeed crucial to their survival. And although the Romantic belief in childhood innocence was spreading, many clung to the Calvinist notion of original sin, which held that work was good for children, since "Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do."

### **The Innocent Ideal**

Nevertheless, as the century wore on, more and more people began to accept the idea that childhood should be a protected period of education and enjoyment. However slow education reform was in coming, it did come: in 1851, fully one third of English children received no education at all, whereas by the end of the century, nearly ninety percent went to school for seven to eight years. At the same time, there was an explosion of books, magazines, toys, and games aimed at entertaining children. Indeed, children's literature blossomed into what critics call its "Golden Age."

With its rollicking depiction of nursery life, Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839) is often regarded as a landmark text that shifted the focus of children's fiction from instruction to delight. Classics like Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1846) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) carried on this tradition. Mixing fantasy and realism, authors like Juliana Ewing, Mary Louisa Molesworth, and E. Nesbit painted a vivid picture of the middle-class nursery as a hotbed of hobbies: private theatricals, elaborate games, gardening, the composition of family magazines, and so on.

Like Dickens, children's authors often voiced their belief in the perfect purity of the young, as when Carroll enthused, "Their innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful, and gives one a feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred" (*Letters* 381). Such sentiments became increasingly common in sermons, poetry, and periodicals from this period; the Victorians often quoted Wordsworth's claim in the Immortality Ode that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" Artists like Charles West Cope and John Everett Millais produced dozens of domestic genre paintings with titles like *The First Music Lesson* (1863) and *My First Sermon* (1862-3), which portray the child as a bastion of simplicity, innocence, and playfulness. Women were also praised for embodying these qualities, and together with children they were urged to inhabit a separate sphere: to withdraw from the workforce, embrace their status as dependents, and provide the male breadwinner with a refuge from the dog-eat-dog capitalist world outside the family.

### **Consuming Childhood**

Ironically, though, even as the Victorians represented children as opposed by nature to the materialistic world of trade and profit, the figure of the child was commodified and put on display as never before. For example, the Pears Soap Company bought reproduction rights to Millais' paintings *Cherry Ripe* (1879) and *Bubbles* (1886), and placed the images in advertisements and calendars (see figure 3). When *Cherry Ripe* was featured as a color centerfold in a Christmas annual, the magazine quickly sold 500,000 copies. Kate Greenaway also took advantage of the increased public appetite for images of childhood; her watercolors of children playing appeared not just in her wildly popular books but on tea towels, wallpaper, stationary, soaps, and clothes.

Actual young people were paraded before the public as well. New presentation furniture like the bassinet and the perambulator allowed infants to be displayed to an admiring world. Child actors appeared on stage in record numbers, performing in pantomimes, ballets, operettas, straight dramas, minstrel shows, music halls, and circus acts. By the 1880s, Drury Lane Theatre was hiring 150-200 children per pantomime. Child prodigies like Jean Davenport and Lydia Howard astonished audiences by playing multiple roles in the same evening, while numerous companies routinely ran all-child productions. For example, the famous D'Oyly Carte Opera Company had a children's troupe which put on Gilbert and Sullivan operettas without the help of a single adult performer.

### **The Cult of the Child**

As children became more visible on the stage, the question naturally arose: did such work constitute labor? Considerable controversy arose over this issue in the 1880s. Educational activists like Millicent Garrett Fawcett insisted that children under ten should be banned from full-time theatre work as they had been from factories and workshops. Theatre people and other artists, including Carroll and the poet Ernest Dowson, strongly disagreed. Acting was not a labor but an art, they maintained, and children benefited from and enjoyed doing it.

Dowson develops this argument in his 1889 article “The Cult of the Child.” As his title indicates, however, the insistence that children “delight in” performing quickly gives way to the admission that adults delight in *watching* children perform. “Disillusioned” grown-ups, tired of facing the complexities of contemporary life, find relief by turning their attention to children: “[T]here are an ever increasing number of people who receive from the beauty of childhood, in art as in life, an exquisite pleasure.” Dowson and other members of the “cult” insisted that contemplating the innocent simplicity of children served as a healthy corrective to the tawdriness and skepticism of modern life. Religious doubt was on the rise, particularly after the publication of Charles Darwin’s findings about evolution. Some commentators have suggested that the child gradually replaced God as an object of worship.

But although adherents to the cult of the child described their appreciation in religious and/or aesthetic terms, the art they produced reveals a disturbing tendency to conceive of the child as the ideal romantic partner. In novels like Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and J. M. Barrie’s *The Little White Bird* (1902), besotted bachelors pursue children rather than women, while Dowson wrote a sonnet sequence celebrating the charms “Of a Little Girl.” Dowson also fell in love with an eleven-year-old named Adelaide Foltinowicz, proposing to her when she was fourteen. He was not alone; eminent Victorians like John Ruskin and the Archbishop of Canterbury also wooed young girls, and child prostitution was an accepted if deplored fact of London life.

### **Strange Inconsistencies**

To our eyes, the Victorians seem very inconsistent in terms of their attitudes toward children. Child-worshippers who waxed rhapsodic about the perfect purity of children simultaneously eroticized them. Even as sentimentality about childhood reached new heights, the notion that all children are savages likewise gained widespread support; many Victorians accepted the “Law of Recapitulation,” which stipulated that as a child develops, he or she repeats the stages of development of the human race. This belief in “the savagery of all children and the childishness of all savages” served a justification for subjecting children to harsh discipline, and natives of other countries to the rule of the expanding British Empire (Cunningham 98).

These contradictory impulses of cruelty and concern informed the actions of individual Victorians. Journalist W. T. Stead provides a perfect example. In 1885, he launched a campaign to raise awareness about child prostitution and prod the government to raise the age of consent. But his method of pursuing these admirable goals landed him in jail. To

prove that virgins were being sold on the street in record numbers, he abducted a thirteen-year-old girl without telling her parents what he planned to do with her. After subjecting the unwitting girl to a medical exam to prove her purity, he drugged her, pretended to accost her, and sent her off to Paris. The lurid account he wrote of these events featured headings like “The Violation of Virgins” and “Strapping Girls Down.” It reads like pornography, yet it helped assure the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen. This bizarre event encapsulates some of the conflicting discourses circulating around the Victorian child.

### **Recommended Reading**

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