



Devils & Dolls

Conceptualising the Victorian Child



What is a Child?

“A young person of either sex, usually one below the age of puberty; a boy or girl.”
(*OED*, 2a)

undeveloped

Not-adult

immature

dependents

minors

**Child-of-parent
offspring**



Suggests a sense
of possession

Age-dependent?

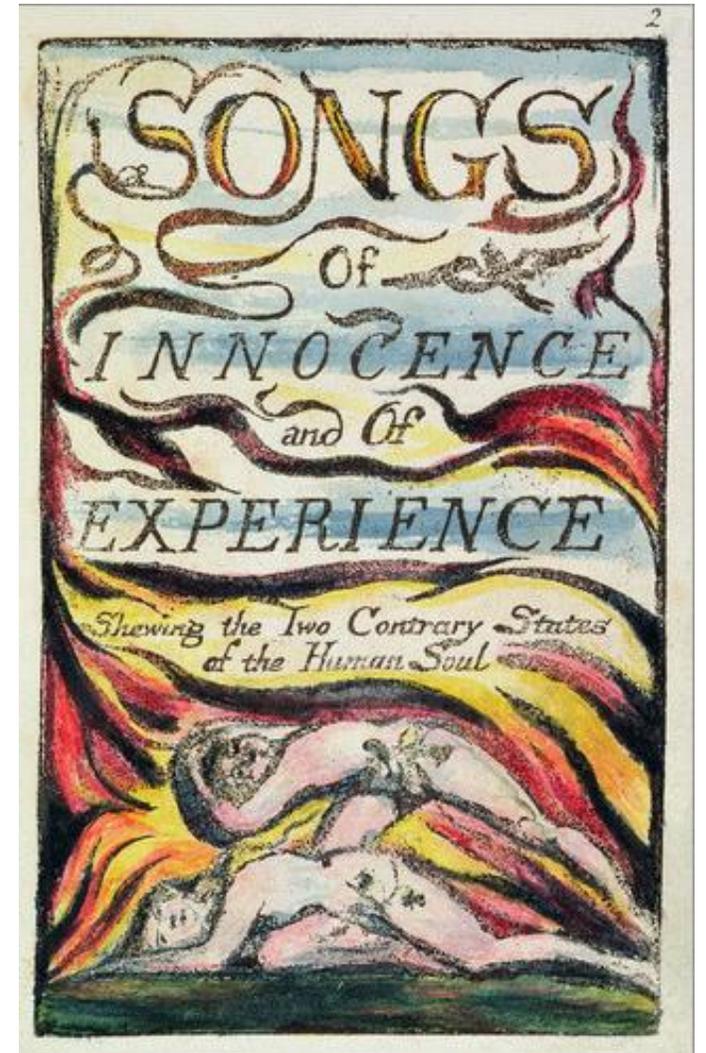
for power. In conversation, every person expressed without constraint their wishes and opinions; and wherever these differed, reason and the general good were the standards to which they appealed. The elder and younger part of the family were not separated from each other, even the youngest child in the house seemed to form part of the society, to have some share and interest in the general occupations or amusements. The

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BELINDA

children were treated neither as slaves nor as playthings, but as reasonable creatures; and the ease with which they were managed, and with which they managed themselves, surprised Belinda; for she heard none of that continual lecturing which goes forward in some houses, to the great fatigue and misery of all the parties concerned, and of all the spectators. Without force, or any factitious excitements, the taste for knowledge, and the habits of application, were induced by example, and confirmed by sympathy. Mr Percival was a man of science and

- ❖ Child as a symbol of the origins of man
- ❖ Child as founder of imperial race, a “national asset”
- ❖ Child as commodity
- ❖ Child as the harbourer of innocence or sin



“lies at the heart of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, race, and selfhood: a figure who is **by turns** animal, savage, or female, but who is **located** not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the **very centre** of English domestic life.”

Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (2010).

“a high level of **critical self-consciousness** about the whole problem of representing, writing for, looking at, interacting with, and adoring children. A rarely acknowledged sign is that the Victorians themselves coined the term “the cult of the child”... articles with titles such as “Babyolatry” (1846), “The Worship of Children” (1869), “The New Hero” (1883), “Child-Worship” (1901), and “The Literary Cult of the Child” (1901) appeared throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers*, 2009.

e.g. ‘our notions of the age of a child taken from the middle or upper classes will be utterly inapplicable to that of a child brought up on vagrant habits, or that has received a street education’

Micaiah Hill, ‘Juvenile Delinquency’ (1851)

What is Childhood?

“The state of being a child; the stage of life or period during which one is a child; the time from birth to puberty”
(*OED*, 1a)

A time of subjugation

Pre-sexuality

Time of compulsory learning
Or without learning?

Second-childhood

TIME OF INNOCENCE

Developmental stage

A Time of Play

The past...

‘There is **no absolute definition of childhood**, whether subjective or official, because it is always lived and defined in cultural and economic contexts.’

(Anna Davin, ‘What is a Child?’)

class

gender

Law

race

Geography

Religion

Over the C19th century the ideal childhood;

- ❖ Characterised by innocence (from sin, sexuality)
- ❖ Characterised by Play (for some, and more so towards end of century)
- ❖ Characterised by Learning (legally, in prescriptive schools)
- ❖ Characterised by Learning (freely, through nature and curiosity)
- ❖ For the Romantics - a time of natural affinity with sublime
- ❖ For the Evangelists and Moralists - a time to be moulded into a good person

We are born "traising clouds of glory" and "Heaven Lies about us in our infancy" (Wordsworth)

“the association of childhood with innocence became deeply imbedded within Western culture, particularly after the Romantics had made their mark in the nineteenth century” depicting children as “creatures of deeper wisdom, finer aesthetic sensitivity, and a more profound awareness of enduring moral truths”

David Grylls, *Guardian and Angels*, 1978.

Childhood as innocent



“Yet it was one thing to **proclaim** the angelic nature of childhood in a poem, quite another to create well-rounded characters in a novel, or deal with street urchins who were far from innocent.”

Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood*. 2001.



Neither would have admitted an active interest in so pale and **thin and wretchedly-clad a little mortal**. Her hair hung loose, and had no covering; it was hair of no particular colour, and seemed to have been for a long time utterly untended; the wind, on her run hither, had tossed it into much disorder. Signs there were of some kind of clothing beneath the short, dirty, worn dress, but it was evidently of the scantiest description. **The freely exposed neck was very thin, but, like the outline of her face, spoke less of a feeble habit of body than of the present pinch of sheer hunger.** She did not, indeed, look like one of those children who are born in disease and starvation, and put to nurse upon the pavement; her limbs were shapely enough, her back was straight, **she had features that were not merely human, but girl-like, and her look had in it the light of an intelligence generally sought for in vain among the children of the street.** The blush and the way in which she hung her head were likewise **tokens of a nature endowed with ample sensitiveness.**

Gissing, *The Nether World*

Child Death

...Wilson's twin lads were ill of the fever.

They had never been strong. **They** were like many a pair of twins, and seemed to have but **one life** divided between them. One life, one strength, and in this instance, I might almost say, one brain; for they were **helpless, gentle, silly children**, but not the less dear to their parents and to their strong, active, manly, elder brother. **They** were late on their feet, late in talking, late every way; had to be nursed and cared for when other lads of their age were tumbling about in the street, and losing themselves.

Mary Barton

Mrs. Wilson in the old rocking-chair, with **one sick, death-like boy** lying on her knee, crying without let or pause, but softly, gently, as fearing to disturb **the troubled, gasping child**; while behind her, old Alice let her fast-dropping tears fall down on the **dead body of the other twin**, which she was laying out on a board, placed on a sort of sofa-settee in a corner of the room. Over the child, which yet breathed, the father bent, watching anxiously for some ground of hope, where hope there was none. Mary stepped slowly and lightly across to Alice.

"Ay, poor lad! God has taken him early, Mary."

Mary could not speak; she did not know what to say; it was so much worse than she expected. At last she ventured to whisper,

"Is there any chance for **the other one**, think you?"

Alice shook her head, and told with a look that she believed there was none. She next endeavoured to **lift the little body**, and carry it to its old accustomed bed in its parents' room. But earnest as the father was in watching the yet-living, he had eyes and ears for all that concerned the dead, and sprang gently up, and took his dead son on his hard couch in his arms with tender strength, and carried him upstairs as if afraid of wakening him.

The other child gasped longer, louder, with more of effort.

"We mun get him away from his mother. He cannot die while she's wishing him."

"Wishing him?" said Mary, in a tone of inquiry.

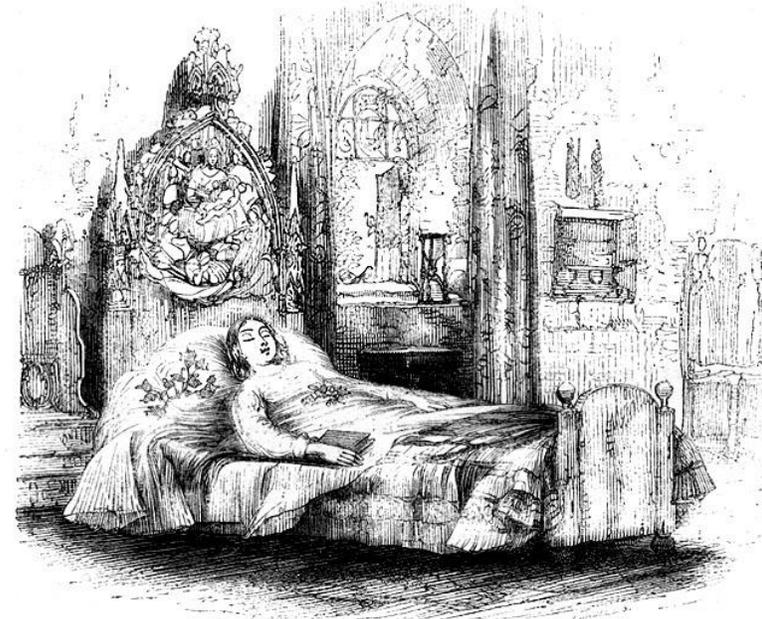
"Ay; donno ye know what wishing means? There's none can die in the arms of those who are wishing them sore to stay on earth. The soul o' them as holds them won't let the dying soul go free; so it has a hard struggle for the quiet of death.

‘the idea that death could preserve a child at the height of its attractions and while still pure resulted in a new appreciation of the potential beauty of [...] child death.’

Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynold, *Representations of Childhood Death*, 2000.



Postmortem Portait of a Baby (c.1856)



George Cattermole, “At Rest (Nell dead)” in Charles Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*. (1848)

In a chair, at the head of the bed, sat the mother,—smiling. She held one of the hands (rapidly stiffening, even in her warm grasp), and gently stroked the back of it, with the endearing caress she had used to all her children when young. [...]

"Oh, he was always a rogue! You remember, don't you, love? how full of play he was as a baby; hiding his face under my arm, when you wanted to play with him. Always a rogue, Harry!"

Mary Barton

“As innocent as children seem to be to us, yet if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God’s sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers. . . .”

Jonathan Edwards (1730)

As Evil

“As to any recreation with other children of my age, I had very little of that; for the **gloomy theology of the Murdstones made all children out to be a swarm of little vipers** (though there WAS a child once set in the midst of the Disciples), and held that they **contaminated one** another.

The natural result of this treatment, continued, I suppose, for some six months or more, was to make me sullen, dull, and dogged. I was not made the less so by my sense of being daily more and more shut out and alienated from my mother.”

David Copperfield

Writers were fascinated by the social status of children as ‘non-functional’, . . . this may also be why Victorian Evangelicals found them so **sinister**, as indeed do some modern horror films, since anything which falls outside the realm of functionality seems to a utilitarian to fall outside the domain of morality too. The Victorians thus could not make up their mind whether children were angelic or demonic, *Oliver Twists* or *Artful Dodgers*. They are also, of course, sinister because they are **uncanny**, very **like adults but not at all like them**.

Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 2003

I should think there never can have been a man who enjoyed his profession more than Mr. Creakle did. **He had a delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite.** I am confident that he **couldn't resist** a chubby boy, especially; that there was a fascination in such a subject, which made him restless in his mind, until he had scored and marked him for the day. I was chubby myself, and ought to know.

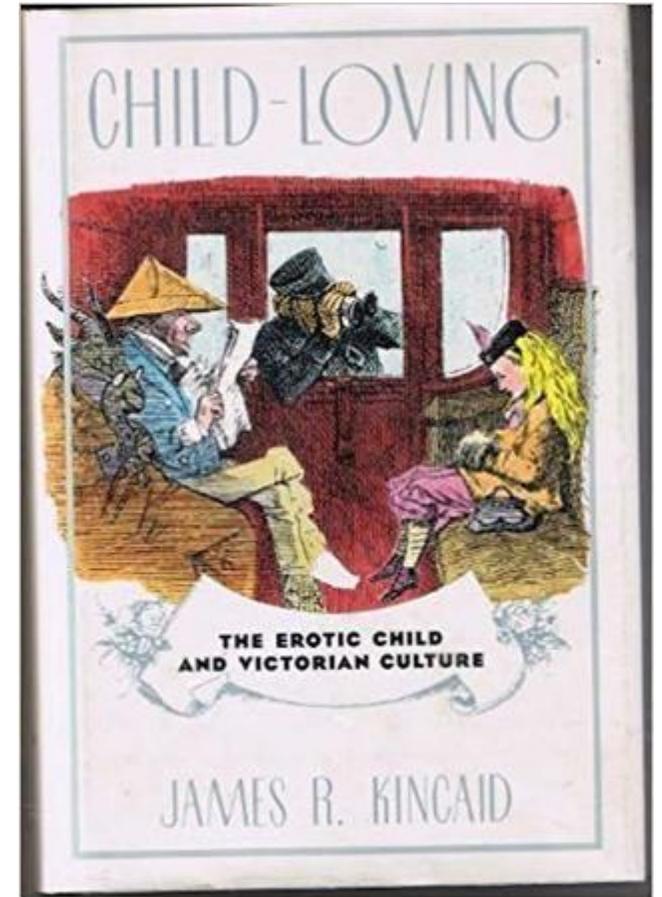
David Copperfield

“By insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child” the Victorians” **created a subversive echo:** experience, corruption, eroticism”

James Kincaid, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Literature*, 1992.

“One thing which Dickens seems to have recognized, and which most of his contemporaries did not, is the sadistic sexual element in flogging.”

George Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, 1940.



Child as Savage (C19th sources)

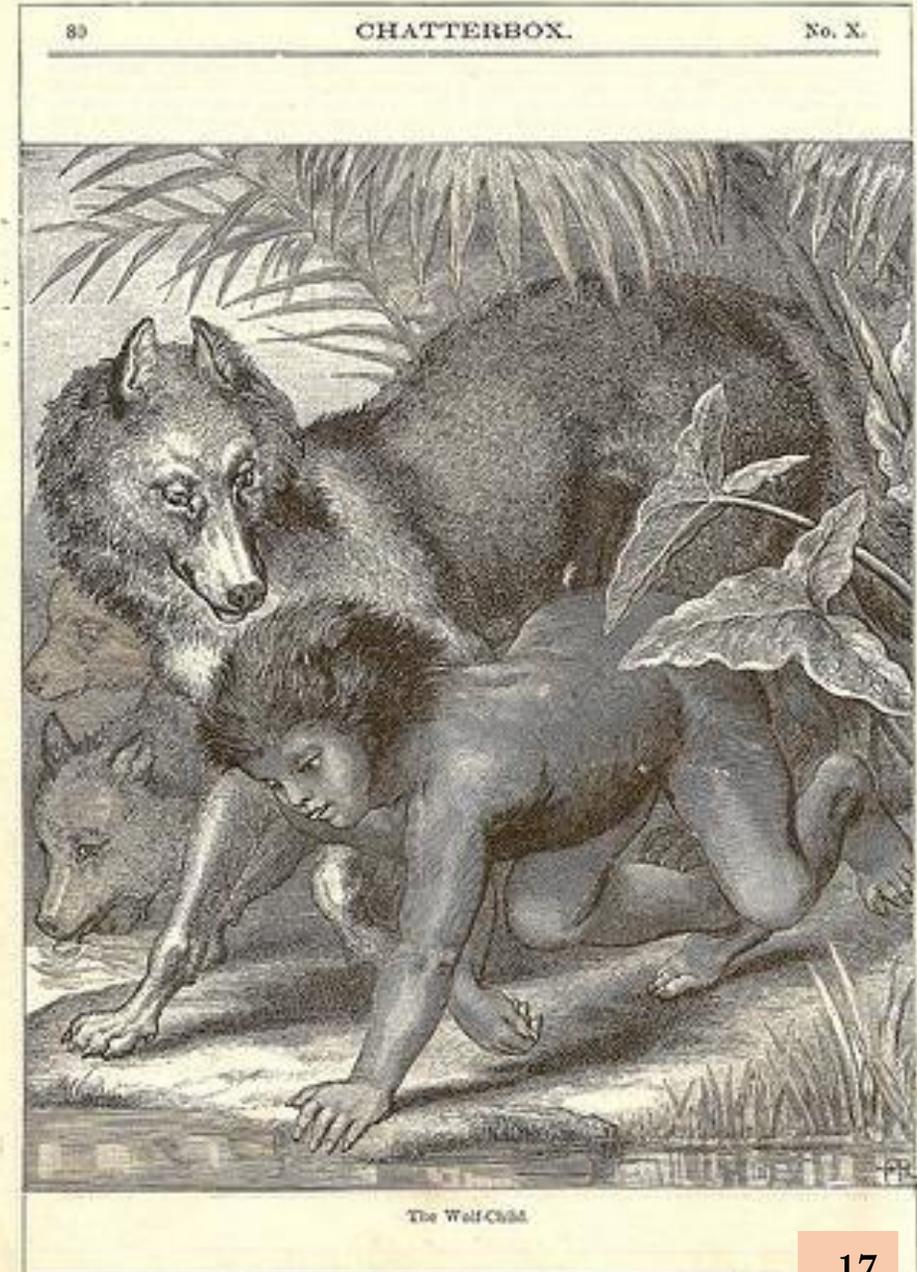
“the quick passion, the vices, the cruelties, and the other evidences of an uninformed moral sense which the young child discovers, are invariably observable also in the **infantile mind of a barbarous people**”

Henry Maudsley, *Journal of Mental Science* (1862)

S. S. Buckman’s “Babies and Monkeys” (1894), contended that “the actions of children when rightly interpreted tell their own tale and may fitly be compared to ancient monuments of prehistoric times”.

Alfred A. Mumford’s “Survival Movements of Human Infancy” (*Brain*, 1897), sees babies’ movements as survivals of ancestral water-dwelling forms.

Louis Robinson’s articles “Darwinism in the Nursery” (1891) and “The Meaning of a Baby’s Footprint” (1892)



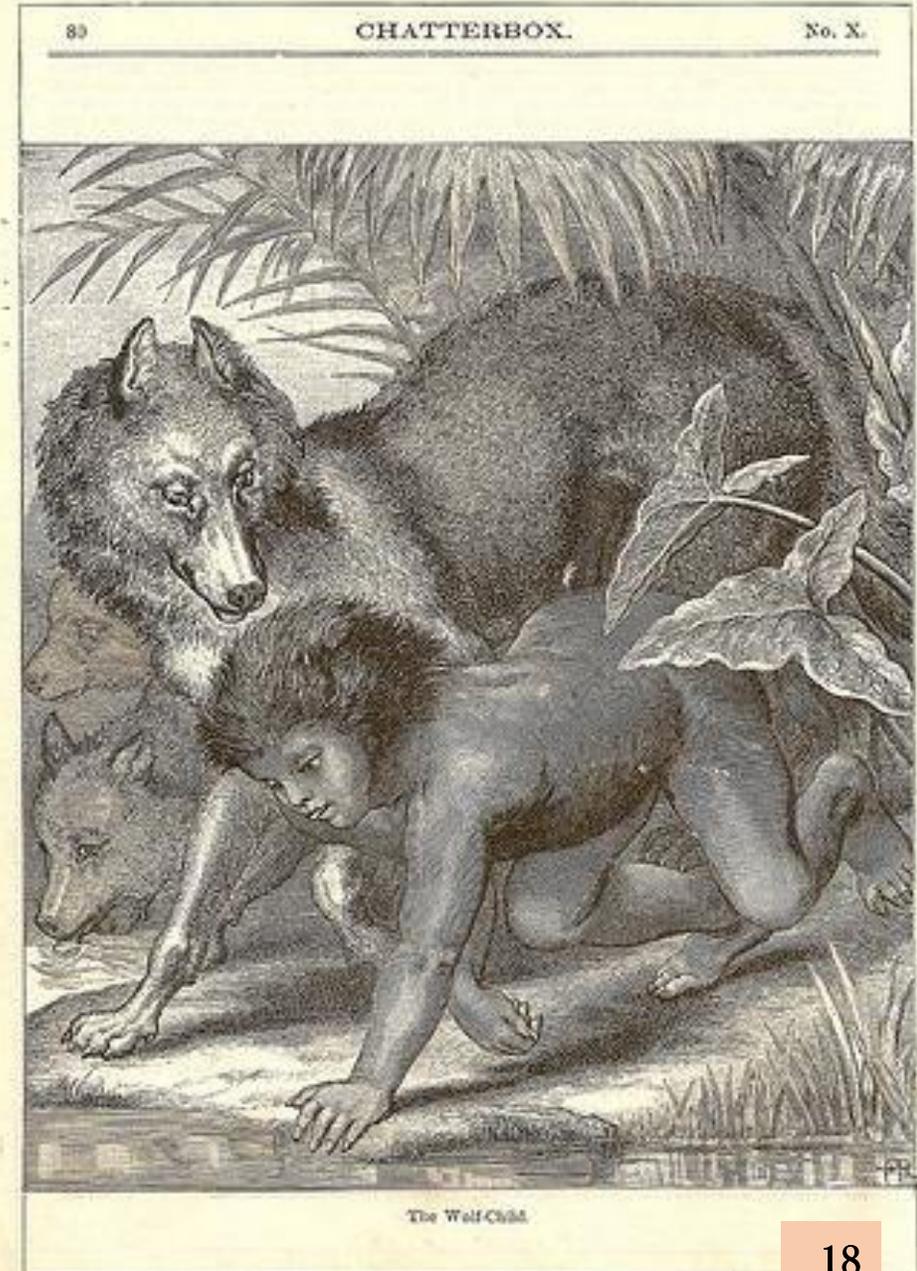
Child as Savage

C19th Western sociological theorists ‘saw in other cultures primitive forms of the human condition. These they regarded as childish in their simplicity and irrational in their belief.’ Theorists such as August Comte suggested the foreign “savage” was the ‘precursor of civilised man, paralleling the way that the [white, Western] child prefigured adult life’

Prout & James, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 1997

[In literature] ‘usually appears in the modified form of the moderately naughty child, often in trouble but never malicious, never anything other than **the regal and loveable barbarian**’ – like the Artful Dodger – literary figures who are nevertheless ‘strangely innocent too, protected by their innocence and their “primitive” status’

James Kincaid, “Dickens and the Construction of the Child”. 1992.



Alice as Savage

'Oh! So Bill's got to come down the chimney, has he?' said Alice to herself. 'Shy, they seem to put everything upon Bill! I wouldn't be in Bill's place for a good deal: this fireplace is narrow, to be sure; but I THINK I can kick a little!'

She drew her foot as far down the chimney as she could, and waited till she heard a little animal (she couldn't guess of what sort it was) scratching and scrambling about in the chimney close above her: then, saying to herself 'This is Bill,' she gave one sharp kick, and waited to see what would happen next.

The first thing she heard was a general chorus of 'There goes Bill!' then the Rabbit's voice along—'Catch him, you by the hedge!' then silence, and then another confusion of voices—'Hold up his head—Brandy now—Don't choke him—How was it, old fellow? What happened to you? Tell us all about it!'

Last came a little feeble, squeaking voice, ('That's Bill,' thought Alice,) 'Well, I hardly know—No more, thank ye; I'm better now—but I'm a deal too flustered to tell you—all I know is, something comes at me like a Jack-in-the-box, and up I goes like a skyrocket!'



'Serpent, I say again!' repeated the Pigeon, but in a more subdued tone, and added with a kind of sob, 'I've tried every way, and nothing seems to suit them!'

'I haven't the least idea what you're talking about,' said Alice.

'I've tried the roots of trees, and I've tried banks, and I've tried hedges,' the Pigeon went on, without attending to her, 'but those serpents! There's no pleasing them!'

Alice was more and more puzzled, but she thought there was no use in saying anything more till the Pigeon had finished.

'As if it wasn't trouble enough hatching the eggs,' said the Pigeon, 'but I must be on the look-out for serpents night and day! Why, I haven't had a wink of sleep these three weeks!'

'I'm very sorry you've been annoyed,' said Alice, who was beginning to see its meaning.

'And just as I'd taken the highest tree in the wood,' continued the Pigeon, raising its voice to a shriek, 'and just as I was thinking I should be free of them at last, they must needs come wriggling down from the sky! Ugh, Serpent!'

'But I'm *not* a serpent, I tell you!' said Alice, 'I'm a - I'm a -'

'Well! *What* are you?' said the Pigeon, 'I can see you're trying to invent something!'

'I - I'm a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

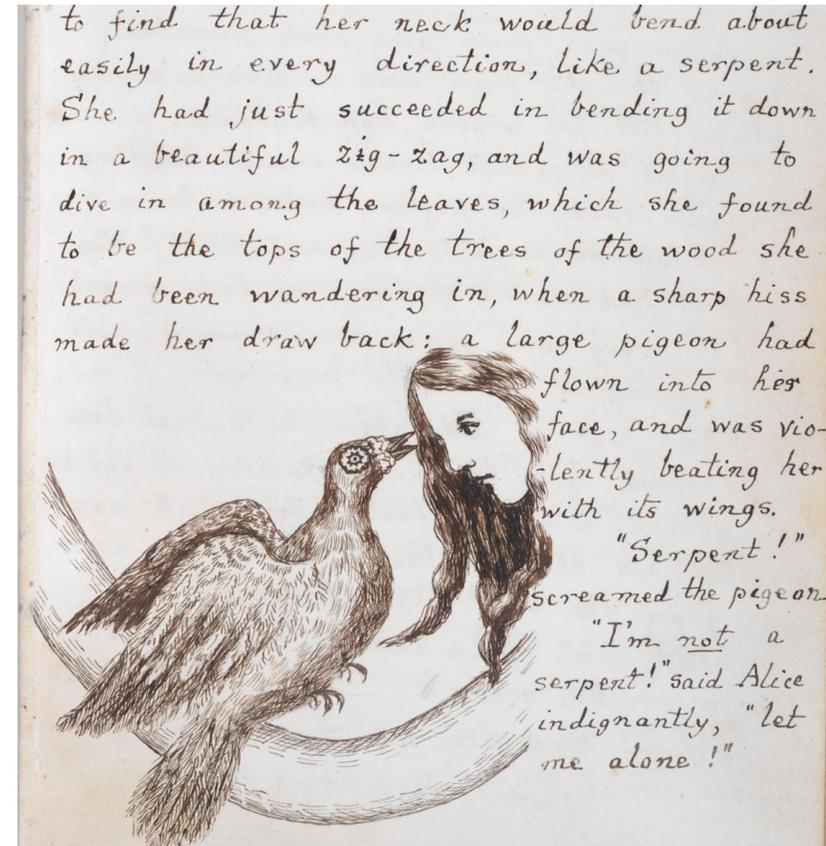
'A likely story indeed!' said the Pigeon in a tone of the deepest contempt, 'I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!'

'I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,' said Alice, who was a very truthful child, 'but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'

'I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon, 'but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say.'

This was such a new idea to Alice, that she was quite silent for a minute or two, which gave the Pigeon the opportunity of adding, 'You're looking for eggs, I know *that* well enough; and what does it matter to me whether you're a little girl or a serpent?'

Alice and the Natural Order



Lewis Carroll, [own illustrations](#) for original manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Underground* (c.1862-4)



Charles Robinson 1907 illustrations for *Alice*



The Mocking Bird (Rattlesnake attacking a mocking-birds' nest), from John James Laforest Audubon, *Birds of America* (London, 1827-30)

“The egg-thief, then, is probably best understood as a kind of subgroup of the many Victorian depictions of predation and conflict in the animal world [...] With their dramatic subject matter and the added effect of an authentic setting, these studies are likely to have been particularly appealing to Victorian viewers of all ages: their existence establishes the egg-thief motif as a lasting one well known to Alice readers for many decades.”

“natural history contexts ultimately guide readers toward the new challenge posed by Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1860s Oxford, with its contradictory effects of endorsing the competitive social struggle at home and imperialist ambitions abroad, while simultaneously undermining biblical accounts of the creation and origins of humankind”

Rose Lovell-Smith. "Eggs and Serpents: Natural History Reference in Lewis Carroll's Scene of Alice and the Pigeon." (2007)

Alice as Imperialist

“a fascination on [Carroll’s] part with the imaginative possibilities latent in a ‘**confrontation of cultures**’ – the kind of encounter that the imperial experience of the nineteenth century was bringing to the forefront of European consciousness”.

“In *Alice*, Carroll renders a world organized by **gamelike social structures** in which mastery of the game promises mastery of others”,

“a semiotic imperialism: she is incapable of constructing, on a model radically different from her own, the "system" or "systems" that give meaning to the behavior of the creatures.”

Daniel Bivona. "Alice the Child-Imperialist and the Games of Wonderland."
Nineteenth-Century Literature (1986).

Childhood Topographies

E.g:

Most friendly childhood spaces draw from and continue the pastoral tradition of modernity, which idealizes and romanticizes the wild (ironically) as a safe retreat for those weary of civilized constraints... Childhood landscapes, which are defined in contrast to and as an **escape from civilized adult spaces**, appear in adult literature as **primitive and undeveloped**.

The association of childhood with **geographical exploration** expresses not only adult envy of the child's greater opportunities for novelty but also adult feelings of **entrapment in an increasingly industrialized and developed territory**. This need for escape finds even more room for expression in books for children.

Susan Honeyman, 'Childhood Bound'

Girl-Child as National Asset

‘The birthrate was of national importance: population was power’

(Davin, ‘What is a Child’?)

‘The image of the ideal middle-class daughter was that of the sheltered flower, a creature whose role in the home was to adorn it and assist in its maintenance.’

(Deborah Gorham *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*)

During tea, the minute thing's movements and behaviour gave, as usual, full occupation to the eye. First she directed Warren, as he placed the chairs.

"Put papa's chair here, and mine near it, between papa and Mrs. Bretton: *I must hand his tea.*"

She took her own seat, and beckoned with her hand to her father. "Be near me, as if we were at home, papa."

And again, as she intercepted his cup in passing, and would stir the sugar and put in the cream herself, "I always did it for you at home, papa: nobody could do it as well, not even your own self."

Throughout the meal she continued her attentions: rather absurd they were. The sugar-tongs were too wide for one of her hands, and she had to use both in wielding them; the weight of the silver cream-ewer, the bread and butter plates, the very cup and saucer tasked her insufficient strength and dexterity; but she would lift this, hand that, and luckily contrived through it all to break nothing. Candidly speaking, I thought her a little busy-body; but her father, blind like other parents, seemed perfectly content to let her wait on him, and even wonderfully soothed by her offices.

"She is my comfort!" he could not help saying to Mrs. Bretton.

(*Villette*, ch.1)

‘Will you call me a name I want you to call me?’ inquired Dora, without moving.

‘What is it?’ I asked with a smile.

‘It’s a stupid name,’ she said, shaking her curls for a moment. ‘Child-wife.’

[...]

‘I don’t mean, you silly fellow, that you should use the name instead of Dora. I only mean that you **should think of me that way**. When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, “it’s only my child-wife!” **When I am very disappointing**, say, “I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!” When you miss what I should like to be, and I think can never be, say, “still my **foolish child-wife** loves me!” For indeed I do.’

I had not been serious with her; having no idea until now, that she was serious herself. But her affectionate nature was so happy in what I now said to her with my whole heart, that her face became a laughing one before her glittering eyes were dry. **She was soon my child-wife indeed**; sitting down on the floor outside the Chinese House, ringing all the little bells one after another, to punish Jip for his recent bad behaviour; while Jip lay blinking in the doorway with his head out, even too lazy to be teased.

This appeal of Dora’s made a strong impression on me. I look back on the time I write of; **I invoke the innocent figure** that I dearly loved, **to come out from the mists and shadows of the past**, and turn its gentle head towards me once again; and I can still declare that this one little speech was constantly in my memory. I may not have used it to the best account; I was young and inexperienced; but I never turned a deaf ear to its artless pleading.

David Copperfield

Whilst there are undoubtedly ‘a large number of Victorian women in both fiction and fact notable for their toughness, competence, and independence’ ... to many ‘Victorian feminists...middle-class Victorian **society was ordered in such a way as to keep its females perpetual children, sexually innocent, financially dependent, adorably helpless**’

Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults*



“Our Housekeeping”

‘Precocious **working girls** are typically shown laboring on behalf of domesticity, striving to fill both the stereotypically masculine role of provider and the stereotypically feminine one of homemaker because the domestic ideal is so unquestionably good.’

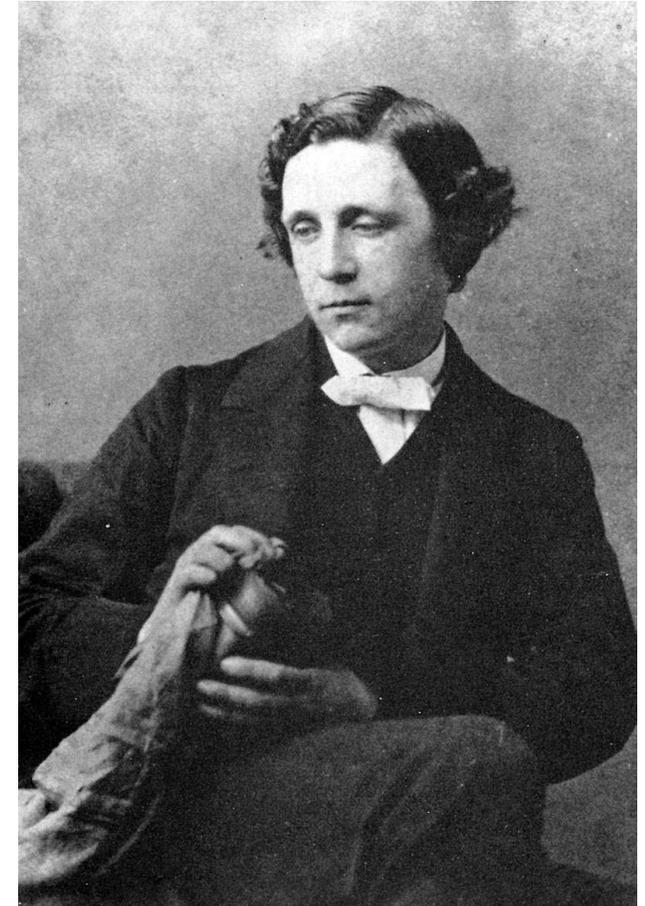
(Nelson)

Mary Barton is a good example of this in the lower classes.



The Victorian “idealization and idolization of little girls . . . [is inextricable from] a pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage. In this light, **little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood**, but an adult male’s best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self”

Robson, *Men in Wonderland*



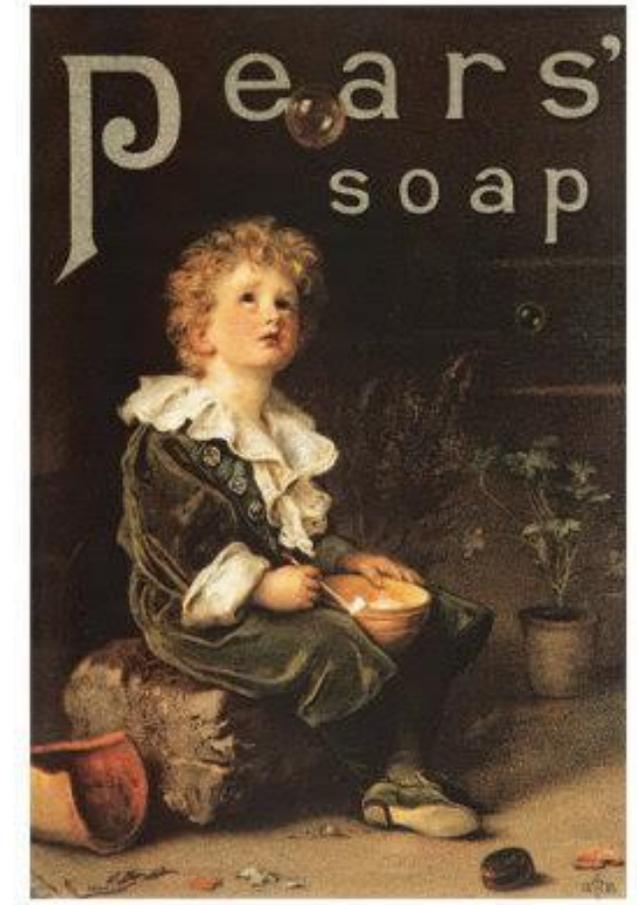
Child as Commodity

"Thank you... kindly," said Silas, hesitating a little. "I'll be glad if you'll tell me things. But," he added, uneasily, leaning forward to look at Baby with some jealousy, as she was resting her head backward against Dolly's arm, and eyeing him contentedly from a distance—"But I want to do things for it myself, else it may get fond o' somebody else, and not fond o' me. I've been used to fending for myself in the house—I can learn, I can learn."

"Thought and feeling were so confused within him, that if he had tried to give them utterance, he could only have said that **the child was come instead of the gold—that the gold had turned into the child.**"

"But she'll be *my* little un," said Marner, rather hastily. "She'll be nobody else's."

Silas Marner



a girl of maybe eight or ten who was running as hard as she was able down a cross street [...] the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground. [...] 'If you choose to make capital out of this accident,' said he, 'I am naturally helpless. No gentleman but wishes to avoid a scene,' says he. 'Name your figure.' Well, we screwed him up to a hundred pounds for the child's family;

Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

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.

Marah Gubar, "The Victorian Child, c. 1837-1901." (2005).

THE ADULT CHILD: “The Child is the Father of the Man”

‘The development of a new conception of the child is necessarily accompanied by a new conception of the grownup,’ and the Victorian grownup was accordingly pressed to embrace ‘responsibility, respectability, earnestness, stability, seriousness,’ while the child was associated with imagination, charm, and playfulness.

(Robert Newsom, ‘Fictions of Childhood’).

Child (def) “A person who has (or is considered to have) the character, manners, or attainments of a child...

‘If it hadn’t been for me, his own brother would have shut him up for life. That’s all [...] A proud fool!’ said my aunt. ‘Because his brother was a little eccentric—though he is not half so eccentric as a good many people—he didn’t like to have him visible about his house, and sent him away to some private asylum-place: though he had been left to his particular care by their deceased father, who thought him **almost a natural**.

[...]

‘So I stepped in,’ said my aunt, ‘and made him an offer. I said, “Your brother’s sane—a great deal more sane than you are, or ever will be, it is to be hoped. Let him have his little income, and come and live with me. **I am not afraid of him**, I am not proud, I am ready to take care of him, and shall **not ill-treat him as some people** (besides the asylum-folks) have done.”

[...]

‘I say again,’ said my aunt, ‘nobody knows what that man’s mind is except myself; and he’s the most amenable and friendly creature in existence. **If he likes to fly a kite sometimes, what of that!** Franklin used to fly a kite. He was a Quaker, or something of that sort, if I am not mistaken. And a Quaker flying a kite is a much more ridiculous object than anybody else.’

David Copperfield

“their rough-hewn, powerful exteriors conceal a **childish simplicity** of feeling: they are in many ways grown-up children, adults who have a particular **affinity with childhood**.”

Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child*, 1994.



Returning to Childhood near Death

“Yo’re mourning for me, my dear; and there’s no need, Mary. I’m as happy as a child. I sometimes think I am a child, whom the Lord is hushabying to my long sleep. For when I were a nurse-girl, my missis always telled me to speak very soft and low, and to darken the room that her little one might go to sleep; and now all noises are hushed and still to me, and the bonny earth seems dim and dark, and I know it’s my Father lulling me away to my long sleep...”

Mary thought of Alice’s long-cherished, fond wish to revisit the home of her childhood...

Mary Barton

The lost or imagined child

‘What do you think of him?’ said my aunt.

I had some shadowy idea of endeavouring to evade the question, by replying that I thought him a very nice gentleman; but my aunt was not to be so put off, for she laid her work down in her lap, and said, folding her hands upon it:

‘Come! **Your sister Betsey Trotwood** would have told me what she thought of anyone, directly. Be as like your sister as you can, and speak out!’

Suggested Further Reading

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