

Tracing the Genesis of Childhood and the Disappearance of Child: A Perception

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Abstract

This article aims to trace the history of childhood and the trajectory of children from different corners of the world. It includes discussing the concepts of childhood, society, identity, psyche, the printing press, children as adults, and the disappearance of childhood.

Keywords: Child, Childhood, History of childhood, Disappearance of Childhood

Discovery of Child and Childhood

The child is a boy or girl between birth and puberty. A vital feature of the term child is innocence and development. A child is entwined in the process of formation by trial and error. Metaphysically, there is a child in every one of us, as every person is through trial and error. In every society, the notion of children's literature evolves only after the child is understood as a separate category with its own needs and desires. In Europe, concerns about the child as a separate entity were discussed for the first time during the Enlightenment. Social philosophers like Locke and Rousseau brought forth the issue of the child and its need to be nurtured into social awareness. The romantic poems of William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, and William Blake valued it. Wordsworth's phrase 'The child is Father of the Man' from the poem "My Heart Leaps Up" is probably one of the most quoted lines of poetry ever written. The poet's celebratory vision of the child is captured thus,

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!/
Shades of the prison house begin to close/
As a growing boy.... (Wordsworth 362)

Of the attitudes toward children in antiquity, understanding children is not enough. The Greeks paid scant attention to childhood as a particular age category, and everything did not apply to the concept of a child. Their words for child and youth were ambiguous and included almost anyone between infancy and old age. It is unlikely that the Greeks thought it was worthwhile to portray children.

One thing, however, is clear. Though the Greeks were confused about the nature of childhood, they were single-mindedly passionate about education. The greatest Athenian philosopher, Plato, wrote extensively on the subject, including three proposals on how youth education should be conducted. His most memorable dialogues are discussions of questions such as whether or not virtue and courage can be taught. Greeks invented the idea of school. Their word for it meant leisure. Even Spartans, who needed to be more assertive in what their neighbors would call thinking and learning, established schools. According to Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*, the Spartans enrolled seven-year-old boys in classes where they played together and were taught some reading and writing. There were several accounts of atrocities on children in the past, including infanticide. Aristotle and Herodotus also witnessed children and their growth but never raised their voices against the horrors of the child. The Romans, of course, borrowed the Greek notion of education and even developed an awareness of childhood that surpassed the Greek idea. Roman art, for example, reveals quite an extraordinary sense of the age of the young and growing child.

In a literate world, children must become adults. However, in a non-literate world, there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult, for there are few secrets, and the culture does not need to provide training in how to understand itself. In an oral world, there is not much of a concept of an adult and, therefore, even less of a child. One finds that in the Middle Ages, childhood ended at age seven. It was because that is the age at which children accomplish command over speech. They can understand what adults can say and understand. They can know all the secrets of the tongue, which should not be known to them. Moreover, this helps to explain how the Catholic Church designated age seven as the age at which one was assumed to know the difference between right and wrong, the age of reason.

The absence of literacy, the lack of education, and the absence of the idea of shame are why childhood did not exist in the medieval world. Nevertheless, one must include in the story not only the severity of life in the past but in particular also the high rate of mortality among children.

The printing press likewise created a new definition of adulthood based on reading competence. The new conception of childhood began to base on that reading competence after the introduction of the printing press. Before the coming of that new environment, infancy ended at seven, and adulthood began at once. There was no superseding stage because none was needed. That is why there were no books on child rearing before the sixteenth century and exceptionally few about women as mothers.

The Printing Press and the New Adult

For an idea like childhood to come into being, there must be a change in the adult world. Moreover, such a change must be only of a great enormity. Explicitly, it must engender a new definition of adulthood. During the Middle Ages, several social and essential inventions, such as the mechanical clock, and many significant events, including the Black Death. However, nothing that required where adults could find their conception of adulthood occurred. However, in the mid-fifteenth century, such an event happened: the printing press's

invention. The new adulthood, by definition, excluded children, and as children were expelled from the adult world, it became necessary to find another planet for them to inhabit. That other world came to be known as childhood.

As the printing press unleashed a heightened and unabashed self-consciousness in writers, it also created a similar attitude in readers. Before printing, all human communication occurred in a social context. Even such reading as was done used as its model the oral mode, the reader speaking the word aloud while others followed along. However, with the printed book, another tradition began: the isolated reader and their private eye.

However, individualism alone could not have produced childhood, which requires a compelling basis for separating people into different classes. For that, something else needed to happen. And it did. For want of a better term, it was called a knowledge gap. Within fifty years after printing had been invented, it became apparent that the communication environment of European civilization was dissolving and reconstituting itself along different lines.

What sort of information was in books? What things were available to learn? There was, first of all, how-to-do it books: books on metallurgy, botany, linguistics, good manners, and, at long last, paediatrics. *The Book of Children* by Thomas Phaïre, published in 1544, is the first book on paediatrics written by an Englishman. Phaïre recommends using teething rings and provides a comprehensive list of grievous and dangerous diseases of children, including aposteme of the brain, terrible dreams, itching, bloodshot eyes, colic, and rumbling of the stomach. The Literate Man had been created.

Moreover, in his coming, he left behind the children. Because of printing, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to learn to read by entering the world of typography. Moreover, to accomplish that, they would require education. Therefore, European civilization reinvented schools. It made childhood a necessity. The first fifty years of the printing press are called the Incunabula, literally, the cradle period. By the time print moved out of the cradle, the idea of childhood had moved in, and its incunabula lasted for some two hundred years. After the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, childhood was acknowledged as a feature of the natural order of life.

However, the tie between education and the calendar age took some time to develop. The first attempts to establish classes or grades of students were based on the students' capacities on how they read, not on their calendar ages. Differentiation by age came later. Childhood came to be defined by school attendance. As Phillippe Aries explains, "the organization of school classes as a hierarchy of reading competence brought the realization of the special nature of childhood or youth and idea that within that childhood or youth, a variety of categories existed" (Aries 127).

Then what followed from this was predictable. For one thing, the clothing of children became different from that of adults. By the end of the sixteenth century, custom required that childhood include unique costumes. The difference in children's dress and adults' perception of children's physical features is well documented in paintings from the sixteenth century.

As a form of childhood took shape, the state of the modern family also took shape. The actual event in creating the contemporary family was the invention and extension of formal schooling. The social requirement that children be formally educated for prolonged periods led to reorientating parents' relationships with their children. These developments were the outward signs of the emergence of a new class of people, i.e., children. They spoke differently from adults, spent their days differently from adults, learned differently, and, in the end, thought differently. What had happened as the underlying structural change was that through print and the handmaiden, the school and adults were found with unparalleled control over the symbolic environment of the child.

Even before childhood, children were suitable to be more haphazardly energetic adults. Indeed, one of the several reasons why Philippe Aries has lamented the invention of childhood is that it tended to restrain the high energy levels of youth. In a world without books and schools, youthful excitement was given the broadest possible field to express itself.

By the sixteenth century, a theology of the book existed, a new and growing commercial system based on print, and a new concept of the family organized around schooling. Parents and teachers had a complete hold on the children, but some educationists and teachers were not merely revealing adults' secrets to the young. It is essential to know that teachers were addressing adults and children with books on public conduct. They were building a concept of adulthood as well as a concept of childhood.

The Journey of Childhood

It must not be supposed that childhood sprang full grown from Gutenberg's press and schoolmaster's class. These were the actual events in childhood's formation in the modern world. For example, industrialization developed in the eighteenth century was childhood's constant and formidable enemy. In England, literacy, schooling, and youth increased until the end of the seventeenth century.

John Locke, for example, exerted enormous influence on childhood growth through his remarkable book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693. Locke saw the connection between book learning and childhood and proposed an education that treated the child as a precious resource, nonetheless demanding thorough attention to the child's intellectual development and capacity for self-control—even Locke's enlightened views on nurturing physical growth aimed to develop a child's power of reason. Locke's tabula rasa created a sense of guilt in parents about their children's development. It provided the psychological and epistemological ground for making the careful nurturing of children a national priority.

In the eighteenth century, the second significant intellectual influence on childhood was, of course, Rousseau. The first was in his assertion that the child is essential in themselves, not merely as a means to an end. In this, he differed sharply from Locke, who saw the child at every point as a potential citizen and perhaps a merchant. Second was that a child's emotional and intellectual life is essential because childhood is the phase when a person is closest to nature. Rousseau's idea was original, and all other writers and critics followed him.

Until the eighteenth century, adolescence was confused with childhood. According to a sixteenth-century calendar of the ages, a child was considered solid and brave at twenty-four. In the course of the seventeenth century, a change took place by which the old usage was maintained in the more dependent classes of society. At the same time, a different use appeared in the middle class, where the word child was restricted to its modern meaning. Some references were found that mentioned how children were not related to any moralist or ethical practices. The records say that,

One of the undocumented laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and best respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference, above all any humorous reference, to sexual matters in the presence of children. This notion was entirely foreign to the society of old. The modern reader of the diary in which Henri IV's physician, Heroard, recorded the details of the young Louis XIII's life is astonished by the liberties which people took with children, by the coarseness of the jokes they made, and by the indecency of gestures made in public which shocked nobody and which were regarded as perfectly natural. No other document can give us a better idea of the non-existence of the modern concept of childhood at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The second principle was that children must not be pampered and must be accustomed to strict discipline early in life. The third principle was modesty, and the fourth was practicing decency. (Kallimani 80)

The idea of childish innocence resulted in two kinds of attitude and behavior towards childhood: firstly, protecting it against the negativity of life, and exceptionally the sexuality tolerated, if not approved of among adults; and secondly, strengthening youth by developing character and reason. There is a disagreement here, for on the one hand, childhood is preserved, and on the other hand, it is made older than its years, but the conflict exists only for the twentieth century.

Finally and ultimately, from the sixteenth century, a new character came on the scene in the calendars: the child. Therefore, the following pictures of the months of the year introduced new characters: the woman, the neighbors, the friends, and finally, the child. Moreover, the child was associated with a previously unknown desire for homeliness, for familiar, if not yet precisely, family life. The modern family, on the contrary, cuts itself off from the world and adapts itself to the society of the isolated group of parents and children. All the group's energy is exhausted on helping the children to raise in the world, individually and without any collective ambition, i.e., the children rather than the family. Family and school together detach the child from adult society.

Critics think the period between 1850 and 1950 represents the high watermark of childhood. In America, to which one must now render exclusive attention, successful attempts were made during these years to get all children into school and out of factories, into their clothing, furniture, literature, games and games, and their social world. There were a hundred laws where children were classified as qualitatively different from adults; in a hundred customs, assigned a preferred status and offered protection from the vagaries of adult life.

The incunabula of television were another reason. That television erodes the dividing line between childhood and adulthood in three ways, all having to do with its undifferentiated availability: first because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second, because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behavior; and third because it does not separate its audience. With the assistance of other electric non-print media, television recreates the condition of communication that existed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Biologically all are prepared to see and interpret images, to hear such language as may be necessary to provide a context for most of these images. The new media atmosphere that was rising provided everyone with the same information.

The Disappearing Child

Jacqueline Rose mentions that,

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, which rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relationship between adults and children. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but neither enters the space in between. (Rose 1-2)

The proof for the disappearance of childhood comes in several varieties and from different sources. There is the verification displayed by the media, for they not only promote the unseating of childhood through their form and context but reflect its decline in their content. There is confirmation to be seen in the merging of the taste and style of children and adults, as well as in the changing perspectives of appropriate social institutions such as the law, the school, and evidence of the complex variety like alcoholism, drug use, sexual activity, crime, etc., that imply a fading distinction between childhood and adulthood. Childhood as an ideology and construct was gradually deconstructed, and there remained hardly any difference between an adult and a child.

Children's literature plays a vital role in the growth and development of young minds. It is used to entertain, inform, socialize, shape behavior, channel, and learn beliefs and customs of one's own culture, develop an understanding, and create exposure to other cultures. Children's literature also serves as a guide to self-enlightenment, making one's identity. Children's literature aims mainly for socialization and education, paired with the playful discovery of the environment. In addition, values and points of view of traditions of the society are scrutinized critically in children's literature. Today enculturation is still one of children's literature's primary concerns and purposes. The modern text will be considered critically and open to new views. In children's books, child protagonists are the rulers, the conventions of the genre are observed, the story told is set within a moral code, and positive rather than negative outlooks on life are favored for a child.

The critics mentioned above have also discussed how children have become more sophisticated and knowledgeable about specific life experiences than children of any previous generation, acknowledging that this body of literature is tough to distinguish from adult

literature. Death, war, starvation, terror, violence, and everything is a part of children's literature today, which is, unfortunately, a part of some children's lives. Children are no longer spared any emotions as the evening news brings them everything vicariously, and in fact, today's children are exposed to violence purely in the name of entertainment. Thus, today's children are at stake and are vulnerable in this society, as the ambiance of the world does not provide a proper platform for the development of children and childhood.

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