

# Depictions of Children and the Adult's Journey in the Arts



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By

Margarita Georgieva

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When all my days are ending  
And I have no song to sing,

I think that I shall not be too old  
To stare at everything;  
As I stared once at a nursery door  
Or a tall tree and a swing.

—From *A Second Childhood* by G. K. Chesterton (1922)



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## INTRODUCTION

Many scholars across the disciplines have examined children and childhood in literature and the arts. We do not cease to discover the complexity behind the child characters in literature and the figure of the child in art. In fact, rich and varied depictions of the child as a character or a metaphor can be retrieved in almost any work of fiction, regardless of whether the author is a child or an adult. This collection is an attempt to unify these perspectives under a common denominator, and to investigate various works that look at the child and link the child's character to a set theme, e.g. the representations of children and gardens, the child in the city, and the figure of the child in certain artworks and films. Originating from a series of separate articles, this collection adopts various perspectives that take into account, each in its own way, the connections between children and adults, and examines children and childhood as the recurrent fixations in the lifelong journeys of the adults around them. Like *Childhood Studies* (2000), these articles focus less on the child's perspective and more on that of the adults writing about or representing children (Mills and Mills 2000). It is interesting to examine the multiplicity of these perspectives, and from there the multiplicity of worldviews and the different outlooks on the nature of the child that these texts present. Hence, this collection is also an attempt to gather and analyse texts from various genres, as well as films and artworks that might not necessarily have been placed next to one another before, by finding common elements and motifs within them.

Broadly speaking, there are two major tangents of reflection when it comes to the representation of children and childhood across literature and the arts. The first tangent of reflection presents us with literature and artworks produced by children themselves, which take a look at the world from a child's perspective. A notable and well-known twenty-first-century example is the *Eragon* series (2003–9), but historically, the figures of young authors such as Thomas Chatterton and Marjorie Fleming have made an impact on how we view writing by children and young adults. Another recent and popular, but much less marketed, example is called *The Chronicles of the Children* (2013–). It stands for an ongoing work, developed by a young girl on various social media and blog websites, that is now on sale at Amazon. This work has gathered child, young adult, and

adult followers. In art, we have interesting examples in the personas of Iris Grace, Marla Olmstead, and Ms. Autumn de Forest. Albeit a limited one, this category of children's imaginary work has gained recent attention and has sparked a genuine advancement in the scholarship and understanding of the child as a driving force of the literary and artistic mind. Along with these, we have seen numerous films starring children, and through some of them we have even seen how both the real children and the actual characters they portray grow into adulthood together. The *Harry Potter* (1998–2016) saga, as much as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–6) before it, is a notable example of this trend in both its literary and cinematic versions. Interestingly, we also find some films intended for an adult audience that develop strong child characters of visionary, timeless, and almost epic proportions (e.g. *Pazachyt na myrtvite* [*The Warden of the Dead*], 2006), and trace their impact on the lives of the adults around them (e.g. *Povodyr* [*The Guide*], 2014).

This brings us to the second tangent that reflects on the fact that the literary and artistic output that encompasses children and childhood has most often been produced by adults, and has therefore passed through the prism of an adult worldview. Books like *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) or any examples of Frances Burnett's work situate themselves on a very long timeline of books written for children, either for their amusement or instruction. As such, they contain what an adult believes a child would like, or what a child would need to read about; that is, the adult's view of the child's world, and the adult's view of the child's needs. Such literary output is thus based on second-hand adult experiences and adult perceptions of remembered or observed childhoods. These trends have continued throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the thought-provoking habit of some film studios and producers to cast adult female voices for child characters (e.g. the *Little Princess* series in 2006–12) or use adults to portray what were originally child characters in fiction (e.g. Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* in 2010). When tracing these phenomena, we may wonder if there is a problem with adults writing about and for children, or with adults representing or impersonating children, and what exactly that problem is. Historically, these are established ways of educating and raising our young. However, while the fundamental child still lives in each of us, it may be expedient to study the extent to which these behaviours are parts of an adult's journey of growth. To what extent are they parts of the adult's effort to develop or reacquire lost positive self-regard through the prism of a child's life? Indeed, is it possible to look at adult writing about children, not as writing for children but as a part of the adult's self-actualization process?

This reasoning places us somewhat on the margins of what literature and psychology have in common. To a great extent, we can see literature as revelatory of generalized tendencies in the collective unconscious that have transpired in the writing for and about children, especially when authors write of terror, fear, rites of passage and journeys of growth. However, the answer to why adults write about children is partially revealed when we begin to see adult writing about children only as containing myths and archetypal figures, or only as the product of repressed childhood desires and urges. It is understandably all of these, but also much more. Thus, we see limitations to Jungian, Freudian, and Lacanian theories of the mind applied to literature for children, especially when it comes to explaining literary and artistic fiction that deals with children growing up. Many analyses in that direction often seem incomplete. These lines of analysis are, it seems, only partially applicable to a rather complex process that has a great deal to do with the adult producing the fiction, rather than with the child within that fiction. And it also has a great deal to do with the adults depicted within the fictional narratives. Whose figures are they? Of the writer? Of observed adults? Of imaginary children? Of grown-ups the authors once knew as children? Are they memories? In this respect, for the literary scholar dealing with children and childhood in the writing of adults, it can be interesting to also take a look at the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. We could then draw parallels between the growth of a child within a narrative, personal growth during adulthood, the author's self and identity, and the way all of these come together in complex metaphors of looking at, seeing, and overseeing children.

Let us look briefly at how these theories can be linked to literary and artistic examples. The two conditions necessary to realize one's organismic self (Ryan and Deci 2000) are positive self-regard and self-actualization. The theoreticians at the origin of this view of the self, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, developed comprehensive theories of the self, and of what one needs in order to grow and develop (Maslow, *Hierarchy of Needs* 1998). The objective of developing positive self-regard is, of course, realizing one's potential; that is, growing in life. This is where things become interesting because successful adult journeys in life are oftentimes likened to children growing up (Aronsson and Sandin 2012). A child's first steps, for example, are a recurrent metaphor for the beginnings of adult undertakings, whether we think of a business idea or other ventures. We do tend to see entrepreneurship and the growth of any initiative as passing through a series of stages that are frequently metaphorized in terms of human development. Some theoreticians actually represent corporate lifecycles like human ones, originating in an infancy

stage (Taborga 2012). This has also become a recurrent metaphor in many self-help works and in the culture of self-actualization itself. It often goes hand-in-hand with going back to one's childhood, or rather to a romanticized view of it, and of finding one's inner child. However, the idea of obtaining an improved self from an improved self-image and a more positive self-regard is also anchored in another view that sees society first, and the individual after. The child thus becomes part of a social process that is built on adult outlooks and adult perceptions of the child (Mead 2001). The various influences this process plays on the child's development, whether positive or negative, are therefore essential to bear in mind when reading the works examined in this collection.

Positive self-regard is determined by the love, affection, and respect a person obtains from others. Childhood experiences are therefore the first, and probably main, determinant of whether someone will become a self-actualized individual. A person "grows" when some conditions (Maslow 1943) are reunited, e.g. a person is able to safely express oneself genuinely and openly (can engage in self-disclosure), is accepted, loved and empathised with, and is being listened to and understood. This is what helps a person grow to become a fully-functioning individual (Rogers 1961). If this person is open to experiences, be they positive or negative, in existential living by trusting oneself, one's emotions, and intuitions, as well as creativity in order to lead a fulfilled life, then that person self-actualizes. Ideally, children would reunite all these conditions, and would thus be able to grow up. But ideal scenarios rarely exist in life and, with time, we lose many of the factors we just mentioned. Progressively, from childhood to adulthood, we face the many complications of life. We lose loved ones and we face a lack of understanding and rejection by our peers. These make self-actualization difficult, and often impossible. Self-actualization is therefore much easier for children to achieve as they have their parents to validate all the conditions for them, to accept them as they are and nurture them into adulthood. But what if these children face traumatic experiences? What happens to an author who has had a very difficult childhood? The obvious question for us now becomes the following: how does an adult, after going through all the ups and downs of life, become self-actualized? Can this happen through writing and artistic creation? In particular, can this happen when the adult writes about children and depicts childhoods?

At the core of this collection is the assumption that an author, a writer, or an artist who depicts children, tells narratives of children, or imagines the journeys of a child through space or time (that we might also see as

metaphorical journeys of growth) is inevitably in search of positive self-regard and is seeking to reunite all the conditions for self-actualization by creating a fictional childhood. Such an adult is trying to self-actualize through the experiences and identities of the children depicted. In this sense, the child and the childhood experiences become the medium through which an adult must pass to recover all the conditions for self-actualization. We could extend this assumption to the fictional adult characters within a work of art and examine the broader multifaceted relationships between author, adult characters, and the characters of children. What will this reveal? It can tell us, for example, how self-actualization might work on the scale of an artwork or a novel. On the author's side, this will depend on the nature of the work that was planned. Our hypothesis is that, for every work involving children, there is always some intention on the author's part to achieve self-actualization through the depiction of a child growing up. On the adult's (author, writer, or artist) level, the self-actualization conditions may be missing. Therefore, this adult will attempt to make up for the missing stages through the creation of fictional characters and fictional narratives about children. The adult will thus journey through the imaginary life of the child, using storytelling rather than authentic experiences to achieve self-actualization by proxy. The way authors and artists look at children, and the way their art self-actualizes through this process, may also be indicative of their efforts to come to terms with a fragmented personal growth. Depicting children thus becomes a way of reimagining childhoods that are defined by resilience in overcoming trauma, grief, social stigmas, and isolation, and also childhoods that evoke the promise of a more peaceful adulthood.

From this comes the choice to title this collection with the quote "a monster made of eyes." At the heart of this idea lies the realization that the life of the child within an artwork or a novel oftentimes revolves around a series of metaphors that deal with eyes, with vision and with looking. In fact, we can even draw parallels to our daily lives and the way we metaphorize the caring and rearing of children. Adults *look* after their children; they want to *see* them through adolescence to adulthood. This is evident even in the word *pupil*, which we usually use to refer to young students. Variations of the expression "dear to my heart *as the apple of my eye* is the image of my child" (Williamson 1840) have also survived through centuries and appear across the genres even today. The multiplicity of these outlooks on the child seems to finally culminate in the many-eyed monster that Chesterton refers to. This monster, benevolent or unkind, comes alive in the many adult eyes collectively watching over the child. The monster has found its way into Chesterton's poetic story, which

also looks at human life as originating in and ending with childhood. The serpent bites its tail when the childlike elderly man looks death in the eye and sees his childhood. This crisscrossing of gazes is characteristic of the relationships between children and adults featured in this collection.

In order to present a transversal study of these ideas, this short collection is structured in five chapters. It begins with a study of the eyes motif and its connection to the child and childhood in various texts, including fairy tales and gothic novels. This first part discusses eyes, vision, and blindness, as well as the depiction of the child as a clairvoyant, enlightened being. We shall then move onto art and the portrayal of children in the work of Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais. This will present a pictographic look at the child that complements what we find in literature. This second section presents the adult's view of the child across various sociocultural contexts. It is followed by a study of children, gardens, and the metaphors of growing up in a collection of literary works across different periods and genres. The final sections of this collection will present three films whose main characters are children, and an analysis of the eye motif in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its connection to the child. The eye motif reappears here and is further analysed in the light of both the literary and pictographic material from the previous sections. Broadly, the intent will be to raise questions and bring together narratives from different countries and periods without going through a fully comparative study. The aim is to reveal ideas that might have arisen simultaneously in different countries or across different genres and periods in time.

# CHAPTER I

## EYES AND CHILDREN

### Introduction

In his poem *A Second Childhood* (1922), G. K. Chesterton develops a centuries-old metaphor of human life as both originating from and receding into childhood. It is a path that connects childhood and old age. The poem presents an old man's narrative that shows the wonder and freshness, the terror and enormity of life as one might have seen it in childhood. In this poem, the adult's perception of reality gradually returns to what it was when the adult was a child. All that seems to define adult life is as if negated through the repetition of the phrase "men grow too old to ...". What remains underneath the adult self, represented as vain and sinful, is something entirely different. It is depicted as something pure and unadulterated, creative and imaginative. The poetic narrative progressively eliminates sexual love, drink, and lies, and shakes off sin (mentioned repeatedly throughout the poem) to leave place for an old age that is essentially defined by what had always been there before the child grew into the adult. It represents a view of the world in magical transformations, where dust can be magicked into snow. This understanding of the child's nature as pure and innocent is not something new. It is situated in the continuity of spiritualistic (mostly Christian) perspectives on the child character across literature (Bunge 2001). What is more particular here is Chesterton's introduction of an interesting connection between childhood and adulthood. Both the child and the adult in the poetic narrative seem to share similar fears, expressed through the striking image of the many-eyed monster:

Men grow too old for love, my love,  
Men grow too old for lies;  
But I shall not grow too old *to see*  
Enormous night arise,  
A cloud that is larger than the world  
And a *monster made of eyes*. (Chesterton 2008)

Monstrosity with the multiplication of eyes and the shadows of enormous, undefined things are peculiar motifs in both the fictional and real-life examples of childhood fears of the things that hide under beds, in attics, and in basements, and go bump in the night. They are not always discussed in detail across literary criticism but are present in many works about children and childhood. Whether seen as threats of death or as fears of the unknown journey to adulthood, they usually develop the same fixation on the eyes of the monster—a monster that is sometimes eyes only. These texts are always open to myriad interpretations that go with the symbolism of the eye, including divine omnipotence, power and supernatural vision, or the hiding and revelation of secrets.

One of the most famous examples of the recurrence of the eye motif in children's literature can be found in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). In it, the young hero faces many nameless "wild things" with yellow eyes, and in turn they look him in the eye ferociously. Interestingly, both Chesterton's childlike old man and Sendak's young boy conquer this fear by staring back and managing to bravely look into the monster's many eyes:

and tamed with the magic trick  
of *staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking* once  
and they were frightened and called him the most wild  
thing of all. (Sendak 1963)

Both texts tell stories of a power that is only available to the child, that the adult has buried deep inside and has forgotten about. Fearlessness, bravery, and looking at one's fear (and even death) in the eye become the property of childhood, rather than adulthood. There is a curious parallel in settings between both texts as they originate in a bedroom, at night, and tell stories of transformation and becoming. More importantly, they both involve journeys across imaginary landscapes. One is a journey of growth, the other a journey back to childhood in a quest for spiritual empowerment and personal growth. The adult in Chesterton's poem is looking for something beyond the mundane, and therefore goes back to the child's nature so that the combination of adult wisdom and childhood innocence can empower him with imagination to forget that these are the final moments of life.

Because of this, when the poetic persona in Chesterton is faced with life's end, his reaching out to himself, and to his inner child, is even stronger. The decision to always keep alive a part of the child in him shows a wish for continual self-actualization, the desire to always preserve a renewed



outlook on life, but also a wish for the immortality of the soul. Chesterton's text fights with a gloomy shadow of death and finds respite in the childlike renewal of all things around him:

And *things grow new* though I grow old,  
Though I grow old and die. (Chesterton 2008)

The repetitive use of the verb “grow” here and in all the stanzas of the poem is remarkable. Used to signify regression to an ideal childhood state, it also stands for life coming to an end. Growth thus becomes the definition of both life and death, and also signifies life's journey, at the end of which the old man looks at life with a childlike wonder. Continual growth and becoming are what Chesterton equates with childhood, along with enhanced senses and a capacity to see reality unlike that of any adult. If we look further into this theme we can find a number of texts that use the eye motif to portray enlightened or clairvoyant children.

### **Clairvoyant Children**

An interesting variation of the eyes theme can be found in fairy tales. One famous children's fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm (also available in different variations across Eastern Europe) presents a very strange but telling transformation of the all-seeing eye leitmotif. It also plays on questions of the social norm versus family-bound societies that deviate from the social norm, and the child's struggle with the conflict between these public and private standards. Although this story can be seen as part of the struggle to accept nonconformity, it is also explicitly focused on the eyes, and from there on knowledge and understanding. Entitled *One Eye, Two Eyes, Three Eyes*, the omniscient narrator tells the story of a mother and her three daughters. Each of the three sisters has a different number of eyes from one eye in the middle of the forehead, to two normally-placed eyes, to three eyes. The girl with two eyes is constantly teased and bullied by her two sisters for being strange. Their mother starves her and encourages the one-eyed and three-eyed girls to be rude to her. Surviving in this close-knit female society where normality is ostracised, the two-eyed girl knows she is “different.” Her family believe they “can't let anyone see her” (Shepard 2007) on account of this difference. They hide her from strangers and send her off to work in the fields on her own. The girl is eventually seen (while attempting to hide) by a prince who takes her to his father's castle. After she grows up there, he marries her. Obviously, this story considers social inclusion and exclusion, but also a class society that defines women's roles inside or outside of the

home based on their looks, and specifically on how they are seen by others.

The sisters are named after the number of eyes they have: One Eye (the eldest), Two Eyes, and Three Eyes (the youngest). This increase in the number of eyes with the successive births of the children presents an interesting domain for analysis when we consider what each of them is able to see and understand. Obviously, One Eye is depicted as a little limited in her faculties, both physical and intellectual. Three Eyes, on the other hand, is characterized as a sly, clever, and resilient creature. She is able to both sleep and remain awake, and thus has access to multiple states of conscience. While the number of the mother's eyes is never mentioned, she adamantly insists that Two Eyes is the only one who does not seem to correspond to the deviant norm of the family because she has two eyes like everyone else in the world. However, she does not correspond to the social norms either, as she has access to a magical world of fairy godmothers that no one can see, magically appearing food-laden tables, and trees with golden apples. She is the only one able to manipulate the objects from that magical world and transpose them into reality. She is the only one to actually see magic. In this sense, Two Eyes *is* different and possesses a sight that is distinctly more empowered than that of her sisters. The character of Two Eyes has provoked a number of interesting interpretations of this little story. Some are based on a song that Two Eyes sings over and over again. It is a simple repetitive tune ("Is your eye awake? Is your eye asleep?") that she sings to her sisters to make them go to sleep so that she can make magic happen without them seeing her.

This tale retained the attention of some self-proclaimed scholars in child development who produced a series of pseudo-scientific books that are better classifiable as fantasmatic esoteric writing—*The Magical Child* (1976) and a later offshoot called *The Secret Life of Kids* (1987). Both aim to explore the psychic powers of the child. Albeit lacking any scientific foundations for their claims, it is interesting for the literary scholar to read these texts as fiction, and as part of a common worldview of the child who is able to grow into someone that the observing adult could never become. Their authors advocate the view that the attention philosophical and literary thought pays to children is a sign that all children are in fact clairvoyant and endowed with psychic powers. The folktale of Two Eyes with the particular attention paid to the eyes in it is used as a concluding example. The alternation between sleeping and wakefulness in the tale is taken as transcendence between one world and another; the eye situated in the middle of the forehead is naturally interpreted as symbolizing the third

eye. Such ideas about the child are, in fact, a continuity of earlier literary periods (e.g. Romanticism and Victorianism) that would see the child as naturally enlightened (Georgieva 2013). Interestingly though, each of these twentieth-century books refers to unconditional love and self-disclosure as the conditions that children fulfil before becoming fully empowered. While Romanticism and Victorianism used innocence, purity, and carefree optimism as simply signs that the child is closer to some vague manifestation of the divine, here we see a more complex process. It involves more than merely *being* a child or having a child's nature; it requires certain conditions to be in place, thus allowing adults to become like children, and from there gain insight into the inner workings of the universe. We will see further on that this representation of the enlightened child who is given uncommon foresight and knowledge had already been developed in the nineteenth century, not only in literature but also in the arts, with a very notable example in Millais's work *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849–50). Both *The Magical Child* and *The Secret Life of Kids* also insist on an idea that Millais develops—adults are to take the child's spirituality as an example on how to lead more enlightened lives and awaken their souls so as to accept a childlike view of life. Supposedly, this will enable their children to preserve their powers through adolescence and adulthood, and will in turn allow the adults to access these powers themselves. In this sense, each work attempts to use the child so that the adult can achieve self-actualization, either through emulation (getting in touch with one's inner child) or the practice of raising empowered children. Obviously, this is not to be taken literally, but rather as a symbolic expression of a tendency in the history of ideas, mostly developed throughout Victorian thought, to see the child as on a higher level of existence, an innocent, younger version of the “angel in the house,” taken literally.

Another, this time much more scientifically reliable work tells stories of childhood resilience and survival that help an adult with their own journey of self-actualization. These poignant stories of abused and persecuted Jewish children are collected as *Children with Emerald Eyes: Histories of Extraordinary Boys and Girls* (1987). The author mostly considers trauma psychology, but the book is a fascinating read for both specialists and interested readers. What is particularly striking is its title. It directly points to the children's eyes as the gateway to their souls, to the horrors they have seen, and the interior strength they possess. It is thus profitable to look at this text not only as a testimony of treating the soul, but also as a literary and artistic output that presents to the reader real characters on a journey of healing, growth, and self-actualization. The collection opens

with a frame narration by an adult who has gone through similar traumatic experiences, and who sees herself in her new patients. The context is set by a crisscrossing of looks, gazes, and stares between adult and children in an interesting exchange of untold fear, symbolic demonstrations of power, and curiosity. What the reader sees is an adult who fears the children, who in turn fear her. As their teacher, supervisor, and analyst, she represents the adult world from which they have seen only cruelty, and that cruelty is now furthered by her study of them. There is an underlying, unspoken motif that recalls Nazi studies on children and the way adults observed the child through torture to see what would happen. All of these are thematically connected to the representation of the eye. The stories the therapist expects to hear are what she believes to be versions of her own story that she is forced to relive over and over again. What happens, in fact, is a game of looks, rather than an act of listening. The sequence of narratives combines both adult and child voices that are accompanied by strong visuals of how the children look and what they do. Thus, children and adult go down the same path in repeatedly traumatic journeys by looking at one another. The final outcome for both children and adults is the onset of a self-actualization process.

If we seek similar titles of scientific research, we find a continuation of the principle of looking through children's eyes, or of looking into children's eyes to uncover their stories. Throughout the twentieth century, we witness an increase in books (and this has recently become a true phenomenon) that use the eyes motif. The multiplication of studies like *In the Eyes of Children* (2012) and *Through the Eyes of a Child* (2009) is revealing of an adult quest that seeks mysteries in the child's world. Such studies are scattered across the disciplines and all are adult attempts to look through children's eyes, study the world from their perspective, and ultimately help adults in their quest of understanding themselves. This idea of adopting a different, younger viewpoint is oftentimes expected to uncover something exceptional, or to provide a fresh, unique perspective. In this sense, the contemporary interpretation of what the child stands for symbolically and in a metaphorical sense remains unchanged from the eighteenth century. The child who sees the world differently becomes a symbol of renewal and rebirth, and represents a purer, enlightened, and unburdened existence, has been a recurrent motif in both fiction and non-fiction for centuries.

## The Blind Child



Fig. 1 Frontispiece of E. S. Pinchard's *The Blind Child* (1791)

An interesting aspect can be added to our collection of the vocabulary that binds together the adult, the child, eyes, vision, and seeing. Curiously, it is found in works that look the other way and deal with darkness, disability, and blindness. Literature and the arts often associate two things with unadulterated, unconditional love: perpetual infancy and blindness. The Roman Cupid was represented precisely like this, as a boy in early childhood jumping out of an enormous egg, holding a bow and arrows—a very happy child indeed, but a blind one. Shakespeare liked to toy with this idea and so did many of those who came after him. But how did late eighteenth-century literature for children link love, blindness, and the child into a logical whole, and why would an author use these elements? Is there a difference in the way they represent childhood and adult blindness, and were these also connected to an enlightened, clairvoyant state of perpetual childhood?

Childhood blindness is one of the metaphors some eighteenth-century authors used to signify pure, universal love, and, by writing about it, tried to analyse adult self-regard and self-actualization. Some texts also have a lot to do with the social integration of the blind, acceptance, and adaptation. In 1791, Elizabeth Sibthorpe Pinchard wrote a book entitled *The Blind Child; or, Anecdotes of the Wyndham Family*. She intended it to be a sentimental work for young people and, as such, it had to speak of feelings and disembodied love greater than all other examples of it. She chose to depict a blind eight-year-old girl named Helen, whose portrait is that of the elegant, angelic female in need of protection from infancy. The frontispiece depicted in Fig. 1 represents her in the same way—dressed in white, a lean figure that is a miniature version of her mother's. However, she is differentiated from all other children in her family as the female incarnation of Cupid. Blind to both beauty and ugliness, she binds the family together in the love they share for her. She cannot tell what human beauty is. She is turned inward in search of beauty within the souls of people. This is why they love her. While Helen gives unconditional love to her family and is depicted as the sweetest child, they do not seem fully satisfied with her. Although she is a perfectly comfortable child in all respects according to the eighteenth-century view (disciplined, respectful, quiet, calm, and composed), her physical disability is a major point of concern. Helen herself is completely at ease in the darkness, but her mother hopes that the child will one day be able to see like everyone else. This wish is symbolically expressed even on the frontispiece, with the rays of light penetrating thick clouds on the background.

The twist of the novel comes when Helen's parents decide to take her to a London surgeon who performs an operation on her eyes in front of the whole family. Her brothers and sisters are present, and they all watch the surgical procedures, like a many-eyed monster waiting on the other side of darkness, ready to pounce. Everything is done without anaesthetic. The surgeon reminds the whole family that they should not "run away from scenes of pain and inconvenience" or from "sick-beds" (Pinchard 1791), and thus they watch. While this may be surprising to a contemporary audience, it was not the case at the time with many operations taking place at the home with the family gathered to see them (Bynum and Porter 1985). However, in this text, the operation acquires a whole new symbolic layer when we understand that the family is trying to improve what they believe is an imperfect Helen. The differences between what they see and what she sees, and even what the doctor sees, clash at the surgery scene, and this is where the narrative actually attains its climax. Without realizing that Helen is already very much self-actualized and does not need to see

the material world in order to grow, the family are attempting to fix themselves. The family believe that by making Helen better they will be able to function better, and they will all be better. This is a very good example of how the child figure is used as a form of expiation, also featured in Millais's artworks.

When the operation is done, the family keep Helen in the darkness of her room for a while. This is a transition for her, from a dark world in which she feels at ease to a world of vision in which she will be truly disabled for a while. Helen finally recovers and is "suffered to see" (Pinchard, *The Blind Child*; or, *Anecdotes of the Wyndham Family 1791*) her relatives gathered around her. It is very telling how the word "suffer" suddenly springs into the text, while it has been avoided until that very moment. It is not used even when the child obviously suffers physical pain and discomfort during the operation. Throughout the surgery, Helen is described as "patient, quiet," and she never cries. She merely emits "a faint shriek" (Pinchard 1791, 169) only after the operation is over. Interestingly though, suffering and seeing seem connected. The text seems to extoll the act of suffering, submitting to, and enduring physical pain in exchange for what others believe will lead to personal growth as a virtue. Much of what Helen endures, though, is for the sake of her family. After her recovery, the former blind girl quickly learns to appreciate sublimity (note "sublimity," not "beauty") and starts drawing landscapes. Although she now has access to vision, Helen is still unable to see beauty and appreciates a touch of darkness and imperfection in the world.

While Pinchard's intentionally sentimental work exhibits the beginnings of an influence of gothic and dark Romantic fiction, the child character is placed at the centre of it all with the intention of stressing personal growth. The author also insists on personal betterment in her preface. While this is not necessarily a major concern of gothic or sentimental fiction, it seems to prevail in Pinchard's work. She continues in this vein with her later work, and in *The Two Cousins* (1798) she develops this even further, this time showing how an eleven-year-old strives to be "mild, tractable, and obliging" (Pinchard 1798) solely to make her mother believe that she excels at motherhood. The same happens in *Family Affection* (1816) with a prodigal son who self-actualizes through the experience of physical pain and hardship. Pinchard goes for the moralistic touch in all her works, trying to teach the lesson that patient sufferers are rewarded. This does remind one of little Two Eyes, whose daily miseries are finally repaid by a wealthy marriage. Ultimately, though, in both narratives the rewards are

for the adults as they obtain material gain from their reformed or risen-in-status children.

Even though Pinchard's work is not overtly religious, it is influenced by moral teachings the average eighteenth-century housewife would hear in church, especially those that strive to equate suffering with self-actualization. In fact, blindness was extensively used as a metaphor in Christian literature and sermons through the eighteenth century. It is retrievable in Hugh Knox's "self-blindness of sinners" (Knox 1776) and in Rev. Erskine's writings about "dark and blind Gentiles" (Erskine 1794) among many others. Blindness here refers to physical blindness only as a punishment. In many other cases, blindness can be taken metaphorically to stand for ignorance or the refusal to see or understand the truth. Frequently linked to sin, blindness is either the direct cause of sin or the terrible consequence of it, and is used as a weapon against disobeying. Thus, the idea that people (as children of God) can be punished by blindness is also easily retrievable in literature. The downfall of the child, the punishment, and the repentance that follows represent a journey of growth. Curing blindness, on the other hand, was synonymous with possessing divine power or accomplishing a miracle. In that religious context, we retrieve a rising interest in childhood blindness, increasingly positivised by both scientists and men of letters. *The Blind Boy: A Melodrama, In Two Acts* (1808) played on the angelic image of the blind, blonde child who is seen as an intermediary between the spiritual and the mundane, and who is thus interesting to adults seeking personal betterment and spiritual ascendance.

Furthermore, with the rise of gothic and supernatural fiction, blindness began to be explored in a slightly different manner to combine both the beneficent and negative effects of the condition. For example, an interesting remark about the "advantages" of blindness is made by Robert John Thornton in his *The Philosophy of Medicine* (1799). He describes the case of a young patient who was blind from infancy but then regained his sight:

He remarked also, with great justice, that his former blindness gave him one advantage over the rest of mankind, which was that of being able to walk in the night, with confidence and security. (Thornton 1799, 8)

Not being afraid of darkness becomes a detail of importance in Francis Lathom's novels. In his *The Impenetrable Secret* (1805) he creates a truly enlightened character of a blind boy:



the birth of her son, Felix, whose privation of that most useful and desirable sense, his sight, seemed to call in a particular manner upon his parents to render his existence as free from regret as it was possible the imperfect state in which nature had sent him into the world should allow him to exist ... (Lathom 2006)

Even though considered “imperfect,” the boy Felix is brought up with ambition. His parents work on him as if on a common project to raise the perfect adult. Felix is naturally endowed with intelligence and is never influenced by the gothic terrors around him. He is able to accept darkness as none other and is frequently portrayed smiling. Likewise, he is capable of enlightened reasoning and is considered entertaining by his sister and her friends. Lathom thus creates a smooth, positive character who develops a highly positive self-regard and whose force and personal growth are gradually contrasted with the weaknesses of the other characters. Despite this, Felix is pronounced a sufferer by everyone because of his “imperfection of the functions,” further called “a drawback upon the enjoyment which an individual would otherwise reap from existence” (Lathom 2006). All refrain from using the words “eyes,” “vision,” and “blindness,” as if refusing to accept the obvious. His mother considers his disability a punishment and prays for his recovery. While he still is a child, he shares the destiny of young Helen:

every surgical aid was called upon, to use its utmost exertion in attempting to give the infant Felix the blessing of beholding the light of day, till a physician, in whose knowledge Signora del Alvaretti placed considerable faith, pronounced it as his opinion, that it was impossible for the art of surgery to give him sight ... The mother listened attentively to this advice, and making it her only hope, that her child would never feel the want of a sense which he had never enjoyed, she ceased to subject him to the process of surgical operations. (Lathom 2006)

Gradually, like Helen, the boy becomes a symbol of love. The parental and sibling love converge in the figure of the blind boy and transform him into an enlightened personality. Thus, the name Felix reveals all its meaning:

As Felix grew up, he displayed a heart of the most benevolent and engaged kind; his manners were bland and conciliating; and his memory, which was the only channel through which information could be conveyed to his understanding, of so strong and retentive a nature, that his mind, in the course of a few years, shewed itself to be composed of such materials, that had it been gifted with that only sense of which it was derived, its possessor must have ranked in the first class of genius and learning. (Lathom 2006)

By the end of the novel, Felix has grown into a worthy man and miraculously regains his sight. The presence of Felix in the novel partly remains a mystery as he is not its main character. Rather, his childhood represents a positive force, which balances out the dark secrets of the other characters. But his role in their destinies when he becomes an adult is unclear, as if the author was at a loss about what can be done with a blind child growing into manhood. Interestingly, his handicap disappears before his marriage, which has sparked numerous critical interpretations. What is important, however, is that while a blind child was a very convenient symbol of force for Lathom, a blind man proves difficult to manage. Hence, the change in physical characteristics also reveals a long-awaited goal, not for Felix, but for the adults who raised him.

## Conclusions

The eyes are obviously an underlying thread in all the works that we have examined up to now. Without it being the primary force behind plot development, the link between eyes and children persists throughout. There is a subtle logic to its appearance in sentimental, gothic, and esoteric fiction, and it is even furthered today into the way we write science. These are but a few examples of the multiplicity of works that combine the symbolism of the eyes and the figure of the child in their plots. Chesterton seems to be right when referring to the many-eyed monster as part of the child's collection of fearsome nightmares. He might have been subconsciously referring to the adults insistently and repeatedly looking at, inspecting and studying the child, as if seeking answers. There is something truly troubling in this multiplicity of looks and in their repetition, of the curiosity and obsessive attention paid to the child, based on a supposed superiority in terms of personal growth capability. It seems there is also a strange overreliance on the child as a figure of personal salvation for the adult, and a kind of abusive selfishness in relying on the child to show us the way to that salvation. It is a fearsome thought that an adult might want to pry open the "secret life of kids" (Peterson 2001), as the work is enticingly entitled, and lay it out in the open for any adult to see in complete disregard for childhood privacy. This is especially true in the esoteric works studied, but it is also a prevalent tendency in sentimental and gothic fiction. It is as if the child existed for the adult, rather than for themselves. The notion of privacy in childhood rarely makes it into such texts and seems to be only a recent development.

In the next chapter, we will focus on an adult, artistic view of the child. There will be no childhood perspective in it; rather, we will only see the histories of children depicted by the artist, as well as the artist's interpretation of them. In that sense, the pictographic narratives will be indicative of adult thinking only. The representations of children will thus be revelatory of the artist's sensibility, first and foremost, and secondly of the larger context in which they developed their art. In the continuity of what we have just seen, an increased attention to the child's intimate, private world at any given moment in time is the predominant feature of these works. They present children at home and outside, children at play and children occupied in serious activities, children in their beds or at church, with their parents or alone. Broadly speaking, the world of the child is laid bare for the adult to look at, yet that world is largely determined by the way the adult sees it. Hence, we will find children as messianic figures, or slightly sexualized in the fashion of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.



## CHAPTER II

# THE PRE-RAPHAELITE CHILDREN OF SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

### Introduction

In 1855, at the age of twenty-six, John Everett Millais began one of his most intriguing paintings—the painting that would mark his career as one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), and would influence the representation of the female in art during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. His models were a group of young girls, all of them under thirteen years old, purportedly chosen for their youth and beauty. This painting he called *Autumn Leaves* and with the finishing touches of his brush he sealed the tenth anniversary of his early graduation from the Royal Academy of Arts. John Everett Millais was a child himself when he entered that institution at the age of eleven. Criticized for lacking a breath of vision and imagination, young Millais had in fact succeeded in preserving the fresh, slightly naive, yet unadulterated, holistic, and transcendent vision of the world that is said to be only proper to children. But what is sometimes naive can be viewed as corrupt, and what is intended as pure can be seen as immoral. Such was the case with some well-known figures among Millais's acquaintances who were oftentimes blamed of having other motifs as to their preoccupation with children and childhood. Between 1856 and 1868, John Everett Millais and his wife Effie had eight children. Effie happened to be the ex-child wife of John Ruskin, who never consummated his union with her. After all of her children sat for the paintings of their father, Ruskin declared his aversion to Millais's art as crude and disproportionate. And when some of Effie's children posed for the photographs of Lewis Carroll, the family went a little deeper into the forbidden territory that is childhood sexuality. Their close-knit society of adolescents depicting children later grew to become a bizarre society of adults depicting children to the extent they attracted public notoriety and criticism, especially in the case of Lewis Carroll and his photographs of the young girls.

Because the nature of Pre-Raphaelitism is such that it supposes the use of countless elements and symbols, determining the most important elements in the work of any painter of the movement can be a very difficult task. Critics have paid special attention to women, colour, and religious symbolism as these seem the most prominent. In the work of Millais, however, the figure of the child plays a central role. Children and childhood are far from used as mere accessory models within the larger whole of Millais's art—it is much the contrary. Because childhood was a defining experience in the painter's life, children became central to his work. Many of Millais's paintings are technically organized around one or several children, exploring their activities and environment, looking at the child from all angles. In this sense, the figure of the child seems to acquire a primordial importance to Millais's discourse and becomes a source of inspiration. It was, above all, a fascination and an obsession to a degree that cannot always be understood by an impartial critic. It was much the same with Lewis Carroll, whose work is largely for and about children. The figures of children, as we shall see, allow for the development of a large number of themes. Millais explores the world of the child from a variety of points of view which have social and philosophical implications. Many are exaggeratedly sentimental, while others are less so. However, all of them have the character, atmosphere, and symbolism of the PRB. Interestingly, the theme of fear can also be found at their core with its various dimensions, such as religious fear and fear of death.

Broadly speaking, John Everett Millais's paintings of children fall into two main groups. On the one hand, he has produced numerous portraits of children accompanied by adults. On the other, he painted a variety of portraits of children on their own. These two broad groups are spread throughout the years, transitioning from collective to individual portraits. The beginning of Millais's career (up to 1862) was mostly devoted to groups of children and children accompanied by adults. From 1862 onwards, Millais produced a greater number of portraits of children alone with a few exceptions. Thematically, the artist's treatment of the child falls into several categories. The family unit, providing education and protection, is one of the easiest to pinpoint. Children in distress and as victims of crude and harsh adult realities represent another recurring category. The innate purity of the child is the founding principle of these works and is usually enriched with additional themes. It is also retrievable, however, as a standalone theme. The contact of the child with the adult world is also treated as a source of distress and disappointment, resulting in Millais's most poignant and pathetic works. This latter category is easily identifiable during the period 1850–62.