

CHARLES DICKENS AND THE VICTORIAN CHILD

Romanticizing and Socializing
the Imperfect Child



Amberyl Malkovich

ROUTLEDGE

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the Imperfect Child

AMBERY L. MALKOVICH



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CHARLES DICKENS AND THE VICTORIAN CHILD

This book explores the ideas of children and childhood, and the construct of the 'ideal' Victorian child that rapidly develop over the Victorian era along with literacy and reading material for the emerging mass reading public. Children's Literature was one of the developing areas for publishers and readers alike, yet this did not stop the reading public from bringing home works not expressly intended for children and reading to their family. Within the idealized middle class family circle, authors such as Charles Dickens were read and appreciated by members of all ages. By examining some of Dickens's works that contain the imperfect child, and placing them alongside works by Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit, Malkovich considers the construction, romanticization, and socialization of the Victorian child within work read by and for children during the Victorian Era and early Edwardian period. These authors use elements of religion, death, irony, fairy worlds, gender, and class to illustrate the need for the ideal child and yet the impossibility of such a construct. Malkovich contends that we still long for the Victorian child within our literatures, and while debates rage over how to define children's literature, such children, though somewhat changed, can still be found in the most popular of literatures read by children contemporarily.

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Romanticizing and Socializing the Imperfect Child
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*To the memory of my grandparents, father and uncle who guided
my days and inspired an unending love of learning and to my Uncle
Rick and his passion for family.*

For Zachary, with all my love.

Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term *children* to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

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Extract of "The Fairy School," published in Thomas Keightley's *The World Guide to Gnomes, Fairies, Elves, and Other Little People* (1880). Rpt. in Harper's

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Introduction

As *Oliver Twist* flees from a crime he has not committed, the words “Stop thief!” echo down a Victorian London street. By trying to escape the screaming mob, Oliver becomes labeled as a common criminal. Yet, as is presented in both George Cruikshank’s 1837 illustration “Oliver amazed at the Dodger’s Mode of ‘going to work,’ ” and Roman Polanski’s 2005 film version of the beloved Charles Dickens’s (1812–1870) classic *Oliver Twist* (1837), in this scene Oliver is being severed from his life of poverty for the first time as he tries to escape not only the robbery victim, Mr. Brownlow, but also the mob of onlookers that gather to claim him. While Dickens indicates the true thieves of Mr. Brownlow’s handkerchief, Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, have simply left the scene of the crime (*Oliver Twist* 117), Polanski depicts them in flight from it altogether. As Oliver tries to explain to a policeman, “It wasn’t me indeed, sir. Indeed, it was two other boys” (*Oliver Twist* 117), Artful Dodger and Charley Bates “ . . . filed off down the first convenient court they came to” (*Oliver Twist* 117). In both cases, his new friends abandon Oliver to his fate. A carriage, Polanski’s representation of the separation of Oliver’s dual existence, comes between them and Oliver is then pursued by the crowd, which includes his soon-to-be savior Mr. Brownlow. The carriage, indicative of movement in Oliver’s life, also provides the momentary barrier that allows his escape.

Oliver is often thought of as the idyllic Victorian sentimental child, and as Dickens writes of his protagonist in the preface to the 1838 edition of *Oliver Twist*, his purpose is to show “ . . . the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last . . . ” (33). Yet he also notes, “I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil” (33). For Dickens, Oliver is not symbolic of the purest of good, but rather practices it when faced with situations he knows are right or wrong. Stories like *Oliver Twist*’s have come to be associated with contemporary conceptions of Victorian childhood. Though many have read such literary constructions of the Victorian child as good or evil, critics and scholars have largely overlooked the idea of the imperfect child. Such

children are not constrained by gender or socioeconomic status nor do they simply accept their fates. Rather, the imperfect child is participatory in the development of their agency. As such, imperfect children depict the potential impact of reality upon culture and society and the way one may challenge such conventions for the betterment of everyone. These children are not limited by a binary construct of good/evil; Romantic¹ child vs. street waif. Through a transitory, blended space, such as occurs between the transition from the “real” to fantastic world and back again, their agency is strengthened and solidified. Ultimately, the imperfect child, though often looked upon as a nuisance by society and culture, develops a plan and path for their life in the face of adversity and rejects or accepts mores as they deem fit, thus becoming a self-advocate. They often care for others and take charge of difficult situations even when adults fail to enact change. The imperfect child is neither the Romantic child nor a street urchin but rather an individual who is comprised of both innocence and experience; who’s “good” comes from their knowledge of the “vilest of evil.”

Depictions of the imperfect Victorian child can be found in the works of Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley (1819–1875), George MacDonald (1824–1905), Hesba Stretton (1832–1911), Christina Rossetti (1839–1894), and E. Nesbit (1858–1924), as well as many other nineteenth-century authors. Dickens did not write specifically for a child audience but rather for the general public, which included children. Inadvertently, he practiced what has come to be termed cross writing² because adults as well as children had access to his texts. Dickens has come to be known as one of, if not *the*, most popular authors of Victorian England, and the term “Dickensian” has become synonymous with not only the Victorian period but elements of it when we speak of things being sinister, ominous, or enigmatically ironic. As has been well established,³ Dickens drew upon Victorian culture and society to help inform his work and this can readily be seen from the way he constructed his stories. His publications were and continue to be influential for authors. Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit are only a handful of writers Dickens’s work helped inspire. Yet these authors, who also wrote for adults as well as children, are most often remembered as authors of children’s texts rather than remembered for their adult material. Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit construct the Dickensian child in their children’s texts and bring the imperfect child to younger audiences. Although Dickens is taught to child and young adult audiences in middle and high schools across the globe, he is not considered a children’s author. His popularity and literary status remain constant and his fiction is often considered “classic” and “timeless,” both of which are problematic terms. Consequently, his texts are largely used for college preparation. The works of Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti and Nesbit are not as widely used in classroom settings, but are still popular for younger children or those searching for moral, spiritual, and/or religious literature. The construction, definition, production, education, and

desire for the imperfect child, and the implications of its use in the classroom, form the focus of Chapter 1.

One of the most popular modes of constructing the Victorian child in nineteenth-century literature was to give the child character a spiritual crisis and pilgrimage along their troubled social and cultural journey. In this fashion, the child could be “saved.” This is especially true of the imperfect child. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, Oliver has been raised in an orphanage run by the church system that was impacted by the Poor Law of 1834. Yet Dickens satirizes this system as one that “farms” children and says of poor Oliver, “If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of churchwardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder” (47). Though many of Dickens’s child characters resemble Oliver and his plight, Oliver, Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* (1841), Paul Dombey of *Dombey and Son* (1846), Nelly Trent from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1843), Amy Dorrit of *Little Dorrit* (1855), and Esther Summerson from *Bleak House* (1853) remain some of Dickens’s most popular fictional children, exemplifying the construct of the imperfect child. These characters are not alone among Victorian imperfect child characters. Kingsley’s Tom from *The Water Babies* (1863), MacDonald’s Diamond of *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) and Princess Irene and Curdie from *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882) series also follow the patterns of Dickens’s imperfect children and childhoods in their construction and development culturally and spiritually. Stretton’s most popular work, *Jessica’s First Prayer* (1867), illustrates the life of Jessica, an orphan, a condition even most of Dickens’s protagonists were able to avoid, and also illustrates the imperfect child, as do Rossetti’s Flora, Edith, and Maggie from *Speaking Likenesses* (1874). The characterization of the imperfect child also carries over into E. Nesbit’s Edwardian, yet very Victorian, children Edred and Elfrida of *The House of Arden* (1908) and Dickie Harding from *Harding’s Luck* (1909).⁵

It is important to consider their differences and similarities, and thus the variety, in order to show the development of the imperfect child across the Victorian period. As evident in Nesbit’s work, for example, continues to be a presence in post-Victorian literature and has become a standard literary representation of the child. As Ginger Frost asserts in *Victorian Childhoods* (2009), “. . . the Victorian child has a special appeal because of both the dramatic changes over the course of the nineteenth century and the popularity of many child characters in Victorian literature. In part because of the fictional accounts, modern readers often have contradictory views of childhood in the nineteenth century” (5). It is also significant how long this child has been overlooked even when it has been presented numerous times in mainstream literature, as is discussed in Chapter 5, such as in Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999–2006) or J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) series. However, the additional complexity nineteenth-century female authors faced was in their fight for recognition in Victorian society alongside their characters.

Gender construction and performance are equally significant to the development of the imperfect child because while sex does not determine if a child will be imperfect, such children often cross gender norms prescribed by society and culture. The ways in which the Victorian female child was and is both romanticized and socialized differs from that of the male child and this extends to class ideologies. Though Oliver and Jessica undergo similar crises, they are viewed and treated differently. In *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998) James Kincaid discusses the concept of child loving and how this has become not only accepted but also commercialized in both Victorian and contemporary culture and suggests:

It is worth noting that these hollow child images [characters like Betty Boop without any “real” context] not only focus and allow desire but also erase various social and political complications, performing essential cultural work that is not simply erotic. By formulating the image of the alluring child as bleached, bourgeois, and androgynous, these stories mystify material reality and render nearly invisible—certainly irrelevant—questions we might raise about race, class and even gender. Such categories are scrubbed away in the idealized child, laved and snuggled into Grade-A homogeneity. (20)

Poor characters, like Oliver and Jessica, however, also fit Kincaid’s depiction, for they are eroticized through their economic and familial plights and are often as alluring, if not more so, than bourgeois children, through their dirt, grime, and daily struggles. Kincaid finds, “When poor children are allowed to play this part, as they sometimes are, they are helped into the class above them; boys and girls leave difference behind and meld together . . .” (20). Oliver and Jessica exemplify such positions, as do many other Victorian child characters. Poor children and an impoverished childhood were popular narrative techniques used in Victorian writing. Such characters’ bodies were often “othered” and such children became erotic creatures for the middle-class reading public for which Dickens, Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit were writing. As characters such as Oliver and Jessica achieve new positions and find faith, they become part of the collective “whole,” and when this occurs their stories cease as they have been accepted and are no longer “interesting” and “erotic” to the reader’s gaze.

Often the romanticized Victorian child is thought of as innocent and perfect. Perfection, or the “ideal” Victorian child, is often what readers look for in characters such as Oliver and Jessica. While the bourgeois child in literature does not typically face the same struggles as the working class child, he/she must often undergo a transformation into some semblance of societal and cultural perfection by the conclusion of his/her journey. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), Alice, for example, undergoes many

transformations. Yet these challenges occur in a fairylike world that parallels Alice's upper-class background rather than the discordant streets of London that working class Oliver and Jessica must navigate. However Alice, like Oliver and Jessica, does not *become* the idyllic Victorian child. The transformation that children like Alice, Oliver, Jessica, and similar child depictions undergo shifts their position to that of the ideologically imperfect child.

The romanticization of the child is overtly present in many works. It is through gender and class socialization in their works that Dickens, MacDonald, Kingsley, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit illustrate the difficulty of attaining the culturally ideal child and childhood. The elements of the fairy tale and fairy world, which form the basis of the discussion in Chapter 2, are also important in the construction of the imperfect child and childhood. These fantastical spheres are venues and elements of a fantasy world where life is idyllic and perfect. The fairy tale was at the heart of Victorian writing, art, and the romanticized idea of life. Authors writing for both children and adults, including Dickens, used it as a tool in their writing. For many Victorians, the fairy world and all that it contained became a religion. Many noted personalities of the Victorian period, such as Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle, delved into expanding fields like occultism and mesmerism. As occultism spread throughout the nineteenth century and the sciences became more concrete, so too did the desire to believe in something tangible. The world of fairies could be found right outside one's backdoor. The fairy world was accessible yet belief in the imagination was also needed for it to be real. Authors capitalized on these emerging belief systems and incorporated them into writing, as can be seen in the works of Dickens, MacDonald, Kingsley, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit.

Fantasy and fantastic worlds become central to the imperfect child's journey and experiences throughout these texts. Fantastic spaces offer alternative areas where protagonists, much in the vein of Shakespeare's dual plots of reality/fantasy in plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594), may be free from social and romantic constructs of the "child" and "childhood." Fantasy, according to U. C. Knoepfelmacher in *Ventures into Childhood: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (1998), for adults might "... embody a shared childhood preoccupation with loss and recovery" when shared with children (4). These authors brought childhood preoccupations into their own writing from incidents in their own childhoods. The imperfect child offers such writers a way to express social and cultural concerns and yet points out ways in which society and culture simultaneously "norm" both child and childhood. Writers such as Dickens, Kingsley, MacDonald, Stretton, Rossetti, and Nesbit also use fantasy to separate the child and childhood from social "norming" and the cultural gaze that seeks to "other" them until their own norming takes place. Knoepfelmacher believes "... an adult reader is drawn into fantasy that remains essentially anti-adult in its regressive hostility to growth and sexual deviation" (5) as this, in essence, will allow the "child" and text to retain their innocence.