

The social construct of childhood explored with reference to The Illustrated Mum by Jacqueline Wilson.

When considering what the term 'childhood' truly means, we look to the social constructions formulated by adults. Gabriel (2010, p.137). states that by 'tracing the historical forces' it is easier to understand the sociological viewpoints held by individuals at certain times. James and James (2004, p.10) emphasise the portrayal of children in the media, as marketing campaigns often include or target children to increase sales. This social construct considers children as consumers in an increasingly modern age. However, it is also important to recognise how children were regarded in the past.

This essay will consider and explore the changes of the construct of childhood. Through looking at the context of the Industrial Revolution, paired with the work of Aries (1962), societal expectations will be acknowledged to see why children were perceived in such a way at this point in history.

This essay will then go on to analyse Wilson's (1999) book 'The Illustrated Mum'. Wilson explores several unconventional themes that weren't typically written about in children's literature, for example: mental illness, alcoholism and single parent households. Hall (2003, p.139) states that children's literature 'offers a window onto what various societies at different times consider as desirable for children.' Wilson (1999) was writing from a period where relative poverty was in decline, but still a prominent issue in the UK (according to the Child Poverty Action Group, 2017). This may be why she decided to write about such issues within her book The Illustrated

Mum to allow children to be aware of subjects that may have affected their own families or many families around them.

This essay will then go on to explore both romantic and puritanical discourses in depth in relation to Wilson's (1999) story, followed by a conclusion to summarise the points made.

There is not one clear definition of what childhood is. Morrow (cited by Meyell 1994, p.128) explored that in the industrialised West, childhood is constructed as 'a period of dependency with little sense of responsibility'. She emphasises how this construct sees a child's responsibility away from school-life as 'invisible' and thus challenges how childhood is conceptualised within modern sociology.

To look briefly, Morrow's (cited by Meyell 1994, p.128) idea is contrasted in Wilson's (1999) book. Rather than invisible, the responsibility felt especially by the character of Star, is a prominent feature. With the absence of mum Marigold, Star has no choice but to take on the role of caring for herself and younger sister Dolphin. This carries a lot of added weight and pressure for a teenage girl as she says: "Look, it's not like I'm your *mother*. It's not fair. Why should I always have to look after you?" (Wilson 1999, pg.155) Therefore, this conception of childhood disregards the responsibility that children face, even at such an early age. This demonstrates that constructs are simply matters of opinion and cannot fit with everybody's ideologies of what childhood constitutes.

Uprichard (2008, p.311) sees children as 'active social agents', individuals who participate in childhood as 'beings and becoming's' through the construction of knowledge and daily experiences. These ideas are shared by James and Prout

(1997, p.235) who state that through the care of a child, their present and future selves are shaped which is why it is important that the provision of children is top priority. This acts as the basis for the EYFS (DfE 2021, p.21), the key document for practitioners to follow in ensuring that children remain protected whilst under their supervision.

It has always been queried whether childhood has always existed. Aries (1962, pg.2) believed that 'in medieval society, childhood didn't exist' and reflected that throughout the Middle Ages, childhood and adulthood were not distinctively dissimilar stages of life. Aries (1962, pg.10) writes that in the tenth century, 'painters were unable to depict a child except as a man on a smaller scale.' So why was this the case? Aries (1962, pg.2) suggested that children were regarded as 'small adults' due to the child labour they underwent and the communication they were expected to hold with adults. It was also common that children died before they reached adulthood. He stated that it was not until much later that parents started to consider children in a different light, and it was only then that a child's education was starting to be prioritised.

Thompson (2015) would agree with Aries (1962). This is because in the Middle Ages, the law did not differentiate between adults and children and instead regarded them in the same way. This therefore demonstrates that they were not seen as independent, agreeing with Aries' idea of 'small adults.' Yet Wilson (1980) would directly contradict Thompson (2015) and Aries (1962) as he says that individuals in the medieval period 'did have an awareness of children' however just lacked in the modern knowledge of knowing how children should be treated.

Acocella (2003) recognises the contradictions of Aries' (1962) ideas. Within his book, he uses images of families that demonstrate their luxurious and wealthy lifestyle in the Middle Ages. However, Acocella (2003) notes that his writing suggests that the lives of families may have been negative and severe, contradicting the images that he displays.

Cunningham (2021) also criticises Aries' (1962) work. He states that Aries (1962) has no 'hard-evidence' that allows for his ideas to be held with a high regard. Aries (1962) uses paintings as a form of evidence, a type of aesthetic artifact that depicts an artist's opinion rather than a factual understanding. This cannot be a reliable basis for forming an idea of what childhood was like in the Middle Ages.

The Industrial Revolution emerged in the 18th century and changed the face of British economy forever (White, 2009). The building of factories saw small children from orphanages and workhouses being sent to work long shifts handling heavy machinery. The conditions in these factories were extremely hazardous and accidents occurred frequently. Alternatively, children were sent down into the coalmines to pull the carts along the railroad tracks or sort through coal and remove any impurities. Both workplaces were completely unsafe for children to work in, and they often suffered from severe health problems or even lost their lives. This was detrimental to the quality of life of children in this period. (Beck, 2021)

Children were seen as the perfect employees to employers during the Industrial Revolution. This was due to their small stature that allowed for more precision in cleaning equipment, fitting into small spaces etc. and they were much cheaper to employ as well. History.com (2022) demonstrate that children would earn 10-20% of

an adult wage which was more beneficial to employers and children were less likely to organise into union groups so striking would be avoided.

With the new dangers to children came the growth of the romantic discourse. Rousseau (cited in Brown 2017, pg.16) saw children as good and innocent and in need of love, nurturing and protection. This contrasted with the dominant puritanical discourse of the time that saw children as innately evil and in need of punishment to correct their behaviour (McDowall Clark, 2016, p.19).

The 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, was an important figure in the protection of children during the Industrial Revolution. The Earl raised his concerns about the conditions that children were exposed to down in the mines and the long hours that they were being made to work (cited in Finlayson 2004, p.183). As a result, the Mine's Act of 1842 was created. This act prohibited boys under the age of ten and all women and girls from working in the mines. He also encouraged the government to provide low-cost houses for workers and more thoroughly inspect the housing that was already offered (Britannica 2022). These changes demonstrated the need to keep children protected and highlighted a shift in attitudes towards the young.

Mary Carpenter was another significant individual during this point in history. Carpenter opened a reformatory school for young girls who had been in prison. She questioned whether help could 'be given, to influence these degraded children?' and turn their lives away from crime, 'especially those who are almost certain from their ignorance, destitution, and the circumstances in which they are growing up, if a helping hand be not extended to raise them' (Carpenter 1968, p.3). Typically, these girls would have been treated with disrespect and not shown any love because of

their crimes, following in the puritanical discourse that was prominent at the time. Yet Carpenter wanted to make a difference and deter away from the views ordinarily held. She treated them with kindness to allow them to feel valued as individuals which would lead to a change in their behaviour. By providing them with an education, the young girls were kept off the streets and away from committing further crimes. (Taylor, 2016)

Young and Ashton (1965, pp.169-170) summarise Carpenter's approach when it came to providing education to the girls. Her six main elements were: treatment should be founded on the love of the child, change required the cooperation of the child, there should not be any forced work, recreation was as important as work itself, limit corporal punishment and have an approach that was educational and based on Christianity. Smith (2020) emphasises that Carpenter wanted to create a setting that closely resembled a family, built on both love and affection. She believed that change could only be instilled if the child were ready and willing. This contrasted starkly with the dominant ideas and practices of her time and allowed Carpenter to be seen as a shining light and a force for change.

Wilson (1999) both challenges and conforms to traditional views within her book *The Illustrated Mum*. Rousseau's ideas (cited in Brown 2017, p.16) of the romantic discourse can be seen as undermining the capabilities of children. Wilson (1999) demonstrates that the characters of both Star and Dolphin can care for themselves with the absence and the struggles of their mum Marigold. "Marigold hardly ever took me to school. Mostly she stayed in bed in the morning." (p.37). This demonstrates that even at an early age, Dolphin can take herself to school safely which contradicts the views of individuals like Rousseau. Therefore, it can be argued that an elevated

level of protection is not always necessary as children have a proficiency in being able to take care of themselves that adults seem to misconceive.

Star's character demonstrates qualities of responsibility that would be considered as unexpected for children of her age. "Star had done the shopping for as long as I could remember." (p.119) This demonstrates again the capability that she possesses which is undermined by adult characters in the book. Micky believes that Star is too young to go out and do the shopping and that the girls are too young to stand on their own at the fairground: "we can't leave the girls standing by themselves, there are all kinds of crazy characters round here." (p.127) Micky encapsulates the views of the romantic discourse, wanting to safeguard the children at all costs and ensure that they are protected from harm. This is not always the most realistic viewpoint though, as Wilson (1999) demonstrates throughout her literature. Wilson (1999) shows that even though both Star and Dolphin are exposed to potentially harmful situations, they are more competent than given credit for which demonstrates that they cannot always be shielded from the true dangers of the world.

We see in *The Illustrated Mum* the idea that with responsibility comes a change in childhood (Martin, 2020). In the Industrial Revolution, children who were sent off to work young had to grow up well before their time. We can see this with the character of Star. Star acts much older than she is, dressing in inappropriate clothing for her age and spending time with older groups of people: "she had a lot of Year Nine and Ten boys keen on her" (p.50) "She looked incredibly grown-up, a stranger instead of my sister." (p.98). This illustrates her lack of childhood innocence, a key part of the romantic discourse, as she has had to mature much quicker than other children to look after both herself and her sister.

Wilson (1999) demonstrates a clear contrast in the two children. Dolphin's character represents childhood naivety as she is not yet fully aware of the world whereas Star represents cynicism as she has already been exposed to such mature topics and behaviours throughout her short life. Therefore, Wilson uses these ideas to challenge the romantic discourse and broadcast a different view that is not typically presented in children's literature.

We see a shift back in the level of maturity when Micky enters her life. "Star tried so hard to look old for her age that I thought she'd get angry, but she didn't seem to mind at all." (p.112) Now Star no longer needs to be independent, she allows herself to have the childhood that she missed due to Dolphin's dependency on her. Star no longer needs to take on responsibilities well beyond her age and can now act in a way much more appropriate for a child (Martin, 2020). Micky, like the Earl of Shaftesbury and Mary Carpenter were to the children at their time, was a figment of hope in Star's life and a way for her to escape the struggles of her everyday life.

Wilson's (1999) character of Jane can also be compared with Mary Carpenter as the epitome of the romantic discourse. Jane, as a foster carer, fostered 'outcasted' children and provided them with a much better life and a chance of a successful future. These children, like Dolphin, were criticised because of their behaviour. However, Jane allowed them the chance to be happy, recognising the goodness of their character. This contrasts to the character of Mrs Luft who despite being of a similar age, still possesses an old-fashioned viewpoint about what it means to be a 'good mother' and the behaviour that should be expected of children. As discussed in the work of Lomanowska *et al* (2017, pp.120-139), this mirrors onto modern society where individuals of different generations each possess their own ideas

about parenting that often clash with one another. This therefore demonstrates that social constructs of childhood do not inherit a 'one size fits all' standpoint and cannot be applied to each unique circumstance.

The puritanical discourse is also displayed in Wilson's (1999) literature through the character of Miss Hill. "Miss Hill went on and on, telling me it just wasn't good enough, I was a dirty, lazy girl without any sense of pride..." (p.217). Miss Hill's character shows a complete lack of respect and sympathy towards Dolphin's well-known difficult home life, offering little support to help her and instead acting coldly. She epitomises the puritanical discourse, considering children as evil and in need of punishment to correct their behaviour, contrasting drastically the care that Mary Carpenter showed. Rodriguez (2020) stated that originally this view was in line with religious beliefs and that children should be kept in covenant with God to be forgiven from sins and delivered from evil as the Lord's prayer proclaimed.

Wilson (1999) also challenges the typical views held about parenting in her book *The Illustrated Mum*. The puritanical discourse explains that a parent needs to punish their child to correct their behaviour for them to become respectful adults, something that Kohn (2006, p.2) discusses in his book. However, Wilson (1999) shows that even though Marigold is not a responsible parental figure and suffers with manic depression, Dolphin still knows what it means to be a loving parent. We see this in her pretend mothering to Marigold: "I felt like I really was the mother, and she was my little girl." (p.148) Through Marigold's mistakes, Dolphin recognises the true love and care that a mother must show her child. This contrasts the puritanical discourse as Dolphin does not need to be punished to possess such

qualities, demonstrating that children are not innately evil and do not always need to be taught such things.

It can be argued that Wilson (1999) uses this story to demonstrate that even though there isn't a constant in the security of the family's household and finances or a constant in Marigold's mental health, what there is a constant of is love and this is the most important aspect. As emphasised by Murphy (2000), Wilson (1999) demonstrates the value of the love Marigold, Star and Dolphin show to one another as family, even if it is not the typical 'nuclear family' that society expects. Even though there is not a happy ending to the story, there is definitely a positive one that reflects new beginnings and hope for all the real families that may be struggling.

To conclude, this essay has discussed constructs of childhood and the different opinions held by individuals over different periods of history. It has also examined the Industrial Revolution and why this was such a significant point in time regarding children. Children's well-being was beginning to be recognised during this time, individuals like the Earl of Shaftesbury and Mary Carpenter demonstrating the importance of protecting children and ensuring that they are kept safe. This reflected on Rousseau's (cited in Brown 2017, p.16) romantic discourse and contradicted the ideas of the puritanical discourse.

It then went on to look at the ideas presented in Wilson's (1999) book *The Illustrated Mum* and how she both conforms and challenges the ideas of such discourses within her piece of literature. To conclude, Wilson (1999) demonstrates that the romantic discourse is not always necessary as children can care for

themselves in a way that adults undermine. Wilson (1999) also shows the impacts that heavy responsibilities have on children and the lack of childhood innocence that they possess in return.

It is important to recognise that every childhood is different, and no two children are the same. Therefore, it can be extremely difficult to find a construct that capsulises all aspects of a unique sense of childhood and each individual experience.

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