The child in the Victorian age

The imaginative and passionate child.
Oliver Twist, the child as redeemer
Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*

- *Serialized between 1837-39 (book published in 1838) in Bentley’s Miscellany*
Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*

- *Subtitle*: The Parish Boy’s Progress
- *Parody of Bunyan’s* Pilgrim’s Progress
- Establishes a Link with Hogarth’s series of engravings in the 18th century (degraded progress)
Hogarth’s ‘Bad’ Progress in Society

Hogarth, A Rake’s Progress (1733)
Hogarth’s ‘Bad’ Progress in Society

Hogarth, A Harlot’s Progress (1732)

critique of the social degradation of the city
Oliver Twist

- Oliver is confronted with the temptations of the corrupt society of London
- Oliver is an orphan, and when he is in London he goes to live with a gang of thieves (‘Fagin’s den’)
- BUT Oliver strongly refuses to become a thief
A ‘Victorian’ fairytale?

- For many critics, Oliver’s resistance to crime is unrealistic.
- Moreover, Oliver discovers that he is of genteel origins.
- Is crime for the poor only?? This seems unlikely (Dickens himself was poor when a child and he had to work in a factory).
A Victorian Fairytale?

- *Film Director Roman Polanski completely ignored the question of Oliver’s origins.*

- *Maybe because if Oliver is not discovered to be ‘innately’ against crime what is emphasised is his innocence.*
Oliver as a sleeping and daydreaming child...

... something Dickens’ novel and Polanski’s film have in common...
Daydreaming as special Imagination

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes, which, while it holds the body prisoner, does not free the mind from a sense of things about it, and enables it to ramble at its pleasure. So far as an overpowering heaviness, a prostration of strength, and an utter inability to control our thoughts or power of motion, can be called sleep, this is it; and yet, we have a consciousness of all that is going on about us, and, if we dream at such a time, words which are really spoken, or sounds which really exist at the moment, accommodate themselves with surprising readiness to our visions, until reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost matter of impossibility to separate the two.
Daydreaming as Imagination

- Daydreaming is NOT simply sleeping or dreaming
- From the 1860s psychologists insist that ‘dreamy mental states’ are the prelude to madness
- 1895 Sir James Crichton Browne writes that ‘dreamy mental states’ are disorders of the mind, especially in children
The novelist’s different view...

- For Dickens, Oliver’s daydreamy attitude is evidence of the child’s imaginative inner life.

- In Oliver Twist, imagination, daydreaming and innocence are combined.

- It is because Oliver is between sleep and consciousness that he can resist crime.
The novelist’s different view...

- Scientists emphasize the need to control children’s imagination

- BUT many novelists are interested in exploring the potentialities of this imagination
Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights

- Catherine Earnshaw is a wild child, fond of the wild moors and of the stories of imagination
- Cathy is gifted with a heightened vision of the world
- Her passion for Heathcliff is something beyond adults’ understanding
Oliver Twist

The first English novel entirely focused on the character of a child.

At the end of the novel, when Oliver is restored to his wealthy relatives, he is still a child. Dickens does not regard childhood as the mere prelude to adulthood, but as an ‘interesting’ stage of life. Dickens’s ‘good’ adults are those who retain some of the immaturity of childhood.
Dickens attacks the recent amendment to the poor Law (1834): the only public assistance for the poor are the inhumane workhouses.

In Oliver Twist, as in later novel, Dickens throws light on the horrible conditions of the poor in the slums.
Oliver Twist

- Oliver’s active imagination is coupled with innocence.

- The fact that Oliver spends much of his story in a condition between drowsiness and wake is what allows him to resist crime.

- Ingenuity: Oliver believes that Fagin’s boys make (and not steal) handkerchiefs!
Oliver Twist

- There is also another reason why Oliver Twist offers us a ‘typical’ Victorian representation of childhood.

- The innocence of the child is some highly idealized condition.
Fagin, ‘the Jew’

- evil character
- the boss of the boy-gang
- involved in a conspiracy against Oliver
But, at the end of the novel...

- Fagin is in the cell of the condemned
- When he sees Oliver, he repents his evil conduct and is redeemed

A powerful Victorian theme: the proximity to a pure child purifies the heart of the sinful adult
A Christmas Carol (1843)

- The story of Scrooge, the mean and greedy money changer
- On Christmas eve, he sees the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas yet to come
Scrooge’s repentance

- On seeing how much misery his greediness has brought about, Scrooge decides to change his life and help the poor.

However, what especially motivates Scrooge to this change is not just the vision of his life...
Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchin’s son

- The sight of Tiny Tim’s innocence awakens the goodness that lies hidden in Scrooge’s hardened heart.
The child as redeemer

- The child has the power to awaken purity in the adult’s corrupted life.
- This theme comes from the Romantic evaluation of childhood as the symbol of the authentic restoration of the adult-poet.
- Little Nell in Dickens’s The Old Curiosity Shop (1843)
Oscar Wilde, “The Selfish Giant” (1888)

- The selfish giant does not want anyone to get into his beautiful garden.
- The Spring abandons the garden, and all the flowers disappear.
Oscar Wilde, “The Selfish Giant” (1888)

- But then one day children manage to enter the garden and the spring comes back.
- The Selfish Giant helps one tiny child and he is redeemed from his selfishness.
- The tiny child is a figure of Christ himself, and at the end of the story the child takes the giant to Heaven.
Children and adults

- Not all writers shared this idea that children’s innocent imagination may help adults restore their lost innocence.

- In E. Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1849), in C. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1849) and in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) adults cannot understand children’s special imagination.
Children and adults

Literary critic Linda Pollock shows that there is a connection between ‘the invention of childhood’ and some social changes becoming widespread after the 18th c:

- the emergence of an education system that institutionalises distinctions between adults and children
- change in the family structure (smaller families).
Jane and Maggie are little girls often in sharp contrast to the world of adults.

For Brontë’s and Eliot Jane’s and Maggie’s special imagination is what makes them interesting but also impossible to understand (novel’s perspective vs adults’ perspective).