The child in the Victorian age

The imaginative and passionate child. *Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss*

- A book of poems and essays with a very practical design:
  
  “to lead the tender Mind of Youth in the Early Practice of Virtue and Piety, and thereby promote temporal Prosperity and Eternal Happiness”

- Need to instruct children: the ‘affectionate’ parent becomes a terrifying monitor. Ignorance becomes a sin, fancy becomes an obstacle to children’s good behaviour and education.
Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

- *The first English novel narrated from a child’s perspective, in the first person* (but only in the first part)
- *Like Oliver, Jane is an orphan, and possesses a strong imagination*
- *Tendency to faint and to see ghosts*
We first meet her as a child of about nine at Gateshead, home of her awful aunt Mrs Reed and of her cousins Georgiana, Eliza, and John.

Jane is fond of reading: Bewick’s *The History of British Birds*.

“Each picture told a story, mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting”.
Jane likes Gulliver’s book because it stimulates her imagination:

“I considered it a narrative of facts, and discovered in it a vein of interest deeper than what I found in my fairy tales; for as to the elves, having sought them in vain … I had at length made up my mind that they were all gone out of England to some savage country, where the woods were wilder and thicker…; whereas Lilliput and Brobdignag being, in my creed, solid parts of the earth’s surface, I doubted not that I might, one day, by taking a long voyage, see with my own eyes…”
Jane’s world is dominated by her reading

- Jane makes some confusion between actual reality and the ‘reality’ of books.
- Her reaction to John’s arrogance:
  “Wicked and cruel boy! You are like a murderer – You are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!”
  “I had read Goldsmith’s History of Rome, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c.”
Jane Eyre: the ‘stories’ of the text

- Jane Eyre takes its style and subject from a rich miscellany of sources.

- The plot recalls folk-tales and fairy-tales: Bluebeard’s Castle, Cinderella, the Ugly Duckling, Beauty and the Beast.

- The nursery world of fairy tales persists enchantingly even after Jane’s childhood is over.
Jane as ‘not childish’

- For Mrs Reed, Jane is ‘not childish’ because her imagination is too active, not docile.

- This is something Jane has in common with Maggie Tulliver.

- Jane vs beautiful Georgiana; Maggie vs beautiful Lucy (the ideal of subdued femininity).
Jane’s first encounter with Mr Brocklehurst of Lowood school

“What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! What a great nose! And what a mouth! And what large prominent teeth!”

Jane as Little Red Riding Hood...
Jane’s Language

- Jane Eyre employs a simple rather than a complex grammar as its stylistic basis: main clauses rather than hypotaxis.

- The effect is spontaneous intensity and emotional naturalness: “My heart beat thick, my head grew hot, sound filled my ears... I was oppressed, suffocated”
Jane’s Language

- As Jane grows up, the child’s hectic style is tempered by quiet passages of calm.

- Adult Jane’s (=the narrator’s) language is close to the “Puritan plain style”, but sometimes syntactic inversion is used to dramatic effect:

  “Me, she had dispensed from joining the group”

emphasis on Jane’s exclusion
Jane’s paradoxical (and fresh) reasoning...

“No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,” he began, “especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?”

“They go to hell,” was my ready and orthodox answer. “And what is hell? Can you tell me that?”

“A pit full of fire.”

“And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?”

“No, sir.”

“What must you do to avoid it?”

I deliberated a moment; my answer, when it did come, was objectionable:

“I must keep in good health, and not die”.
Jane as ‘liar’

- Jane is accused by Mrs Reed to be ‘a liar’, a deceitful child.
- Jane’s active imagination is misread as proving her tendency to invent falsehood.
- The coupling of children’s imagination and lies-telling is typical of the Victorian concern over childhood.
Mr Brocklehurst’s instruction

Mr Brocklehurst gives Jane a ‘cautionary tale’:

“Little girl, here is a book entitled the Child’s Guide; read it with prayer, especially that part containing ‘an account of the awfully sudden death of Martha G – a naughty child addicted to falsehood and deceit’.”
Jane’s ‘logic of truth’

“I am not deceitful; if I were, I should say I loved you; but I declare I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed; and this book about the liar, you may give to your child, Georgiana, for it is she who tells lies, and not I. [...] I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of it makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty”

“How dare you affirm that, Jane Eyre?”

“How dare I, Mrs Reed? How dare I? Because it is the truth”
Maggie in The Mill on the Floss

- Maggie loves reading stories, and these stories shape her world.
- But this tendency to live in the world of imagination causes trouble to Maggie.
- Eliot is more explicit than Brontë on the dangers of children’s imagination.
The Mill on the Floss and childhood

- Although it is a novel for adults, The Mill on the Floss offers us some interesting reflections on childhood.

- Revision of the Wordsworthian interest in childhood as an idealized stage of human life.

- Eliot’s novel published in 1860 - at the beginning of the ‘decade’ of the birth of CL.
Eliot and *Holiday House*

- Literary critic Karin Lesnik-Oberstein has shown that there are some interesting similarities between George Eliot’s novel and a popular book for children, Catherine Sinclair’s *Holiday House: A Series of Tales* (1839).

- The similarities are both stylistic and thematic (focus on brother-sister relationship: HH Laura and Harry, MoF Maggie and Tom, similar ‘adventures’).
Holiday House offers a fascinating and innovative perspective on children.

We find in these stories an interesting use of nonsense (‘Uncle David’s Nonsensical Story about Giants and Fairies’).

Although the ‘stories’ often have a moral message, Laura and Harry are extremely active and sometimes naughty children.
“The mind of young people are now manufactured like webs of linen, all alike, and nothing left to nature. [...] Books written for young people are generally a mere dry record of facts, unenlivened by any appeal to the heart, or any excitement to the fancy [...] nothing for the habits or ways of thinking, natural and suitable to the taste of children. Therefore, while such works are delightful to the parents and teachers who select them, the younger community are fed with strong meat instead of milk [...].”
Holiday House: from the Preface

“In these pages the author has endeavoured to paint that species of noisy, frolicsome, mischievous children, now almost extinct, wishing to preserve a sort of fabulous remembrance of days long past, when young people were like wild horses on the prairies, rather than like well-broken hacks on the road.”

in mid- and late-century psychology, the wild horse is a metaphor of the unconscious processes of the mind (also Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’).
Maggie’s mum (Mrs Tulliver)

“You talk o’ cuteness, Mr Tulliver, but I’m sure the child’s half an idiot i’ some things, for if I send her up-stairs to fetch anything she forgets what she’s gone for, an’ perhaps ‘ull sit down on the floor i’ the sunshine an’ plait her hair an’ sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur’, all the while I’m waiting for her down-stairs.”

Daydreaming explicitly linked to madness
Adults’ misreading of children

- **Like Jane, Maggie has a passionate nature and loves reading and imagining.**
- **Ambivalent character: interesting for the novelist/narrator but difficult to understand for adult characters.**
- **The mis-reading of the child’s active imagination: Jane = ‘liar’, Maggie = ‘idiot’/madness.**
Imagination taken to extremes

- *Little Father Time in Thomas Hardy’s* Jude the Obscure (1896)
- *The child, thinking that his parents cannot find accommodation because they have children, kills himself and his siblings to free the parents.*
- “*Done because we are too menny*”
“The History of the Devil, by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl,” said Mr Riley. “… Have you no prettier books?”

“O yes,” said Maggie, reviving a little in the desire to vindicate the variety of her reading, “I know the reading in this book isn’t pretty – but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head, you know. But I’ve got ‘Aesop’s Fables’, and a book about kangaroos and things, and the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress..’

‘Ah, a beautiful book’, said Mr Riley, ‘You can’t read a better’ ‘Well, but there’s a great deal about the devil in that’, said Maggie, triumphantly, ‘and I’ll show you the picture of him in his true shape, as he fought with Christian”
Maggie and the Gypsies

One day, Maggie runs away from her home because nobody understands her, and goes to the gypsies.

Her explanation: “she had been so often told she was like a gypsy and “half wild” that when she was miserable it seemed to her the only way of escaping opprobrium and being entirely in harmony with circumstances, would be to live in a little brown tent on the commons: the gypsies, she considered, would gladly receive her and pay her much respect on account of her superior knowledge.”
Maggie and the Gypsies

Maggie in M-o-t-F

Ellen the naughty girl reclaimed
Maggie and the Gypsies

- Maggie shows an unconventional and Romantic idea of gypsies.
- She goes to the Gypsies because she thinks they will listen to her and make her ‘the Queen of Gypsies’.
- Above all, what she is seeking is someone who will understand her.
Maggie as an unconventional Victorian little girl

- Maggie is dark, plain-looking, and not interested in looks.

- In one important episode, Maggie cuts all her hair because it won’t curl.

- Her motivation rejects the stereotype of female vanity: “She didn’t want her hair to be pretty - that was out of question - she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl and not find fault with her.”
The mis-reading of Maggie’s unconventional behaviour

- Tom’s comment when Maggie cuts her hair:
  “what a queer thing you look! Look at yourself in the glass - you look like the idiot we throw out nutshells to at school.”

- the idiot symbolizes her family’s inability to recognize that her unconventionality (based on her imagination) might be a power, not just madness.
When she goes to the gypsies, the spectre of the ‘idiot’ is again mentioned.

“She thought with some comfort that gypsies most likely knew nothing about idiots, so there was no danger of their falling into the mistake of getting her down at the first glance as an idiot.”

Maggie hopes that the gypsies will understand her originality.
Childhood in M-o-t-F

- As she grows up, Maggie loses her imaginative power and is schooled in more conventional femininity.
- It is clear that this is a loss, and yet...
- For Maggie as a young woman the remembrance of childhood becomes a sort of prison.
Maggie as the author herself?

- **Real name = Mary Ann Evans (also Charlotte Brontë used the name ‘Currer Bell’ when publishing Jane Eyre).**

- **Like Maggie, Mary Ann spent her childhood with her beloved brother Isaac (who, when an adult, never accepted Mary Ann’s relationship with George Henry Lewes).**

- **Mary Ann and Maggie are desperate to get their brothers’ love and affection.**
Only biography?

- The biographical hint is just one way - and not the most interesting one! - to make sense of Eliot’s representation of childhood.
- Eliot is NOT taking a sort of revenge on her brother...
- .... but seems more intrigued by the critique of adult’s nostalgia for childhood as proposed by the Romantic ideal.
Children and adults

- The distance childhood/adulthood is felt not just at the beginning of the novel, but also later.
- Maggie would like to restore the world of her childhood but this is not possible - this is possible only at the cost of her life.
A ‘reversed’ Bildungsroman

Maggie goes back to her childhood and to Tom’s love - but only in the final embrace of death - regression

The Flood

Tom and Maggie as children
“and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain. Is there any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him, [...] but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then [...]?

Surely if we could recall that early bitterness, and the dim guesses, the strangely perspectiveless conception that gave the bitterness its intensity, we should not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children.”