

1970

# The Displacement of the Child-Figure in American Fiction, 1850-1910

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The Displacement of the Child-figure

in American Fiction, 1850-1910

(TITLE)

BY

Karen Hahn

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1970  
YEAR

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## The Displacement of the Child-Figure in American Fiction, 1850-1910

The child as a major character in literature is a fairly recent phenomenon, for not until the last decades of the eighteenth century did authors find an audience and a literary vehicle sympathetic to a portrayal of the child. The audience, of course, was the bourgeoisie which sought to strengthen its position in society and to provide evidences of its rising status by encouraging the growth of periodicals which contained sketches and stories of its own middle-class life and manners.<sup>1</sup> Once the child was recognized as having thematic and symbolic significance for the reader, English and American authors interjected child heroes and heroines throughout so many stories that, at times, the nineteenth century is called the "century of the child."<sup>2</sup>

The initial child-figure is a unique synthesis of the bourgeoisie dream of nobility and respectability

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Coveney, "Introduction," Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature (London: Richard Clay and Co., 1957), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, The Writer in America (New York: Avon Books, 1953), p. 159.

and the romantic dream of man in his natural state--unsullied, innocent, and wise. Wordsworthian declarations that "the Child is father of the Man," and "Heaven lies about us in our infancy" were taken quite seriously by the writers of the middle-class, sentimental, domestic novel. As a result, the child was portrayed as a spotless angel who moralized upon the activities of the adult.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States two lasting works of American fiction, Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter [1850] and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin [1852], include examples of this early, popular, child-figure. The little girls, Pearl and Eva, trip through their respective stories almost in spiritual guise. Pearl, at times, seems to her mother to be "rather an airy sprite, which after playing its fantastic sports for a little while upon the cottage floor, would glit away with a mocking smile."<sup>4</sup> Little Eva moves "like a shadow through all sorts of places, without contracting spot or stain."<sup>5</sup> In order that the adult world might be strengthened and reformed

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<sup>3</sup>Coveney, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1961), pp. 99-100.

<sup>5</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1952), p. 143.

through their presences both girls have specific missions in life. Pearl is always to remind Hester of her adultery and to prevent her from evading its moral consequences.<sup>6</sup> At one time, for instance, Pearl's uncontrollable hysteria forces Hester to replace the embroidered letter and to reassume the burden of acknowledging her sin. Little Eva, of course, is one of the "captains of a large host of infant martyrs and evangelists who pointed the way to reform on earth and happiness beyond the grave." These children, continues Herbert Ross Brown, were "to rescue families from divorce, to cheer the poor and to nurse the sick, to soften flinty hearts, and to convert strong men from atheism to the true faith."<sup>7</sup> Eva's awe-inspiring courage in facing her death is the means by which she brings her father to God.

The early death of Little Eva is indicative of the dilemma faced by writers of the sentimental, domestic novel. In creating a child-figure of such purity and innocence there was, as Leslie A. Fiedler suggests,

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<sup>6</sup>Richard Harter Fogle, "Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark," Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Scarlet Letter, ed. John C. Gerber (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 66-67.

<sup>7</sup>The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1940), p. 300.



"no course of action which would not sully them."<sup>8</sup>  
The child-figure, therefore, either died quite young, as in Eva's case, or was physically removed from the locale of the story. Pearl, for example, becomes "the richest heiress of her day in the New World"<sup>9</sup> and is later reported to be living abroad with her husband, a European nobleman. In the figure of Pearl the bourgeoisie dream of wealth and position is fulfilled. Both girls, however, are idealized portraits of what the bourgeoisie thought man might be if he were left in his "natural" state.

Unfortunately, either the writer nor his audience could ignore the corruption and abuses that continued to permeate the new industrialized world despite the promises of reform signified in the child-figure. Neither could the bourgeoisie dismiss the glaring ineffectiveness of idyllic child-like wisdom, innocence, and selflessness in a competitive society. A writer, therefore, could not successfully project his characters beyond childhood without admitting to some "corrupting" qualities in them which would, in

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<sup>8</sup>Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 265.

<sup>9</sup>Hawthorne, p. 287.

turn, enable his characters to survive in the adult world. In order to retain the significance of the child-figure to the adult community writers turned to 1) isolating the childhood experience and using it as a means to escape the responsibilities and pressures of the adult world; 2) eliminating the child-figure and creating significance through absence; and 3) incorporating the child-figure with the adult-figure and allowing the adult to assume some of the characteristics and roles of the child.

The first alternative, isolating the childhood experience, became quite popular after the American Civil War. Isolation, itself, is a common ingredient of American fiction. Kenneth S. Lynn points to a sense of "loneliness," and "isolation" in the American hero that may be attributed to the character's "fear of being overwhelmed from without or betrayed from within." This sense of loneliness, however, is counteracted by the individual's remarkable self-sufficiency; consequently, the American hero is usually an orphan or castaway who is extremely capable of getting along on his own. After the Civil War, Lynn concludes, the American sense of loneliness and isolation becomes more pronounced. The American hero seems to lose his inner strength and to feel, instead, a sense of "powerlessness, emptiness,



and futility" that drives him "into an aching sense of personal inadequacy and a yearning desire for human connection."<sup>10</sup> For many Americans the remembrance of the secure world of childhood served to keep back the frightening realities of the present.

Authors of the 1870's caught up by the local color movement and the nostalgia for the simpler days of the pre-war era turned to recreating the worlds of their childhood. Mark Twain prefaced The Adventures of Tom Sawyer [1876] with the comment that his story was to "pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in."<sup>11</sup> Twain's emphasis upon the adult as a child is reflected in the character of Tom Sawyer, itself. Tom is not "the spotless 'angel' of a romantic moralizing idyll" or the "child of the Puritans' sin and the Devil";<sup>12</sup> he is rather a miniature adult living and working in a specialized world. From the beginning of the story Tom is ambitious for wealth and leadership. He first gains awareness of these

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<sup>10</sup>"Introduction," The Octopus (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1958), p. vii.

<sup>11</sup>New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

<sup>12</sup>Coveney, p. 253.

envious possessions during the whitewashing incident in which he successfully entices others into paying for the privilege of doing his work. The "loot" he collects is traded for the coveted memory slips which, in turn, bring him homage and distinction when he presents them to the Sunday School superintendent for the top prize of the school. This "climb to success" is repeated when he saves Becky and exposes the illegal activities of Injun Joe and Muff Potter. As Harry R. Warfel states,

By saving Becky, Tom gained all that a leader needs: proof of his power over others, money to assure his education, and a potential wife to share his domestic life. Tom is the perfect prototype of the successful American man, a man with imagination, daring, the grit to stick to the task, and a personality capable of overriding obstacles of any magnitude.<sup>13</sup>

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, nevertheless, remains a loose collection of episodes in the life of a boy. While Tom may embody the characteristics of the adult, the world in which he lives limits the significance of his activities. He moves from one episode to the next without the cloying responsibilities and obligations that must be assumed by the adult. It is as though

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<sup>13</sup>"Introduction," The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. xv.

Twain refuses to develop a plot which would take his characters physically and socially out of childhood. The formal "Conclusion" to Tom Sawyer admits Twain's evasion:

SO ENDETH THIS CHRONICLE. IT BEING STRICTLY a history of a boy, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man. When one writes a novel about grown people, he knows exactly where to stop . . . but when he writes of juveniles, he must stop where he best can.

Isolating the child-figure into a unique world of children "playing" as adults is a modification of the early romantic view of the child as an unsullied adult having a vital role in the affairs of the adult world. Tom Sawyer has been affected by the community in which he lives. He is moved by the sensational and irritated by the approved. He can indulge in such emotions as self-pity, pride, revenge, guilt, and self-delusion. As the figure of a boy, however, he retains the naivete and unconscious optimism of inexperience. Tom's vital role in the story is still that of the child's--exposing adult failures and sins, but his actions are not based upon self-sacrifice so much as self-advancement.

Tom Sawyer's friend, Huck Finn, is the child-figure who initiates the dissolution of the childhood

experience as a comfortable escape for the adult. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn [1884] Huck Finn is not, like Tom Sawyer, "the naughty prankster that everyone admires";<sup>14</sup> nor is he "merely the clownish foil to Tom, essentially stupid though good of heart"<sup>15</sup> as he appears in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. He is, rather, that romanticized picture of man in his natural state--the possessor of innate dignity, wisdom, and purity. As "the juvenile pariah of the village . . . idle, and lawless, and vulgar, and bad,"<sup>16</sup> Huck is able through his outcast state to become an accurate observer of the adult world. As the reader becomes more intimately acquainted with Huck, he realizes that the village has projected its own values upon Huck, values which reflect more of its essential characteristics than his. Similarly, as Huck describes the childhood world of Tom Sawyer, the reader is struck by the close relationship between the portrayal of Tom and the portrayal of several of the villagers Huck meets. Huck's illuminating portrait of the corruption found in both worlds negates the theory that childhood is

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<sup>14</sup>Warfel, p. xiii.

<sup>15</sup>Fiedler, p. 274.

<sup>16</sup>Twain, Tom Sawyer, p. 38.

basically the adult's recall of his better self. Tom's dependence upon books and traditions for authorities belies the innate wisdom of the child, and Huck's own inability to act upon his observations<sup>17</sup> reveals the weakness of the child in directing the affairs of the adult. Huck's subsequent departure for the territory "because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before,"<sup>18</sup> destroys the bourgeois hope that the child will carry on and create a better world. Authors, therefore, dissatisfied with the childhood experience as an isolated world turned to the second alternative for restoring the significance of the child to the adult community--eliminating the child from their works completely.

The elimination of the child, of course, is not a new development in American fiction. Sentimental, domestic novels employed the dying child as a means to "extract temperance pledges, make converts, reconcile parents and resolve many plots," it also pictured the dead child as continuing his influence from the grave by "comforting the good, haunting the guilty, soften-

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<sup>17</sup>Lynn, p. xi.

<sup>18</sup>Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 405.



ing the brutal."<sup>19</sup> The impact of the new scientific theories advanced by Darwin, Malthus, Huxley, Spencer, and Lyell, however, resulted in the casting of the child-figure as an illustration of the struggles of the fittest for survival, the victimization of man by heredity and environment, and the vacuous future favored by the naturalists. In almost all cases infant mortality, deserted children, and childless couples best describe the hopelessness of the "naturalistic" world.

Several new forms of fiction were created in response to this new philosophy. The sentimental, domestic novel continued to be produced in an effort to hold on to the moral superiority of the child-figure. Elsie Dinsmore, for example, reappeared in almost every year from 1867 through 1909.<sup>20</sup> Stories of childhood recollections such as Stephen Crane's Whilowville Stories [1889] and Booth Tarkington's Penrod series in the early 1900's were joined by a tremendous outpouring of historical fiction as readers attempted to escape reality by turning to the past ages of man.<sup>21</sup> Despite

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<sup>19</sup> Helen Waite Papashvily, All the Happy Endings (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Papashvily, p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> Larzer Ziff, The American 1890s. Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 92.



the popularity of romantic fiction, young writers interested in describing life as it was being lived increasingly turned to sociological studies of the components of a modern industrial state. Exposés, technical journalism, and minutely detailed sketches of a narrow segment of life were the favored vehicles for those who wished to write in the naturalistic mode.

One of the first novels to examine the present condition of society in the light of the naturalistic philosophy was Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward: 2000-1887 [1888]. Bellamy's novel describes a utopian world of socialistic reform in American industry. By discussing and comparing the worlds of 1887 and 2000 Bellamy is able to point out the evils of private enterprise and uncontrolled capitalism. To Bellamy the survival of the fittest results in the deprivation and enslavement of the majority. Dr. Lette, for example, tells the young man who has unaccountably awakened in the year 2000, that in 1887

For the sake of those dependent on him, a man might not choose, but must plunge into the foul fight,--cheat, overreach, supplant, defraud, buy below worth and sell above, break down the business by which his neighbor fed his young ones, tempt men to buy what they ought not and to sell what they should not, grind his laborers, sweat his debtors, cozen his creditors. Though a man sought it carefully with tears, it was hard to find a

way in which he could earn a living and provide for his family except by pressing in before some weaker rival and taking the food from his mouth.<sup>22</sup>

From the above statement one must conclude that children are a contributory force in creating a repressive society, and that through uncontrolled propagation of children the lives of all adults are wasted. Bellamy does not directly speak of children in his utopian state. Granville Hicks has observed, "social conditions in the year 2000 are presented exclusively through the eyes of professional men, doctors, teachers, or ministers; we are told of the happy lot of the working man, but we never see the new order from his point of view."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Bellamy concluded that adults, freed from the obligations and responsibilities connected with the rearing of children, would devote all of their energies to improving their own lives.

Hamlin Garland's collection of short stories, Main-Travelled Roads [1891], elaborates Bellamy's suggestion of the repressive effect of children upon adults. The stories, according to Larzer Ziff, are "for the most part based on the inhuman conditions

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<sup>22</sup>Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward: 2000-1887 (New York: Vanguard Press, 1917), p. 277.

<sup>23</sup>The Great Tradition (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1969), p. 141.

of the prairie farmer's wife, cut off from the community and doomed to a day-in, day-out drudgery from which no emancipation can reasonably be expected."<sup>24</sup>

In "Up the Coule" the prairie farmer's wife complains,

'I was a fool for ever marrying . . .  
I made a decent living teaching, I was  
free to come and go, my money was my  
own. Now I'm tied right down to a  
churn or a dish-pan, I never have a  
cent of my own.'<sup>25</sup>

According to Garland, then, marriage and family are no longer the panacea for a woman's ambitions; instead, he suggests that the increased opportunities for education and outside employment create dissatisfaction with a woman's traditional role. Marriage and family are too self-sacrificing and confining. In the struggle for survival the child becomes a drain on the adult's own resources.

In another story, "Under the Lion's Paw," Garland writes of a tenant farmer who is trapped by his responsibility to provide for his family. The land he farms is held by an unscrupulous capitalist. In order to make the land productive, the farmer must employ his own children in the fields.

The eldest boy, now nine years old,  
drove a team all through the spring.

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<sup>24</sup>Ziff, p. 97.

<sup>25</sup>Hamlin Garland, Main-Travelled Roads (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p. 101.

ploughing and seeding, milked the cows, and did the chores innumerable, in most ways taking the place of a man; an infinitely pathetic but common figure--this boy--on the American farm, where there is no law against child labor . . . Yet Haskins loved this boy, and would have saved him from this if he could, but he could not.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of the story the farmer in a blind, impulsive move is about to murder the landowner because the landowner has now refused to sell such "productive" and "improved" land.

. . . in the deadly hush between the lift of the weapon and its fall there came a gush of faint, childish laughter and then across the range of his vision, far away and dim, he saw the sun-bright head of his baby girl, as, with the pretty, tottering run of a two-year old, she moved across the grass of the doorway. His hands relaxed; the fork fell to the ground; his head lowered. [177]

The eldest boy and the daughter are representations of the futility and oppression in the farmer's life. Chained to the land and to his family, he will never attain individual freedom. His son and daughter will also become enslaved, unless they either die or run away, because they must be kept on the land in order to support others in the family.

The knowledge that the child limits the personal freedom of the adult became acceptable as the adult

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<sup>26</sup>Garland, Main-Travelled Roads, p. 171.



began to recognize the constraints placed upon the individual in a rampant capitalistic society. At first, the adult dutely submitted to the economic enslavement of this new way of life. Then, as he became more conscious of the value of freedom for the individual, the adult attempted to regain some of his independence by freeing himself of the responsibility for his children. Bellamy, incidentally, predicts this total rejection of the child when he asserts that "individualism . . . not only was fatal to any vital sentiment of brotherhood and common interest among living men, but equally to the realization of the responsibility of the living for the generation to follow."<sup>27</sup> One of the first novels to describe this irresponsibility of the adult is Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets [1896].

The setting of Maggie is the sprawling tenement district of Rum Alley where "from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter . . . and in the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles."<sup>28</sup> In the story,

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<sup>27</sup>Bellamy, p. 268.

<sup>28</sup>Stephen Crane, "Maggie: A girl of the Streets," Great Short Works of Stephen Crane (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 130.

Hicks points out that Crane "did not hesitate to make Maggie the stupid victim of stupid brutality, nor to make her brother a braggart and her mother a drunkard. He set down precisely what he saw."<sup>29</sup> All three children are ignored and rejected by their parents and, as a result, turn to a life on the streets. Tommie, the youngest child, dies in infancy. Crane suggests that the child is a victim of his mother's brutality and neglect. Jimmie, the second child, survives his childhood although Crane pictures Jimmie's existence as being almost on a barbaric level in society. Jimmie had, of course,

. . . studied human nature in the gutter,  
and found it no worse than he thought  
he had reason to believe it. He never  
conceived a respect for the world,  
because he had begun with no idols  
that it had smashed. [138]

Maggie, the eldest child, is lured into prostitution and finally suicide by the promise of escape from "an exasperating future" [151] which she sees reflected in the faces of the women and girls who work in the collar-and-cuff establishment with her.

The treatment of Maggie, Jimmie, and Tommie may be contrasted at this point with the treatment of the

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<sup>29</sup>Hicks, p. 161.



sentimental, domestic child-figure and the nostalgic, idyllic boyhood child-figure. Crane's children are victims of industrialism. In the previous instances, the child is either portrayed as a creature from Heaven or as a miniature adult in a special, protected world. Tommie, Jimmie, and Maggie are called upon to be adults in an adult world. No special "aunt" or "friend" comes forward to accept responsibility for these rejected children or to champion the welfare of the children before their parents. The adults in Rum Alley disinterestedly watch the fistfights of Jimmie and the other little boys or listen to the drunken fights of his parents. The children, therefore, are expected to survive upon their own strengths. If they die, they must not be "fit" enough to survive.

Ten years after Crane's Maggie appeared, Upton Sinclair published The Jungle [1906] and reiterated Crane's position on the victimization of children by their parents. In Sinclair's story a Lithuanian family composed of five adults and six children arrives in the Chicago stockyards and immediately begins to experience the various aspects of the meatpacking industry and life "behind the yards." The children become the victims of heredity, environment, and society. One child, born "with a congenital dislocation of the hip, which made

it impossible for him ever to walk,"<sup>30</sup> dies. Another child, "having lost one leg by having it run over" [127] survives and continues to live by scavaging in the city garbage dump. The other children are sent out to work either in the meatpacking industry or on the city streets in an effort to save the family from destitution. The children in The Jungle are treated as members of the adult community and the traditional family unit soon dissolves. The conclusion that Upton Sinclair reaches about the child-figure is related by his protagonist, Jurgis, after the deaths of Jurgis' wife in childbirth and his son, Antanas, in the flooded city streets.

This was no world for women and children, and the sooner they got out of it the better for them. Whatever Antanas might suffer where he was, he could suffer no more than he would have had he stayed upon earth. [210]

This total rejection of the child as a character capable of competing with the adult reinforced the adult's earlier distaste for the child's repressive effect upon adult life. The child-figure, therefore, was subsequently relegated to a "scenic" position in a story. Since naturalistic writers were interested in a minute dissection of different areas of life, the

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<sup>30</sup>Upton Sinclair, The Jungle (New York: New American Library, 1906), p. 127.

child-figure naturally appeared as an integral part of any society they chose to describe. The child, however, was no longer of importance in and of itself in fiction.

Frank Norris' McTeague [1899] is an attempt to follow the naturalistic procedure advanced by Zola-- to take a section of life, examine it not only from its outward appearance but also from its inner drives and forces, and to reproduce it in writing.<sup>31</sup> Norris, therefore, gives a detailed picture of San Francisco's lower middle-class professional life and within the first pages of his story takes time to sketch the childhood of his protagonist. Norris refers to McTeague's boyhood at the mines, his alcoholic father, and his self-sacrificing mother. Later, McTeague is shown as having inherited his father's weakness for alcohol and as having lost his own initiative through his mother's ambitions for him.

The children in the story are extraneous to the plot. The Sleppe family--the twins, "Owgooste," Trina, and Selina, are a "tribe" which Mr. Sleppe commands and directs. The children are trooped into the park for picnics, herded home, and dismissed. The Sleppe chil-

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<sup>31</sup>Emile Zola, "The Experimental Novel," What Was Naturalism? Materials for an Answer, ed. Edward Stone (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1959), pp. 52-55.

children become rather formless, bland, nonentities who do little to contribute to a "picture" of a family. Even the incidents involving "Owgooste" are scenes in which the adult's behavior in reaction to the child is of more importance than the child itself.

The real children one would expect to appear in the story do not materialize. McTeague dreams that

. . .someday, perhaps he and his wife would have a house of their own. Then there would be children. He would have a son . . . The dentist saw himself as a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren.<sup>32</sup>

Trina, when opening a wedding present of a box of toys, "laughs" and turns "scarlet" when McTeague exclaims, "'We have no need of toys!'" [118] Certainly, both McTeague's dreams and Trina's actions show that children are expected; yet, they remain childless throughout the story. The young married couples with whom they associate also have no children; and although their neighbors, the "newly-wed" Zerkov and Maria Macapa, have a baby, it is

. . . a wretched, sickly child, with not even strength enough or wits enough to cry . . . a thing that had come undesired and had gone unregretted . . . a strange, hybrid little being, come and gone within a fortnight's time. [176]

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<sup>32</sup>Frank Norris, McTeague (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.d.), p. 141.

And finally, Miss Baker and Old Grannis, those sentimental, old-fashioned lovers, are too old for children of their own.

There is, however, an unexpected "childishness" to the adults of the story. Trina and McTeague appear to be insecure and awkward, frightened and bewildered, vulnerable and sensitive, as well as selfish, ignorant, and unconscious of others. During their courtship and wedding they are hesitant and embarrassed. Trina is described as having "a charming poise, innocent, confident, almost infantile," and she is "almost like a boy, frank, candid, unreserved." [17] McTeague, on the other hand, is "embarrassed . . . troubled . . . disturbed . . . and perplexed " by her presence. He has "that intuitive suspicion of all things feminine--the perverse dislike of an overgrown boy." [17] The descriptions of both characters are more in keeping with a portrayal of an adolescent or a child rather than an adult.

Norris' second novel of importance, The Octopus [1901], again delineates characters with child-like qualities. Magnus Derrick's wife, Annie, looks

. . . hardly old enough to be the mother of two such big fellows as Harran and Lyman Derrick . . . Her eyes were large and easily assumed a look of inquiry and innocence, such as one might expect



to see in a young girl.<sup>33</sup>

Annixter, who "pretended to be a woman-hater, for no other reason than that he was a very bull-calf of awkwardness in feminine surroundings," [20] is a stubborn, recalcitrant child until taken in hand by the pure, innocent Hilma who turns him into a thoughtful, expansive adult. Hilma, herself, becomes

. . . a woman, grave, dignified, composed . . . with the seriousness of one who has gained knowledge of the world . . . The calm gravity of a great suffering past, but not forgotten, sat upon her. Not yet twenty-one, she exhibited the demeanour of a woman of forty. [431-432]

after the deaths of Annixter and her unborn child.

The naturalistic predilection for a minute dissection of one particular area of life demands extensive knowledge and acute observation on the part of the writer. Norris, for example, "studied the Harvard Library's copy of A Text-book of Operative Dentistry so he could load McTeague with the minutiae of bud-burrs and gutta-percha."<sup>34</sup> Other incipient naturalistic writers turned to autobiographical data which assured them of unlimited knowledge and a com-

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<sup>33</sup> Frank Norris, The Octopus (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1901), p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Carvel Collins, "Introduction," McTeague (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. ix.



plete mastery of their subject. The decision to write about one's own life affected the viewpoint of the novel, for rather than confining himself to the external facts of life, the writer turned to examining the internal facts that made up his own existence.<sup>35</sup> In concentrating upon the inner life of a man, the child-figure came to be recognized as a continuing part of the adult-figure. Child and adult were no longer separated into two different life-styles; instead, the adult came to be explained in terms of his childhood.

Jack London's autobiographical novel, Martin Eden [1909], returns to the childhood of the character to explain the inward drives and ambitions found in the adult. Martin's fight with "Cheese-Face" as a boy is paralleled by his later "fight" to absorb as much knowledge as he can. Though love prompts Martin to better himself, the contrast between his environment as a child and the "atmosphere of beauty and repose of the house wherein Ruth dwelt"<sup>36</sup> also acts as a stimulant to action. In addition to showing the effect of childhood upon his character, London gives

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<sup>35</sup> Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York: American Book Co., 1934), p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> Jack London, Martin Eden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1936), p. 35.

Martin a child-like innocence. Martin and Ruth are

. . . as naive and immature in the expression of their love as a pair of children, and this despite the fact that she was crammed with a university education, and that his head was full of scientific philosophy and the hard facts of life. [167]

Martin's awkwardness in the presence of Ruth and her family is similar to that of an adolescent attempting to overcome his shyness and naivete in the world of adults. The "growing up" process with its universal appeal in literature allows the protagonist to retain the qualities of a child while entering upon the responsibilities of the adult.

Theodore Dreiser, the "central figure"<sup>37</sup> in American literary naturalism, also turned to autobiographical materials for his stories. Like London and Norris, he attempted to document the effects of heredity and environment upon a "controlled" area of society. In the same manner, too, his characters are "child-like" and "primitive." In his first novel, Sister Carrie [1900], Dreiser writes of the experiences of a young, naive, small-town girl as she enters and loses herself in the great city. Throughout the story Carrie is "an ignorant but slowly wakening seeker

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<sup>37</sup>Fred Lewis Pattee, The New American Literature 1890-1930 (New York: The Century Co., 1930), p. 100.

after some deeper significance in life."<sup>38</sup> She assumes the role of the little lost child, never sure that what she is doing is right and never thinking of the consequences of her actions. Her detachment from the adult world enables her to ignore the obligations and responsibilities of that world and to live outside the traditional moral universe. Carrie's affairs with Drouet and Hurstwood are entered upon with no recall of childhood lessons in morality and no concern for sociological mores. At the end of each affair she moves on, childless, to meet the next offering of life.

Dreiser's second novel, Jennie Gerhardt [1911], is almost a repetition of the story of Carrie Meeber. The themes of seduction and the "disintegration of the family"<sup>39</sup> are based upon Dreiser's impressions of his own troubled childhood.<sup>40</sup> As in the case of Carrie before her, Jennie Gerhardt accepts her role as "victim of circumstance" with little or no objections beforehand and no sense of shame or regret afterwards. She, too,

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<sup>38</sup>F.O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1951), p. 71.

<sup>39</sup>Charles Shapiro, Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 16.

<sup>40</sup>Shapiro, p. 14.

moves from experience to experience unaffected by the standards of the outside world.

In creating child-like characters Dreiser is able to limit the complexity of his subject. As a result, he goes beyond describing action and reaction and, instead, concentrates upon those elements of character that explain action and reaction. Charles Child Walcutt's observations upon Dreiser's An American Tragedy [1925] includes the statement:

As the novel proceeds there is so careful an attention to detail and so complete a delineation of the various experiences which add to Clyde's miserable store of ideas and ideals that the reader seems to be gaining a full insight into the forces which account for the nature of Clyde's personality. It is because of the simplicity of Clyde's character and the narrowness of his initial outlook that Dreiser is able to go so far behind the phenomenon of his 'will' and explain its constituents.<sup>41</sup>

The reader's "full insight" into the character, then, depends upon the ability of an author to simplify those basic components which make up character. In the case of fictional characters, to simplify is to make more child-like. The child-figure, therefore, achieves its significance in modern literature when

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<sup>41</sup>"Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 262-263.

it is considered as an integral part of the adult. No longer separated from the adult character in order to guide the adult to a better life, or to enable the adult to escape life, or to be a symbol of the futility of adult life, the child-figure is now incorporated into the adult-figure to aid the adult in the understanding of himself.



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