Unraveling the Origins of Childhood: Exploring the Vanishing Notion of Child

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Abstract

This article seeks to chart the historical evolution of childhood and the experiences of children across diverse cultures. It delves into various aspects such as the perception of childhood, societal influences, identity formation, psychological aspects, the impact of the printing press, the blurring of boundaries between children and adults, and the gradual fading of the traditional notion of childhood.

Keywords: Child, Childhood, History of childhood, Disappearance of Childhood

Discovery of the concept of child and childhood

The concept of childhood is characterized by innocence and development, encompassing the period from birth to puberty. Every individual experience a metaphysical aspect of childhood through the process of trial and error. In society, the recognition of childhood as a distinct category with unique needs and desires is essential for the evolution of children's literature.

During the Enlightenment in Europe, the idea of the child as a separate entity gained prominence. Social philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau emphasized the importance of nurturing children's social awareness. Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake celebrated the purity and potential of children, as exemplified by Wordsworth's famous line "The child is Father of the Man" from his poem "My Heart Leaps Up."

In ancient Greece, childhood was not considered a specific age category, and the Greeks used ambiguous terms for child and youth, encompassing anyone from infancy to old age. Despite this confusion, education was highly valued in Greek society, with philosophers like Plato proposing various methods of youth education. The concept of school was invented by the Greeks, and even the Spartans established schools for young boys. Although atrocities against children, including infanticide, were present in the past, Aristotle and Herodotus did not vocally oppose such practices.

In non-literate societies, the distinction between childhood and adulthood was less defined, as there were few secrets, and cultural understanding did not require specialized training. In the Middle Ages, childhood was considered to end at the age of seven, when children gained command over speech and acquired the knowledge to distinguish right from wrong, as designated by the Catholic Church.

The emergence of literacy and the printing press in the modern era brought about a new definition of adulthood based on reading competence. With this shift, childhood began to be defined as a separate stage of development. Before this change, childhood ended at age seven, and individuals transitioned directly into adulthood. The scarcity of books on child rearing and women as mothers before the sixteenth century reflects the different cultural perceptions of childhood and adulthood.

Overall, the concept of childhood has evolved over time, influenced by societal, philosophical, and technological advancements. It continues to be a significant and evolving aspect of human development, shaping the literature, education, and social structures of various societies.

The Printing Press and the Emerging Adult.

The emergence of the concept of childhood required a significant shift in the adult world, and this change was brought about by the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. With the printing press, there arose a new definition of adulthood that excluded children, leading to the creation of a separate realm for them known as childhood.

Before the printing press, human communication occurred in a social context, with reading often done aloud in groups. However, the printed book introduced a new tradition of isolated readers and private reading experiences, fostering individualism.

The printing press also gave rise to a "knowledge gap" as new information and learning opportunities became accessible through books. Various subjects, including metallurgy, botany, linguistics, and even pediatrics, were covered in printed books. This transition marked the rise of the "literate man" but left behind the children, who now needed to grow up and learn to read in the world of typography.

As a result, European civilization reinvented schools and made childhood a necessity. The first fifty years of the printing press, known as the Incunabula, witnessed the coexistence of childhood and adult life as distinct stages. However, over the next two hundred years, childhood was recognized as a natural feature of human development.

The tie between education and age took time to develop, and initially, students were grouped based on their reading abilities rather than their calendar ages. The organization of school classes around reading competence eventually led to the realization of childhood's special nature and the existence of various categories within childhood and youth.

The emergence of childhood also led to changes in children's clothing, distinguishing it from adult attire. This transformation in clothing styles is evident in paintings from the sixteenth century.

With formal schooling becoming more widespread, the modern family structure took shape. Parents' relationships with their children were reoriented due to the social requirement

of formal education. As a new class of people, children began to think, speak, and learn differently from adults. The advent of print and schooling gave adults unprecedented control over the symbolic environment of children.

Before the concept of childhood, children were seen as energetic little adults, and childhood's invention, lamented by some like Philippe Aries, led to the restraint of youthful exuberance. Nevertheless, the invention of the printing press, the growth of a commercial system based on print, and the organization of families around schooling solidified childhood as a distinct and vital phase of life. Teachers and educationists contributed to shaping both the concept of childhood and adulthood through their books on public conduct, addressing both adults and children.

In summary, the printing press played a crucial role in the formation of childhood as a separate and meaningful phase of human development, bringing about significant changes in education, family dynamics, and societal perceptions of children and adults.

The Pathway of Childhood

The formation of childhood in the modern world was not a sudden event triggered by Gutenberg's press and school systems. Instead, it involved several significant intellectual influences and societal changes over time.

John Locke's influential book "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," published in 1693, played a crucial role in shaping childhood's growth. Locke emphasized the importance of education and intellectual development for children, viewing them as valuable resources that required careful nurturing and self-control. His concept of "tabula rasa" instilled a sense of responsibility in parents for their children's development, making the careful upbringing of children a national priority.

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau became another prominent figure in shaping childhood. He viewed children as essential beings in themselves, distinct from mere means to an end. Rousseau's ideas on the emotional and intellectual lives of children resonated with many writers and critics of the time.

Before the eighteenth century, adolescence was often confused with childhood. However, the modern meaning of childhood began to emerge during this period, particularly among the middle class. The concept of childhood innocence resulted in two distinct attitudes: protecting children from the negativity of life while also focusing on developing their character and reason.

From the sixteenth century onward, the concept of childhood gained prominence, represented in calendars and associated with the desire for homeliness and familiar family life. The modern family structure detached children from adult society, focusing on individual development rather than collective ambition.

Between 1850 and 1950, childhood reached its high watermark in America, marked by efforts to get children out of factories and into schools. Laws and customs provided children with a preferred status and protection from adult life's challenges.

The advent of television and other non-print media further blurred the line between childhood and adulthood. Television's undifferentiated availability made it accessible to all, requiring no

special instruction and not demanding complex mental or behavioral efforts. This new media atmosphere recreated a communication condition reminiscent of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where everyone received the same information.

In conclusion, childhood's formation in the modern world was a gradual process influenced by significant thinkers, changing societal attitudes, and technological advancements like television. It transformed children's roles and experiences, ultimately establishing childhood as a distinct and valued phase of human life.

The Vanishing Innocence.

Jacqueline Rose argues that children's fiction revolves around an impossible relationship between adults and children. The genre sets up a world where adults are the creators and children are the recipients, but it rarely delves into the space in between where the complexities of their relationship lie.

The disappearance of childhood is evident in various forms and from different sources, such as media representations, the blurring of distinctions between children and adults in taste and style, and shifting perspectives on social institutions like law and education. The lines between childhood and adulthood are fading, evidenced by issues like alcoholism, drug use, and crime that affect both age groups.

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping young minds by entertaining, educating, and socializing them. It helps children understand their own culture and exposes them to other cultures. Enculturation remains a primary concern of children's literature today, while modern texts also embrace critical thinking and openness to new perspectives.

The critics also note that modern children's literature has become more sophisticated, addressing complex life experiences and challenging topics like death, war, and violence. However, this exposure to adult themes may leave today's children vulnerable in a society that lacks a suitable platform for their proper development and protection.

In conclusion, the relationship between adults and children in fiction remains a complex and underexplored theme. Childhood is facing challenges and changes, with children's literature reflecting the evolving realities of their lives, but also potentially exposing them to mature content.

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