

Noble Savage: A Re-reading of Childhood Innocence as a Disguise in Joyce Cary's Short Story "Growing Up"

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Abstract

The main objective of the present study is to explore the theme of childhood with particular reference to Joyce Cary's short story "Growing Up." Children are most often epitomized as symbols of innocence and purity. There is a natural disposition in them to be masters of their own world and other people, particularly the elders of the household, happily accept them to be so. However, at times they engage in such violent games within familial relations itself, where they turn violent and brutish quite unbecoming of the impressions we have of them. It is this inherent inclination towards violence, the animal instincts, to conquer and establish their niche that this paper attempts to unveil.

Keywords: Children, Violence, Instinct

1. INTRODUCTION

'Childhood', as a conceptual space, constructed through discourse, has emerged as an interesting and problematic area for exploration and analysis. As Jenks observes, the child represents "a status of person which is comprised through a series of often heterogeneous images, representations and codes"(Jenks32). Phillip Aries advances the argument that childhood as an idea did not exist before the early modern period which gives rise to pertinent questions regarding the category/concept/empirical phase of childhood itself ; the questions may be subsumed into the following formulation-- can childhood be treated as a chronological marker or is it a metaphysical abstraction? It is debatable whether childhood can simply be understood as a period of life or an experiential reality.

Childhood is also often regarded as one component of a binary of adult/child, which insists upon viewing childhood in relation to an extrinsic category. It can, however, be suggested that childhood is a complex and loaded term which resists homogenization and universalization; it is not a static concept but is continuously developing, evolving and changing, which

becomes manifest in its representation in literature across time, space and culture. Children have been viewed from various psychological, social and cultural perspectives as the ontological origin of the adults, since they are not yet in the subject position. This is reflected in literature as well; children and childhood are often presented as categories that are essentially representations of adult imaginings. Analysis of the presence of this category in literature leads to the understanding of their significance in cultural processes, national identity formation as well as gender configuration.

The Christian theological connotation of childhood is ambiguous - on one hand there is valorization of childhood innocence and faith, while on the other insistence upon baptism is possibly based upon the belief that children are 3 legatee of Original Sin and therefore possessed with the selfish and lustful appetites that caused Adam and Eve's fall. However, as Dyson and Lovelock point out "Christ called children 'blessed', and held them up as examples of qualities, that adults must be reborn into if they are ever to inherit the kingdom of heaven. This was ... an assertion of certain kinds of spontaneity, honesty, delight as truly divine" (Dyson & Lovelock 166). This seems problematic and difficult to reconcile with the assumption that children are born sinners.

Till the Seventeenth Century children were not viewed in English Literature as distinct entities; rather they were perceived as miniature adults. With gradual acknowledgement of their separateness and uniqueness in terms of needs and qualities, vulnerability as well as culpability of children came to be recognized, so that 5 childhood began to be perceived in this age as some unique phenomenon, both in terms of its charm and irony. In Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* the sylph Ariel's dream-warning to Belinda touches upon this compounding of the 'others'/ 'minority':

Some secret Truths from Learned Pride conceal'd
To maids alone and children reveal'd
What tho' no credit doubting Wits may give?
The Fair and Innocent shall still believe. (137-40)

A moralizing tone is associated with any contemplation of childhood during this period along with an underscoring of the necessity of indoctrination. This followed the Lockean assumption regarding the child's mind as *tabula rasa* or a

blank surface that needs to be inscribed according to specific societal standards.

With the advent of Romanticism, a definite shift in perception of children and childhood can be discerned. In *Emile* Rousseau challenged the ethos of the age which prioritized reason and pragmatism and emphasized upon the primacy of spontaneity, instinctuality and feelings in the construction of childhood. This Romantic ideal of childhood underscores its essential purity and proximity to nature. As Anne Higonnet puts it, "nineteenth century European society equated childhood with nature, hence with an innocent purity of vision and creativity" (Higonnet 202). Blake's vision of childhood is suffused with this awareness of purity but it is nonetheless ambivalent in its relationship with society. In "The Lamb", the poet underlines the naivete of the child ("Little lamb I'll tell thee") articulating institutional indoctrination, though Blake camouflages it with the pastoral setting befitting the serenity of childhood. In "The Tyger" however, the same questions of "The Lamb" remain unanswered since faith, belief and conviction of 'innocence' have been supplanted by the doubt, division, skepticism and distortion of 'experience'. (Bloom 4)

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2. INNOCENCE- A DECEPTION FOR THE WILD INSTINCTS OF LIFE

The title of the story at the very outset suggests the theme of growing up. This appears to refer mostly to the two sisters, Kate and Jenny. Later we see it also applies in a way to their father, Robert, who, now in his middle age, is going through an emotional 'growing up.' Having played with his small girls for years, he now gradually feels cut off from them. His wife too seems to regard him with amused unconcern. Dismayed by his diminishing relevance in his family, and especially in his daughter's lives, he is filled with feelings of self pity and acute self-consciousness. He imagines that in a few years he will only be good for paying bills. The author makes the idea clear in the last sentence of the story which hints at the fact that 'growing up', whether at thirteen or at fifty-two, can be a challenge.

Robert Quick, a loving father, is so passionate of his children that he cannot resist himself from seeing them. One day he eagerly turns up at his home to see his daughters. But to his dismay, he sees a note telling they are at the garden of their household. The expectations he has of the kids is very well elicited through the following lines:

He had missed his two small girls and looked forward eagerly to their greeting. He had hoped indeed that they might, as often before, have been waiting at the corner of the road, to flag the car, and drive home with him. (Cary 31)

This image of children which he groomed through all these years could well be placed in the backdrop of their household garden. It is an unpruned natural place where there are very less human interventions except that the children play here for a while. In a way, they are growing up amidst this wilderness. The description of the garden goes thus:

The Quicks' garden was a wilderness. Except for a small vegetable patch near the pond, and one bed where Mrs Quick grew flowers for the house, it had not been touched for years. Old apple trees tottered over seedy laurels, unpruned roses. Tall ruins of dahlias and delphiniums hung from broken sticks. (31)

To some extent this seems to be a neglected place. "The original excuse for this neglect was that the garden was for the children...The original truth was that neither of the Quicks cared for gardening." (31) What makes it all the more interesting is that Mr Quick was even proud of his garden. "He would boast of his wild garden, so different from any neighbor's shaved grass and combed beds. It had come to seem, for him, a triumph of imagination; and this afternoon, once more, he found it charming in its wilderness, an original masterpiece among gardens. (31)

Juxtaposing the wilderness of the garden with the character of the girls, one could presume that they too like the trees in the garden are growing up in their own natural disposition. Of course, there is a positive aspect for this as they are unknown to the crooked assumptions of a civilized society. The descriptions of the garden, hence, are equally applicable to the children as well.

It had the special beauty of untouched woods, where there is still, even among closely farmed lands, a little piece of free nature left, a suggestion of the frontier, primeval forests... a bit of real wild country." (31)

The strangeness of such a wilderness is exposed when he goes in search of his daughters. When he calls for them, even seeing him, they don't show any gesture of affection

towards him. But he finds a solace in the fact that, "children have no manners but at least they're honest-they never pretend."(32) Nevertheless, he feels a sense of separation from the paternal love which children earnestly seek once. However he thought, "he would make the best of things. At fifty two, having lost most of his illusions, he was good at making the best of things." (32)

This change in the natural dispositions of the two girls- Kate and Jenny- becomes all the more evident when they turn violent towards their cocker bitch Snort. Quick was startled and completely taken away by such a weird behavior from the part of the girls.

The two children dashed after the bitch, laughing, bumping together, falling over each other and snatching up anything they could find to throw at the fugitive-pebbles, dead daffodils, bits of flower-pots, lumps of earth,. Snort, horrified, overwhelmed, dodged to and fro, barked hysterically, crazily, wagged her tail in desperate submission; finally put it between her legs and crept whining between a broken shed and the wall. (33)

It is a moment of realization for Quick that these two girls- two wild plants- have grown so wild in their disposition that there is no sign of civilized behavior left with them. Neither have they believed in the laws of the society they live in. They are wild and they act out the violence which is inherent in them- the 'primeval' instincts.

Mr Quick however regains his confidence and comes out towards the children to stop their violence. To his dismay, they have crossed all the limits of children's games, if it could be considered one. "The two girls, staggering with laughter, threw themselves upon their father. Paleface, paleface Robbie. Kill him- scalp him. Torture him."(33) Quick felt himself to be under the clutches of the untamed nature full of violence and scary acts. All the sweet memories he has of the kids were all at once shattered.

It seemed to him that both the children, usually so gentle, so affectionate, had gone completely mad, vindictive. They were hurting him, and he did not know how to defend himself without hurting them, without breaking their skinny bones, which seemed as fragile as a bird's legs. (34)

Quick could not pull himself out of the astonishment the incident has imprinted upon his mind. "He could not forget Jenny's face, crazy, murderous, he thought, not much affection there-she wanted to hurt. It was as if she hated me." (34)

Finally, things have come to an end. The girls washed and dressed themselves in smart clean frocks and

behave in a civilized way with a "reserved look." (35). Mr Quick, however, is disappointed at his predicament and peruses:

Heavens, but what did I expect? In a year or two more I shan't count at all. Young man will come prowling, like the dogs after Snort- I shall be an old buffer, useful only to pay bills. (35)

Still he is confused whether it is just a game or is it something real. He comes to the conclusion, though reluctantly, that "No, he thought, not quite a game- not for half a second. She's growing up- and so am I."(36)

The paper thus attempts to discern the primordial instincts of violence which is inherent in children. Even though most often it is well covered in their image of innocence and naivety, which the society casts upon them, it peeps out every now and then when they try to exercise a wild freedom. Man is savage and hence the child too- a noble savage.

3. CONCLUSION

Romantic child is a 'political ideal' that several Nineteenth Century writers knowingly employed as a "touchstone by which to measure the horrors of modernity" and "a catalyst for moral outrage and inspiration for change" (Dimock 193). However, a child is not only an embodiment of all the good we could find in a human being but also of the worst atrocities a man/woman could imagine. Children are innocent in their spheres of innocence and starkly violent when they assume the full authority of their wild instincts.

Joyce Cary's short story, "Growing Up" addresses the various facets of growing up. Most often we have generalized assumption regarding children until they attain the age of maturity. Cary however unveils the transitional phases through which a child passes before dressing up in the well knit frock of civilized life. It is these primitive instincts and drives we most often ignore in our understanding of childhood dispositions that the chapter attempts to portray.

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