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# Clothing the Child's Body

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Sally Mann's 1989 photograph *The New Mothers* contradicts ideals of childhood innocence. The clothing and accessories worn by the image's two girls engage conventions of childhood now more than two centuries old, only to pit them against body language. *The New Mothers* is as disturbing as our beliefs in the visual signs of childhood are deeply ingrained, and as our vision of childhood is now threatened by change.

Superficially, *The New Mothers* belongs to one of the most widespread and cherished types of current photography: the snapshot of cute children playing childishly, all the more childishly because they are masquerading unconvincingly as adults. In the case of *The New Mothers* (Figure 1), two girls wearing special clothing take their dolls for a stroll.

weight shifted onto her left leg and a cigarette balanced between the fingers of her left hand. She meets our gaze squarely, brows knit and lips slightly turned down, perhaps even faintly hostile. The younger child's pose is similarly uncompromising: feet firmly planted on the ground and left hand on (nonexistent) hip. Neither girl either welcomes us or ignores us, their attitude in sharp contrast with their ostensibly sweet feminine occupation, which the title of the image reminds us of. Next to her Cabbage Patch Kid's cheerful painted smile, the younger girl's expression looks all the more unsmiling, while both dolls' plumply passive extended arms draw our attention to both girls' assertive gestures. Those gestures have been arranged in a stable triangular composition with the older girl's face in bright sun at its apex. The centrally placed girl's verticality is balanced on the right by the shorter child and on the left by a baby carriage of the same height. The viewer's eye is led down the left from face to hand to carriage to doll arm, and the same way down the right from face to hand to doll and head to elbow. This careful, ordered composition of linked forms lends a monumental, frieze-like quality to the photograph.

In several other *Immediate Family* photographs, Mann also juxtaposes the childishly quaint and the startlingly corporeal, but it is in *The New Mothers* that the two conflicting qualities are most disturbingly united in the same children's bodies. Take only one contrasting instance, *Jessie at 5* (1987) (Figure 2), because it was placed on the double page spread just before *The New Mothers*. The central figure is all body: naked from the waist up, shoulder thrust forward and hip jutting backward, painted with makeup, adorned with adult jewelry, and staring right at

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

**Figure 2**  
*Jessie at 5, 1987*  
© Sally Mann.  
Courtesy: Houk Friedman,  
New York.

the viewer in bright focus; while the two flanking figures are all cute: daintily dressed in checks and tiny flowers, limply posed, gazes and bodies unfocused in shadow. However any one viewer may subjectively interpret the connotations of Mann's bodily vivid children—and there has been extremely heated debate over the exact meanings of her images—the more basic fact that the children in her images do have some kind, any kind, of physical and psychological presence is bound to be surprising. For since the end of the eighteenth century, the great images of childhood have taught us to believe that childhood is, by definition, not bodily. Images like *The New Mothers* do not contradict a natural childhood, but rather a long, arduous, and artful process through which an ideal of disembodiment was identified with childhood, innocence, and nature.

Clothing played a crucial role in the invention of childhood innocence. Or to be more precise: the ideal image of childhood innocence depended on a new concept of the relationship between clothing and children's bodies. Because it was a concept, that relationship was most persuasively and completely expressed in representations, though it was also, to different degrees, practiced by real people with actual clothes in everyday life.

The image of the naturally innocent child body—what one might term the Romantic Child—simply did not exist before the modern era. This historical fact has been forgotten partly because the Romantic Child has gradually permeated popular consciousness over more than two centuries. Spreading from its elite origins in English academic painting, the modern image of the child moved into popular early and mid-nineteenth-century painting, from there into mass-reproduced prints, and on outward through late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial illustration into the photographic mass media of the present.

Axiomatic because it has become ubiquitous, the image of childhood innocence also convinces because it looks natural. Because it looks natural to us now, it looks timeless, and because it looks timeless, it looks unchangeable. Yet, far from being inherent in any state of nature or being inherent in children's bodies, the innocence of childhood was a fashionable invention, formulated in art, refined in theory, and costumed for the part.

Before about the middle of the eighteenth century, the bodies of children were basically pictured in the same way as adult bodies. With very few exceptions, children who were supposed to be understood as human, looked like small adults. They were dressed like adults, they behaved like adults, and they didn't look innocent—socially, psychically, or sexually.

Children appeared in paintings and sculpture in order to indicate their future adult social status. Most of them were offspring of royal or aristocratic families, and the point of their portraits was to make that clear. Imperiously, these noble children gesture toward cultivated family

lands or imposing family houses, lean benevolently from their thrones, or impassively stare in effigy, framed by captions that pronounce their rank. As late as the seventeenth century, little George and Francis Villiers, for instance, in their portrait by Sir Anthony Van Dyck (unfortunately, no image of this painting was available), wear flame-red satin gleaming against stiff precious lace in the latest grown-up fashion and adopt the pose that conventionally signaled adult masculine authority: hands on hips, toes turned out, one leg extended forward. Linked to their parents, either explicitly within a family portrait or implicitly, the children in premodern art promise dynastic continuity and display wealth. These are children situated in the opposite of a state of nature; just as the land and the architecture they are associated with compositionally bear witness to civilization's industry and ingenuity, so their clothing molds their bodies into an image of adult society.

Eighteenth-century English portraitists, led by Sir Joshua Reynolds, synthesized and altered artistic precedents to visualize a sweeping change in the definition of childhood. Unlike earlier scattered examples of pictures that look "childlike" to us, paintings by academic masters such as Reynolds (1723–1792), Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830), William Raeburn (1756–1823), and John Hoppner (1758–1810) created a consistent and sustained image of childhood, one which was perfectly in keeping with the latest social trends and written precepts of child-rearing, a movement thoroughly described by James Christen Steward in his *The New Child* (1995). All of these new images of childhood revolved around an innocent child body, a body defined by its difference from adult bodies.

A 1788 painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, leading English painter of the late eighteenth century, titled *The Age of Innocence* (Figure 3) is a paradigmatic example, one of the images that served for at least a century as a model of childhood.

It's a pretty picture. Clever composition allows plants, land, sky and clouds to both show off a child prominently in the foreground and make her seem reassuringly small. At once aggrandized and diminished, the child's body sits quietly close: face, throat, chubby feet, and arms near to us in the picture's space. It is creamily painted, soft peaches and cream unctuously brushed in rounded shapes: big eyes, downy cheeks, dimpled hands. We the viewers are being cued to take visual delight in this figure, but not in the same way we would enjoy looking at an adult. The body parts so prominently displayed are exactly those least closely associated with adult sexuality, a difference reinforced by the child's clothing, which wafts in pure white drifts across adult erogenous zones. This opposite of adult sexuality appears natural, for the child belongs so comfortably in nature that she doesn't need shoes, as the picture insists by pointing tiny toes right at us.

Reynolds, adept at traditional as well as innovative modes of thinking, did produce some traditional paintings of children. They fall into a

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

category then called “subject-pictures” (as opposed to portraiture): satires on adult life, such as *The Infant Academy* (1782), as well as scenes from classical mythology or the Bible, such as *The Infant Hercules* (1788) or *The Infant Samuel Praying* (c. 1766). He also did paintings of children that lubriciously insinuate adult sexual pranks, notably *Cupid As Link-Boy* (c.1774). But it was paintings like *The Age of Innocence* that captured the modern Western visual imagination and became the foundation of what we assume childhood looks like. Significantly, even Reynolds’ child subject pictures were quickly reinterpreted. William Hazlitt wrote in 1814: “The one is a sturdy young gentleman sitting in a doubtful posture without its swaddling clothes, and the other is an innocent little child, saying its prayers at the foot of its bed. They have nothing to do with Jupiter or Samuel, the heathen god or the Hebrew prophet.” (Postle 1995, 93)

*The Age of Innocence*, when set alongside Lawrence’s 1799/1803 *Portrait of Mrs. John Angerstein and Her Son John Julius William* (Figure 4), illustrates what was so compellingly new about the Romantic Child. Unlike most of their predecessors in seventeenth-century Dutch and Rococo French art, these two Romantic Children do not tell any story about adult life. On the contrary, these children deny, or enable us to forget, many aspects of adult society. Compared with Van Dyck’s noble children at one end of the social scale and Murillo’s beggar children at the other end, Reynolds’ and Lawrence’s children have no class. Or rather, they belong to a middle class that identifies itself discreetly with affluent cleanliness and absence of want. The child in *The Age of Innocence* may be barefoot, but her feet are pristinely clean, and both she and John Julius William wear immaculately white fragile dresses on their well-fed little bodies. Their dresses look remarkably alike and so do their hairstyles, faces, and bodies, so much so that we can barely distinguish she from he. John Julius William, in comparison with his mother Mrs. Angerstein, provides about as close an image of adult femininity and childhood as you will find; in 1799, women’s fashion veered close to the costumes invented especially for children: filmy white gowns with high waists, short sleeves, and sashes. But not so close. Mrs. Angerstein, monumentally and neoclassically statuesque (the portrait is life-size), appeals to the viewer sexually; dress style and painter both emphasize her full breasts, while she faces the viewer with a distinctly come-hither gaze, lips and eyes moistly glistening. In comparison, John Julius William isn’t paying much attention to anything, and neither is his *Age of Innocence* counterpart. The Romantic Child makes a good show of having no class, no gender, and no thoughts, of being innocent, that is—socially, sexually, and psychically.

Romantic images of childhood were both the cause and effect of a new relationship between painters and young sitters. Reynolds’ treatment of his young models reads like a passage from the latest child-rearing manuals, quite unlike the more traditional approach of, say, his

**Figure 3**  
*The Age of Innocence*  
 Joshua Reynolds  
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 Plymouth City Museums and  
 Art Gallery.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

rival portraitist John Hoppner. Hoppner had his wife whip children to keep them still, whereas Reynolds sought to amuse his child models while they sat for him, telling them fairy tales, playing tricks, romping and chatting. His assistant Northcote recalled: "He delighted much in marking the dawning traits of the youthful mind, and the actions and bodily movements even of infants; and it was by these means that he acquired the ability which enabled him to portray children with such exquisite happiness, truth, and variety" (Stephens 1884, 71). Entire paintings featuring children might send messages of class difference, as Patricia Crown has warned, but Reynolds rendered the bodies of those children remarkably alike, regardless of class: beggars, upper-class offspring in expensive commissions, and portraits of the children he knew best, children who lived in his household like his great-niece Offy, who modeled *The Age of Innocence* when she was about six. Similarly, the child in Gainsborough's famous c. 1770 portrait *The Blue Boy* sends confusing class signals (Figure 5). The portrait seems to be formal, for the model wears a splendid satin outfit patterned on seventeenth-century clothing, exactly the sort worn by the young Villiers boys whose pose in Van Dyck's portrait Gainsborough cites. Robert Wark, however, showed that behind the portrait's charm lies a socially equal relationship with a neighborhood child, Jonathan Buttall. Scholars are not sure why Gainsborough made the painting, but it was not commissioned, and Jonathan was not noble or even very wealthy. Painters were paying less attention to the future adult social status of child models, and therefore less attention to the ways clothing signaled differences of rank. Instead, they were treating children and their clothing in a way that would signal another kind of difference: difference in age.

Many factors converged to create a new appreciation of childhood. Luckily for historians of images, their chronology is clear. Social historians face murkier evidence, because the representations on which they must rely do not necessarily reflect daily realities. Philippe Ariès, in his pioneering and influential *Centuries of Childhood*, first published in France in 1973, argued that adults cared rather little even for their own children before the seventeenth century, and that the idea of childhood as a distinct age to be treasured and protected emerged only in modern times. Ariès may have relied too much on sporadic statistics, and too much on images, which he uses liberally as social evidence. Other historians have since disagreed with Ariès, arguing from other kinds of evidence that parents and children bonded long before the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In any case, by the time modern images of childhood began to appear in significant numbers, several concepts crucial to a new attitude were firmly in place: a private, nurturing middle-class nuclear family as the building block of society, a capitalist opposition between masculine public and feminine domestic spheres, and a political belief in the innate value and freedom of the individual. Together, these concepts fostered a sheltered, mothering domain within

**Figure 4**

*Mrs. John Angerstein and Child*,  
Maurice Aeschimann  
© Musée d'art et d'histoire,  
Genève.



**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

which childhood could exist apart. Whatever the exact timing or rapidity of the change, an older concept of a child born in original Christian sin, correctable through rigid discipline, hard work, and corporal punishment, gave way to a concept of the child born innocent of adult faults, social evils, and sexuality.

Representations gave form to concepts. No written expression of the modern attitude to childhood was more coherent and eloquent than Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, published in 1762. Skeptical of traditional religious teachings, like other Enlightenment philosophers, Rousseau advocated raising children as "naturally" as possible, by which he meant gently, with toys and play, in simple, light, loose clothing, outdoors whenever possible. Paintings by Reynolds, Lawrence, Gainsborough, and their countless imitators look like illustrations of Rousseau's texts, and it may be no coincidence that Rousseau lived in England between 1765 and 1767, just before the English portraitists' vision of modern childhood swung into high gear. Those portraits, however, contributed something of their own to a modern concept of childhood, something specifically visual. Just as Renaissance paintings of the Christ Child made visibly manifest the theological concept of divine incarnation, so—by the same means but for the opposite purpose—modern paintings made visibly manifest the modern concept of childhood disincarnation. Images have always had a special power to represent the body, that is to present the body according to the concepts by which we understand our physical selves. In a painting, we see bodies with our own eyes, we can feel the image of the body, or at least we can see the traces of an artist's touch; we "face" the physical physically. Perhaps this is why James Joyce called visual sensation "the ineluctable modality of the visible." Nothing could make us understand the concept of an innocent child body better than a visual image.

A powerful paradigm overrides small inconsistencies. If children's bodies are so sexually innocent that they have no gender, then why do their eighteenth-century portraits subtly assign them masculine and feminine roles? Boys, apparently, will be boys fast. Reynolds' little girl looks very much like Lawrence's toddler boy, but not nearly as much like Gainsborough's pre-teen *Blue Boy*. The Blue Boy stands commandingly on a hill; she sits passively. He stares right at us; she glances vaguely toward nothing. He has some distance from us; she is being proffered. Rousseau and his followers resolved this problem by claiming that femininity and masculinity were natural conditions, but today some people disagree with Rousseau.

Nature may not be so natural. If *The Blue Boy* is a natural child, then why the elaborate costume? More to the point, why does he seem, paradoxically, a more attractively natural child because he is costumed? The key is not so much a logically consistent definition of nature, but rather the concept of childhood being set apart from adult life; more specifically, of the child's body being differentiated from an adult body's

**Figure 5**  
*The Blue Boy*,  
 Thomas Gainsborough,  
 © The Huntington.

existence in the (desirous, experienced, complicated) actual present (whenever the present was for the person making the image). Already in Gainsborough's time, the Blue Boy's costume represented a bygone era rich in nostalgic association. Gainsborough made the associations with that clothing perfectly fit the concept of the modern, Romantic, child body. The modern child's body is always the sign of a bygone era, of a past that is necessarily the past of adults, yet which, being so distinct, so sheltered, so innocent, is also inevitably a lost past, and therefore understood through the kind of memory we call nostalgia.

All Romantic Child bodies wear costumes, not just the Blue Boy. Reynolds' and Lawrence's children wear clothing that is supposedly "natural." It certainly fits less tightly and is made of less costly materials than contemporary adult clothing. Clothes, however, do not grow in nature. Societies design them, make them, and govern the conditions of their wear. Reynolds' and Lawrence's children are only more subtly and convincingly costumed than Gainsborough's. He masquerades as a seventeenth-century gentleman; they masquerade as Romantic Children. The very difference between adult and child clothing, first introduced by eighteenth-century fashion, was an invention created by adults.

Once the child body is firmly differentiated from the adult body, then a child can seem to be in masquerade even when wearing adult clothing. Ever since the eighteenth century, adults have reinforced this costume effect by dressing children in adult clothing that is too big for them—take for example another extremely popular child portrait by Reynolds, *Penelope Boothby* (Figure 6). More than 200 years after it was painted in 1788, *Penelope Boothby* still looks cute. The child's face is sweet, but the image is memorable because of the way the ordinary clothes are painted to make the child seem nestled in an oversized fluffy cocoon. The mob cap, especially, looks amusingly too big and grown up. Its puffy style was designed for the huge hairstyles then favored by adult women (Penny 1986, 319). Reynolds does not quite mock his model, but her youth, her smallness, is rendered as not being big enough, as a contrast between her body and her adult clothing, between her child body and an adult body that would fit these clothes correctly. We are supposed to find that contrast endearing. *Penelope Boothby* the human being has been miniaturized.

A vanishing point on our chronological horizon, the Romantic Child shrinks away to an unattainable distance from the adult present. According to the Romantic scenario, innocence must be an Edenic state from which adults fall, never to return. Nor can Romantic Children know adults; they are by definition unconscious of adult desires, including adults' desires for childhood. The Romantic Child is desirable precisely to the extent that it does not understand desire. So the image of the Romantic Child is an unconscious one, one that doesn't connect with adults, one that seems unaware of adults. The child in *Penelope Boothby* is presented for us to look at and enjoy looking at, but not for

us to make any psychological connection with. She looks ever so slightly aside; she is absorbed in childhood. We long for a childhood we cannot reach.

To an exponentially increasing nineteenth-century public, longing for childhood meant longing for its eighteenth-century image. Prints made elite portraits available to any middle-class buyer, and in so doing transformed what had been portraits of individual children into generic child types. Reynolds, so canny in this respect as in others, had himself promoted the reproduction of his paintings in mezzotint prints, produced by skilled engravers. One Reynolds scholar believes the painter may even have created some of his paintings for the express purpose of having prints made after them, taking advantage of a new export market for mezzotints that since the 1770s was quite profitable (Penny 1986, 35–36). The market only got stronger with time, stoked by cheap print technologies and the increasing popularity of illustrated art history books, for example Sarah Tytler's 1877 *Childhood a Hundred Years Ago*. F. G. Stephens' 1867 *English Children as Painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds*, reedited in 1884, which began by confidently assuming, "It must have occurred to the minds of many among my readers that Reynolds, of all artists, painted children best," concluded with a list of dozens of Reynolds' paintings of children that had been turned into prints, many of them several times over by different engravers—*Penelope Boothby* three times, *The Age of Innocence* four times.

As skilled copies of portraits deteriorated into clumsy versions, not only the particular identities of their original sitters faded but also the particular painting styles of their original authors. What remained of style was clothing style. The impact of eighteenth-century images of childhood now depended almost entirely on a relationship between clothing and children's bodies. Thus it became possible for all the connotations of eighteenth-century portraits to be carried by actual clothing copied from portraits and worn by Victorian children. A craze for children's "fancy-dress" swept the Anglo-Saxon world and included a heavy dose of eighteenth-century costumes copied from portraits.

By the end of the century, the single most popular image of childhood was Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, precisely because it had been reproduced in so many protean forms, notably as clothing. In fact, by the early twentieth century, the *Blue Boy* was widely known as the most famous painting in the world, period. Not the least reason for the *Blue Boy*'s fame was that it became the world's most expensive painting when it was bought in 1921 from an English lord by the American collector Henry E. Huntington for more than \$700,000. Why, however, had Huntington been so eager to buy it? Because it had become famous through reproduction. Some biographers think it might even have been a print after the *Blue Boy* that first sparked Huntington's interest in any art (Wark 1991, 38–41). It was also sometimes said that Mrs. Huntington wanted the *Blue Boy* because it reminded her of her beloved

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son. Whether Arabella Huntington's maternal desire for the image is factual or not, it seemed plausible, for as an image in the broadest sense of image, the *Blue Boy* was notoriously a maternal favorite.

The Blue Boy's costume became synonymous with a mother's idea of how to dress a boy, especially after it acquired a look-alike in Reginald Birch's illustrations for Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1885 *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. So much so that the costume became a symbol of maternal desire to keep sons androgynously childish. A boy's struggle to shed the Blue Boy look was therefore his struggle to leave the feminine domestic domain of childhood and enter the world of grown-up masculinity. This became a publicly discussed issue in the case of Burnett herself, who readily admitted that Birch's illustrations were based on photographs of her son Vivian in costume. Burnett finally assured readers that she had cut her son's hair short and that he played heartily in other, more masculine, clothes (Bixler 1984, 50–55). One banal and typical poem, published in a children's magazine in 1888 and illustrated with a boy in Blue Boy/Fauntleroy costume and pose, describes: "A little boy in girlish frocks . . . Has to learn his lessons,/As he stands at Mamma's knee . . . But it's hard for little Willie—/So very, very hard—/Who wants to scamper all the day/About the sunny yard." (Smalle 1988, 2) According to legend, another small fellow, accused of burning down a barn, defended himself by saying his mother had forced him to wear a "Blue Boy" suit.

In and out of pictures the costumes passed. Besides Blue Boy suits, another great dress-up favorite was a Penelope Boothby costume. In 1879, Lewis Carroll (the same Lewis Carroll who wrote *Alice in Wonderland*) liked Xie Kitchen so much in her Penelope Boothby costume that he took her photo portrait wearing it. The same year, the academic master Sir John Everett Millais, widely hailed as a latter-day Reynolds, liked Edie Ramage so much in her Penelope Boothby costume that he painted her portrait wearing it and called it *Cherry Ripe* (cf. Figure 7). Millais adapted several eighteenth-century images of childhood, including *The Age of Innocence* and the *Blue Boy*. Still other paintings, like his 1886 *Bubbles*, were more loosely derived from eighteenth-century portraits; the young model in *Bubbles* wears the "skeleton suit" invented for little boys in late eighteenth-century England, which consisted of straight loose pants buttoned to a short jacket that was often worn over a white shirt with frilled or pleated collar.

Millais and others copied eighteenth-century images of childhood, but there was an important difference between the originals and the copies. Though the boys and girls in eighteenth-century portraits wore clothes that were newly invented, and therefore in a sense fashionable, they were already wearing costumes that set them apart from adult fashion. Having been set apart, children's clothing styles, especially in popular images, were cut adrift from adult clothing styles. Adult fashion proceeded to change rapidly over the next century and a half, while

**Figure 6**  
*Penelope Boothby*,  
 Joshua Reynolds.  
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 Museum, Oxford.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

children's fashion consisted so much of revivals it could hardly even be called fashion. Or rather, children's clothing styles perpetually lagged, so that children were always wearing something that belonged to a past style, whatever the past was in relation to a given present. Gainsborough had anticipated the future with his *Blue Boy*, which may help explain why its popularity increased over the years. As Marcia Pointon has observed, a nostalgic sartorial undertow removed nineteenth-century portraits like Millais' doubly from the present and, by extension, from adult life (Pointon 1991, 220). At any given moment, the child's body was clothed in signs both of not being like an adult body and not belonging to adult time. Experience accumulates in time. Costumed as if timeless, the child's body appears to exist before time began, before experience can begin. The great eighteenth-century child portraits equated childhood with innocence and with nature. The great nineteenth-century child portraits made the eighteenth-century naturally innocent child body timeless.

Among nineteenth-century images of childhood, Millais' *Cherry Ripe* and *Bubbles* announced new conditions of popularity on a new scale. *Cherry Ripe* and *Bubbles* were both turned into prints reproduced in quantities so big that the image of childhood entered the mass-media market. Reproduction rights to both paintings were bought by the Pears Soap Company, which used the images to illustrate advertisements and calendars. The Pears company made a pretty safe investment, for when *Cherry Ripe* had been reproduced as a color centerfold in the *Graphic Christmas Annual* soon after being painted, it quickly sold some 500,000 copies (Bradley 1991, 179). With images like Millais', the use of archaic costume to represent childhood entered into what could be called a common consciousness.

Millais may or may not have painted with an eye for commercial markets. His eminent Victorian prestige certainly required him to deny any such motives. He professed, for instance, to be horrified when *Bubbles*, which was a portrait of his own grandson, appeared high and low to sell soap (Millais 1967, 59). In any case, Millais' images began in a traditionally artistic way, as unique oil paintings (albeit modeled on other paintings). Millais' paintings bridged old and new ways of both producing and marketing images of childhood. The person whose work took the first step after the bridge was Kate Greenaway, the great children's illustrator, whose work was designed for mass markets.

Like other artists of her time, Greenaway cited eighteenth-century portrait paradigms, dressed her children in Romantic Children's clothing and set them in a perpetually preindustrial English countryside. It is often said that Greenaway's costumes and settings are contemporary but rural. This interpretation, however, as Laurel Bradley has shown, ignores the eighteenth-century origins of rural clothing and the nostalgia attached to a vanishing agrarian society by predominantly urban audiences. In

**Figure 7**

*Cherry Ripe*, Sir John Everett Millais.  
© The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



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other words, a quaint rural look was just another way of reviving mythic eighteenth-century values.

Greenaway worked fast and well at commercial illustration. Her first card, a Valentine, bought by the Marcus Ward Company in about 1873, sold 25,000 copies within weeks, (Meyer 1988, 111) and the approximately 150 to 200 cards she designed during the following decade were also extremely popular (Engen 1988, 10). Greenaway worked almost anonymously for about six years. It didn't matter that her name was unknown because the children that she imagined had become her signature. More than a century later, Greenaway's work is still familiar and in print.

Out of conjugated inclination and necessity, Greenaway abandoned all the effects particular to painting (and aptly called painterly). The work for which she is remembered began as pencil and watercolor sketches on small pieces of paper. Instead of calligraphic linear flourishes, rich dense blended colors, and complex layers of scumbled, glazed, creamy, scraped, or flickering pigments, Greenaway used uniform short pencil lines and a small selection of diluted colors brushed in uniform, bounded areas. The facial features of her children are abbreviated and are the same for every child. She managed to avoid drawing hands and feet, and the bodies of her children are imperceptible beneath their clothing. Her settings consist mostly of accessories, hardly at all of space created with perspective, and function as inert backdrops to the children's bodies placed front and center. Seen in comparison with a painting like Reynolds' *Age of Innocence*, an illustration like Greenaway's for the nursery rhyme "Ring-a-ring-a-roses," (Figure 8) done around 1880, is almost pathetically naive and innocent.

Greenaway's images looked childlike. Her supporter, the great art critic John Ruskin, wrote of her work that Greenaway "lives with her girlhood as with a little sister" (Meyer 1988, 117). Greenaway believed she made her images for children, and certainly she illustrated texts intended for children and usually about children as well. Whether or not this was entirely true (a middle-class child's allowance might afford a Greenaway item, but basically adults purchase things for children and control children's spending), Greenaway matched her style to its intended audience. This was a crucial move in the history of childhood's image. The signs that had previously belonged to a subject now also belonged to a style. The innocent child body had become both a subject and a style. The great eighteenth-century portraitists and the great nineteenth-century academic painters of childhood had both made extremely sophisticated images of natural simplicity. Greenaway introduced innocent images of innocence.

Greenaway's innovation was the prerequisite for a booming market in images ostensibly geared to children but in fact pitched to the adults who would buy images that corresponded to their idea of childhood. At the heart of the Greenaway commercial phenomenon were her books,

**Figure 8**

*Ring-a-ring-a-roses*  
Arents Collections, the New  
York Public Library, Astor,  
Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

beginning with *Under the Window*, published in 1879. The first printing of 20,000 copies sold faster than it could be supplied to stores. In Greenaway's own lifetime the book sold more than 100,000 copies (Meyer 1988, 112–13). *Under the Window* was quickly followed by more illustrated books and almanacs, all of them internationally published and pirated. In 1905, shortly after her death, her biographers wrote that “the published works of Kate Greenaway are known, and ought to be found, in every house where children live and are loved” (Spielman and Layard 1986 [1905], preface). Differentiating her work from her prominent peers in illustration, her biographers also stated: “She was the Baby's Friend, the Children's Champion. Randolph Caldecott laboured to amuse the little ones; Mr. Walter Crane, to entertain them. They aimed at interesting children in their drawings; but Kate Greenaway interested us in the children themselves” (Spielman and Layard 1986 [1905], 2).

Greenaway was able to remodel the image of the child's body so effectively because, paradoxically, she virtually eliminated the body from her images, leaving costumes and accessories to be the hallmarks of her style. Formally simple yet distinctively costumed, the Greenaway child was easy to copy and transpose. Greenaway children began to appear on every conceivable printed or stamped commodity: tea towels, embroidery kits, china figurines, wallpaper, stationery, dolls, doilies, soaps, etc. And then there were the Greenaway clothes, which swept the children's fashion world. The little future dance iconoclast Isadora Duncan wore them. Little future Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany wore them (Engen 1988, 13, 14, 21). If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Kate Greenaway should have been one of the most flattered women in the Western world during the 1880s, even though most *Greenawisme*, as it was known in French, was illicit and Greenaway received no direct financial profits from it. Ever since *Greenawisme*, knock-offs, tie-ins, and just plain imitations have made all popular drawn images of childhood common household commodities.

From Greenaway's work, the ideal disembodied child clothed in archaic innocence passed into the work of many gifted illustrators. What has been named the Golden Age of Illustration, from about 1880 to 1920, securely lodged nineteenth-century adaptations of eighteenth-century models in the visual assumptions of millions of book readers, magazine subscribers, and toy buyers. From illustration, the image of childhood innocence was directly transposed into photography. What Roland Barthes so famously called photography's reality effect made the artifices of childhood look perfectly natural.

That other illustrators would emulate Greenaway's example should not be too surprising. It may seem more difficult to assert that photography, ostensibly an automatic picture-making process, could inherit visual conventions invented by illustrators or passed on from paintings. Yet take the example of a quite typical 1993 photograph by

**Figure 9**

*Dressed to Kill*

© Gail Goodwin.

Courtesy: Portal Publications Ltd.

Gail Goodwin (Figure 9), found on a greeting card in a drugstore. There is nothing about the image that was not inherited, except that it is a photograph.

Like Reynolds', Lawrence's, Gainsborough's, Millais', and Greenaway's images, Goodwin's shows children associated with nature, in Goodwin's case by juxtaposing two seated girls with a bouquet of flowers almost as big as they are. Also like all its predecessors, Goodwin's image makes children's bodies look small and insubstantial in relation to their setting; limbs tucked in, alone in front of us, their contained presentation contrasts with the door behind them and column to their right, both of which appear to extend high above the picture frame, just as majestic trees do in Reynolds' paintings. That door and that column, neatly white and ornamentally carved, stand for traditional domestic refuge, exactly the same symbol used by Greenaway in her backgrounds. The most prominent signals, however, are the ones in the center of the image, the ones that clothe the children's bodies. Just as in Gainsborough's, Millais', and Greenaway's images, the children in Goodwin's wear clothing that refers to what is past: light blue or pink checked dresses along with ruffled white anklet socks look quaint in the 1990s. Moreover, the "old-fashioned" resonance of the girls' accessories—straw hat and bags, checked hatbox, white gloves, 1950s costume jewelry and sunglasses—completely neutralizes their sexuality, and the sexuality of the girls' play. The photograph is titled *Dressed to Kill*, and the two little girls are mimicking adult feminine seduction, applying lipstick to pursed mouths. The entire photograph, finally, is processed to look "antique," printed in black and white and hand-tinted in exactly the same pastel palette Greenaway associated with childhood.

Sally Mann's 1989 *The New Mothers* deploys the same kind of clothing and accessory signals as *Dressed to Kill* but a radically different treatment of children's bodies. Mann yanks apart the messages united by more than two centuries of brilliant image-making, the messages that make *Dressed to Kill* look as cute as *The New Mothers* looks disturbing. Clothing signs and body signs clash instead of being harmoniously and persuasively coordinated. Their conflict confronts us with the artifices by which we have insisted on a state of nature. If the clothing of innocence can fit bodies so badly, then others might do equally well.

Nor does the clothing of innocence look so innocent anymore. It is still possible for an image like *Dressed to Kill* to be credible, and for that reason, *The New Mothers* can still seem to contradict a viable option. At the same time, however, the signs of childhood, more specifically girlhood, are being grafted onto signs of adult sexuality. The startlingly hybrid quality of *The New Mothers* is actually not so new any more. Once and to some extent still a fixture of girls' dress-up, the heart-shaped sunglasses worn in *The New Mothers* now carry for many the stamp of their use in the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's film version of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, the nymphet whose name

has become synonymous with underage sexuality. Both girls' dresses may now also be perceived sexually, for the adult fashion industry, trafficking in sex appeal, has already appropriated them. In 1994, *The New York Times* described runways filled with "Baby-doll dresses. Party frocks with little-girl cardigans and mommy-dress-up jewelry, Mary Jane shoes and ankle socks." (Menkes 1994, 9) The same year, *Vogue* magazine pictured its model of the moment, Bridgit Hall, lying in her underwear surrounded by stuffed animals above the caption "Lolita lives!" and went on to describe their "Dream of Contemporary Beauty Incarnate" as "a sixteen-year-old girl with an eighth-grade education." (Gandee 1994, 268–71) From this point of view, *The New Mothers* confronts us with the present of childhood, a present we may be reluctant to see.

The alternative, however, is not a real alternative; or rather, not an innocent alternative. In its esthetically fossilized state, the clothing of childhood innocence has become a symbol of class status. In New York City's Upper East Side, in Paris' 16th or 8th *arrondissements*, and other affluent neighborhoods throughout the Western world, the children of the rich wear the styles of yesterday. Purveyed by boutiques such as Jacadi, La Layette et Plus, or Tutti Bambini, smocked dresses, peter-pan collars, and pleated shorts now fill the same function as children's clothing did in pre-modern art. Like the satin and lace costumes of Van Dyke's sumptuous portraits, today's archaic children's clothing signals the social rank of their wearers' families. On the August 1996 cover of the elite magazine *Town & Country* stride three gorgeous girls clad identically in impeccable white-bodiced, pink-print skirted dresses and white perforated T-strap sandals (Figure 10). Inside the magazine the trio, a collective icon of childhood, reappears, emblem of a Tuscan family whose control of its land dates back, the magazine tells us, more than 1,000 years. Feudal fantasies notwithstanding, this version of childhood, like others, takes the form of clothing. Inside the August 1996 *Town & Country*, some subscribers found a special insert on children's fashion.

### Note

This essay began with a paper Amy Cassandra Albinson wrote about Mann's *New Mothers* for a seminar given by Anne Higonnet at Wellesley College in 1995. Inspired by that seminar, Anne Higonnet is now writing a book about images of children, from which the historical material of this essay is drawn. Cassi Albinson suggested and wrote the essay's conclusion.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARD COPY**

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Figure 10

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