

IDEAS ABOUT CHILDHOOD

	Nurture is Better	Nature is Better
Knowledge	John Locke child like blank slate (<i>tabula rasa</i>) education should provide external knowledge	Jean-Jacques Rousseau child like plant education should preserve internal capacity William Wordsworth (Romantic) child is a prophet
Virtue	Puritans original sin children should be taught to be good	Romantics original innocence children should not be corrupted

TIMELINE

17th century

1689: John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* argues that children's minds are a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) at birth.

1697: Perrault's *Fairy Tales (Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals)* published in France.

18th century

1744: John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is among the earliest books to attempt to entertain children as well as teach them.

1762: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel, *Emile, or On Education*, argues that education should preserve a child's natural goodness from corruption.

1798: William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* includes poems like "We Are Seven," which celebrate childhood innocence.

1799: Hannah More publishes *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*.

19th century

1807: William Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* describes the child as a "prophet" born with memories from a past existence, "trailing clouds of glory" as it comes from heaven.

1809-1810: Sydney Smith publishes essays on education in the *Edinburgh Review*.

1811: *Sense and Sensibility* published (Austen's first published novel).

1812: Grimm's *Fairy Tales (Children's and Household Tales)* published in Germany (first volume).

RESOURCES

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PASSAGES & DISCUSSION**Harry Dashwood and the Old Gentleman**

S&S, from chapter 1 / volume I, chapter i

February 1796 (Moody 313) | Harry is 4

The old gentleman died: his will was read, and like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure. He was neither so unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew;—but he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the bequest. Mr. Dashwood had wished for it more for the sake of his wife and daughters than for himself or his son;—but to his son, and his son's son, a child of four years old, it was secured, in such a way, as to leave to himself no power of providing for those who were most dear to him, and who most needed a provision by any charge on the estate, or by any sale of its valuable woods. The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by such attractions as are by no means unusual in children of two or three years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters. He meant not to be unkind, however, and, as a mark of his affection for the three girls, he left them a thousand pounds a-piece.

Discussion

- What does the "old gentleman" (great-uncle to Elinor and Marianne, and great-great-uncle to young Harry) value about Harry? What view of childhood does this imply?
- What does the narrator value about the old gentleman's "niece and her daughters" (Elinor, Marianne, Margaret, and their mother)? What view of childhood and adulthood does this imply?
- We might expect this discussion of unequal inheritance to focus on gender (the male descendant inherits rather than the females). Why does the narrator focus on age instead (the toddler inherits rather than the teenagers)?

Harry Dashwood and His Parents

S&S, from chapter 2 / volume I, chapter ii

February-March 1797 (Moody 314) | Harry is [5]

Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods, who were related to him only by half blood, which she considered as no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount. It was very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist between the children of any man by different marriages; and why was he to ruin himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his money to his half sisters?

Discussion

- Why does Mrs. John Dashwood disapprove of her husband's plan? Is she genuinely concerned for her son? Is there cause for such concern?
- What view of children is implied by her description of Harry here? Is such a view of children in the child's best interests?

Margaret Dashwood and Mr. F**S&S, from chapter 12 / volume I, chapter xii****Sunday, 29 October 1797 (Moody 317) | 8 months earlier, Margaret was 13 (Moody 313)**

Margaret's sagacity was not always displayed in a way so satisfactory to her sister. When Mrs. Jennings attacked her one evening at the park, to give the name of the young man who was Elinor's particular favourite, which had been long a matter of great curiosity to her, Margaret answered by looking at her sister, and saying, "I must not tell, may I, Elinor?"

This of course made every body laugh; and Elinor tried to laugh too. But the effort was painful. She was convinced that Margaret had fixed on a person whose name she could not bear with composure to become a standing joke with Mrs. Jennings.

Marianne felt for her most sincerely; but she did more harm than good to the cause, by turning very red and saying in an angry manner to Margaret,

"Remember that whatever your conjectures may be, you have no right to repeat them."

"I never had any conjectures about it," replied Margaret; "it was you who told me of it yourself."

This increased the mirth of the company, and Margaret was eagerly pressed to say something more.

"Oh! pray, Miss Margaret, let us know all about it," said Mrs. Jennings. "What is the gentleman's name?"

"I must not tell, ma'am. But I know very well what it is; and I know where he is too."

"Yes, yes, we can guess where he is; at his own house at Norland to be sure. He is the curate of the parish I dare say."

"No, *that* he is not. He is of no profession at all."

"Margaret," said Marianne with great warmth, "you know that all this is an invention of your own, and that there is no such person in existence."

"Well, then, he is lately dead, Marianne, for I am sure there was such a man once, and his name begins with an F."

Most grateful did Elinor feel to Lady Middleton for observing, at this moment, "that it rained very hard."

Discussion

- What view of children does this portrayal of Margaret suggest? Is she innocent or incompetent, or does she act knowingly out of a sense of culture, community, and audience?
- What does the amusement and embarrassment of the other characters suggest is their interpretation of her behavior?

Annamaria Middleton and the Pin**S&S, from chapter 21 / volume I, chapter xxi****Wednesday, 29 November 1797 (Moody 319) | Annamaria is 3**

A fond mother, though, in pursuit of praise for her children, the most rapacious of human beings, is likewise the most credulous; her demands are exorbitant; but she will swallow any thing; and the excessive affection and endurance of the Miss Steeles towards her offspring were viewed therefore by Lady Middleton without the smallest surprise or distrust....

"John is in such spirits today!" said [Lady Middleton], on his taking Miss Steeles's pocket handkerchief, and throwing it out of window—"He is full of monkey tricks."

And soon afterwards, on the second boy's violently pinching one of the same lady's fingers, she fondly observed, "How playful William is!"

"And here is my sweet little Annamaria," she added, tenderly caressing a little girl of three years old, who had not made a noise for the last two minutes; "And she is always so gentle and quiet—Never was there such a quiet little thing!"

But unfortunately in bestowing these embraces, a pin in her ladyship's head dress slightly scratching the child's neck, produced from this pattern of gentleness such violent screams, as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy. The mother's consternation was excessive; but it could not surpass the alarm of the Miss Steeles, and every thing was done by all three, in so critical an emergency, which affection could suggest as likely to assuage the agonies of the little sufferer. She was seated in her mother's lap, covered with kisses, her wound bathed with lavender-water, by one of the Miss Steeles, who was on her knees to attend her, and her mouth stuffed with sugar plums by the other. With such a reward for her tears, the child was too wise to cease crying. She still screamed and sobbed lustily, kicked her two brothers for offering to touch her, and all their united soothings were ineffectual till Lady Middleton luckily remembering that in a scene of similar distress last week, some apricot marmalade had been successfully applied for a bruised temple, the same remedy was eagerly proposed for this unfortunate scratch, and a slight intermission of screams in the young lady on hearing it, gave them reason to hope that it would not be rejected.— She was carried out of the room therefore in her mother's arms, in quest of this medicine, and as the two boys chose to follow, though earnestly entreated by their mother to stay behind, the four young ladies were left in a quietness which the room had not known for many hours.

"Poor little creatures!" said Miss Steele, as soon as they were gone. "It might have been a very sad accident."

"Yet I hardly know how," cried Marianne, "unless it had been under totally different circumstances. But this is the usual way of heightening alarm, where there is nothing to be alarmed at in reality." ...

"I have a notion," said Lucy, "you think the little Middletons rather too much indulged; perhaps they may be the outside of enough; but it is so natural in Lady Middleton; and for my part, I love to see children full of life and spirits; I cannot bear them if they are tame and quiet."

"I confess," replied Elinor, "that while I am at Barton Park, I never think of tame and quiet children with any abhorrence."

Discussion

- Should we believe that Annamaria is usually "gentle and quiet"? If so, is this behavior natural or taught? How much of her screaming is a response to pain, and how much is a strategy for a "reward"? Is her screaming an innate or learned behavior?
- Lady Middleton praises all of her children, but how does her praise differ for her sons and her daughter? Why does she feel "consternation" when Annamaria screams?
- What view of children do the Miss Steeles profess? Why do they profess this view?
- What differences are there between Elinor's comment about Annamaria and Marianne's?
- Is there any significance to the similarity between the names Annamaria and Marianne?

Harry Dashwood, William Middleton, and Height

S&S, from chapter 34 / volume II, chapter xii

Tuesday, 13 February 1798 (Moody 323) | Harry is [6]

One subject only engaged the ladies till coffee came in, which was the comparative heights of Harry Dashwood, and Lady Middleton's second son William, who were nearly of the same age.

Had both the children been there, the affair might have been determined too easily by measuring them at once; but as Harry only was present, it was all conjectural assertion on both sides; and every body had a right to be equally positive in their opinion, and to repeat it over and over again as often as they liked.

The parties stood thus:

The two mothers, though each really convinced that her own son was the tallest, politely decided in favour of the other.

The two grandmothers, with not less partiality, but more sincerity, were equally earnest in support of their own descendant.

Lucy, who was hardly less anxious to please one parent than the other, thought the boys were both remarkably tall for their age, and could not conceive that there could be the smallest difference in the world between them; and Miss Steele, with yet greater address gave it, as fast as she could, in favour of each.

Elinor, having once delivered her opinion on William's side, by which she offended Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny still more, did not see the necessity of enforcing it by any farther assertion; and Marianne, when called on for hers, offended them all, by declaring that she had no opinion to give, as she had never thought about it.

Discussion

- Why do the mothers and grandmothers believe "their own descendant" to be the tallest? Why are they "offended" by the opposite opinion? Is there a significance to height?
- Are Harry's mother (Fanny Dashwood) and grandmother (Mrs. Ferrars) defending him, or themselves? Are the Miss Steeles really complimenting Harry, or his mother and grandmother?
- What do the mothers and grandmothers value about their male descendants?

Margaret Dashwood Growing Up

S&S, from chapter 50 / volume III, chapter xiv

September 1799 (Moody 332) | Margaret is nearly 16

Fortunately for Sir John and Mrs. Jennings, when Marianne was taken from them, Margaret had reached an age highly suitable for dancing, and not very ineligible for being supposed to have a lover.

Discussion

- What is the relationship between Marianne's education (being taught to dance) and her social maturation?