

Evolution of childhood



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To understand the developments in the current industrial society, one must take a closer look at the view of children during the neoclassic and romantic periods of our history. In his book *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift discusses the role of social classes in determining a child's role in the society, albeit in a satirical way.

During the neoclassical period, industrial technology had not surfaced. Therefore, European parents had to toil or work harder to put food on the table. These involved long hours of manual work in the farms. However, long hours of action did not guarantee a higher yield. The inconsistent weather patterns at times determined harvests. Therefore, if a child was born to a low-income family or a developing nation, then he or she would be viewed as a burden to the family or the state. As a result, various mechanisms were set up to prevent children from being burdens to the state or their families.

By then, Ireland was one of the poorest European countries. This made it hard to raise a child in this nation (Day 96). To make it worse, the English or the British policy towards Irish was not friendly. This made it harder for the parents to raise children in Ireland. Swift then suggested that the Irish parents should sell their children into the British labor.

Selling children into labor was a common trend during this era. Low-income families could not afford to educate and feed their children well. Therefore, some children accompanied their parents to work. They worked for the elite families in Europe. Still, the pay was not good enough. This meant that they could barely improve their economic status. Some parents and their children

had to exchange their labor with food. Consequently, most of the work they did was for survival, not to improve their families' economic status or conditions.

Education was not a right but a privilege that few children could afford. The mode of education or the curriculum was based on enhancing a child's way of reasoning or thinking. This encouraged the rise of philosophy and the increasing interests in science. The focus of some education institutions were based on challenging the religious and political authority of the Catholics (Hindman 103). This was because the church played crucial roles in their lives. Also, there was a continuous struggle or frictional relationships between the Catholics and the Protestants. Children born from wealthy families could afford education. However, this was not the same case to children born of poor parents. At times, the parents could not afford the fee required for their education, or the children were just busy working to help their families make ends meet.

Gender was an important issue in European neoclassical societies. Males were regarded superior than the females. Therefore, the males had additional privileges compared to their female counterparts. To ensure the continuity of this ideology or belief, it played a crucial role in the bringing up the children. Boys could be taught matters of leadership while the females could be taught matters of domestic chores, boys were also taught issues of management.

This is because they had the right to inherit their father's property.

Therefore, it is believed that there was a close association between fathers

and their sons. Similarly, girls enjoyed close associations with their mothers. Romantic era ushered in new ideas of compulsory school attendance and nationalism. In fact, it coincided with the first industrial revolution in Britain. As a result of the revolution, machines were coming in to replace human labor. This led to the establishment of first industries in Europe. The introduction of machines in the process of production led the creation of employment opportunities, development and widening gaps in social classes and finally increased European population due to the availability of more food.

In his poem “ The Chimney Sweeper”, William Blake brings into our attention the prominence of child labor during the Romantic era. Machines brought good changes to the society, however, they enslaved people into the belief of economic success. As a result, more people started to strive harder to improve their social and economic status. Therefore, one can easily say that as much as machines improved efficiency or made work easier and brought more food to our tables, it took our children with it and the introduction and prominence of child labor.

Religion played a crucial role in the development of a child’s labor. According to religious teachings, we are taught to embrace the sufferings of the world to gain rewards in the afterlife. Given that the Romantic era was a period of strict religious tolerance, children (especially boys) and as young as four and five years were sold to industrial labor. Also, the form of religion during this period was deeply rooted in European conservatism. Therefore, words from the Bible were regarded as laws. This hindered the concepts of liberalism in bringing out new ideas.

In most industries across Britain, children worked as chimney cleaners. In some, they did other light duties such as sorting out and cleaning some work tools. To most of their parents, this was an act of preparing their children to embrace the difficulties of life in order to make them ready for rewards that come after death, in the afterlife. Such religious arguments led to the prominence of child labor in London and the entire romantic era.

Education played a central role in this period. The curriculum placed more emphasis on sciences, arts, and law (Bassler 67). Unlike the neoclassical period, most children went to school during the romantic era. This was attributed to two factors. First, more parents were employed at the industries. Therefore, they could afford to take their children to school. Finally, many European nations wanted to focus on national development. Education was therefore made mandatory as it played a central role in a nation's political, economic and social development.

Gender still played a crucial role in the raising of children. To preserve the status quo, boys had upper hands in social, political and economic roles. However, the notion that boys are stronger made them more vulnerable to industrial exploitation. In England and other countries in Europe like France, boys as young as four and five years were taken to work in the factories. They did light duties but at times had to clean the sooty chimneys. The pay they received was used by their parents to raise the families.

Girls, on the other hand, were taught to embrace domestic roles. They stayed at home and took care of their younger siblings. At times, older girls would prepare meals for the families. However, they had no right to own

property. In most cases, they were not included in inheriting their family's property.

It's therefore evident that our historical timelines played crucial roles in childhood. For example, during the neoclassical period, the needs of the society influenced how the children were brought up. This is because the societal needs influenced the parents and governments priorities. However, one can quickly point that the industrial revolution played a significant role in changing the mode of bringing up children. For example, the romantic era was deeply influenced by the first industrial revolution that began in England (Hassel 23). This led to new priorities in education and labor demands from the children. One can say that the need for child's labor increased during the romantic era than during the period of the neoclassic era. This change can be attributed to the industrial revolution.