

FROM VICTOR TO MOWGLI: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WILD CHILD IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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The wild child is a traditional mythological figure who has become an important symbol of “original innocence” in many texts. Such a child,¹ devoid of sexuality, uncorrupted by society, without language or religion, is a tempting *tabula rasa* for many authors and theoreticians (Scutter 223). The ills of society, of parenting, of education, and of religion have all been inscribed upon this figure at some time. Images of feral,² wild or “wolf” children repeatedly arise in novels, films, and as part of our cultural mythologies. Such characters have appeared in “stories and reports by chroniclers in the Dark and Middle Ages . . . and a good deal of philosophical and pedagogical discussion on this topic [took place] during the Renaissance and again in the eighteenth century” (Langmeier and Matejcek 34). This theme has been repeated in folklore and literature producing characters such as the *enfants sauvages* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rousseau’s *Emile*, Kipling’s *Mowgli* and Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan* (Lane 28-29). Modern depictions include characters in films such as *Nell* and in books such as David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* and Gary Crew’s *Angel’s Gate*. All of these texts deal with and perpetuate our stereotypical concepts of wild children as characters who have been either abandoned, lost or deserted in the “wilderness” where they are then socialised in accordance with their new environment. According to Harlan Lane “the wild child may have been a reassuring witness that, no matter how utterly a child is rejected by its parents, there is a benign nature that looks after all its children” (28).

The interest of theologians, linguists, psychologists, philosophers and other theoreticians has repeatedly returned to this figure of the wild child. Debate has surrounded issues concerning the acquisition of language and spirituality, the processes involved in socialisation, and the question of what is innate to the human body and mind. Many believed that such questions could be best answered through a study of the wild child, who having lived in a state of “innocent unknowingness” most accurately represented a child-like state in an almost-adult form. As Candland points out “our philosophy, our religions, our education systems, our social beliefs—all of these divisions of belief and knowledge make important assumptions and suppositions about which behaviour is innate and which is learned through experience” (14).

¹ While the term “wild child” appears to make reference to children of both sexes, documented examples of wild males far outweigh those of females.

² According to Candland: “The earlier meaning of the word “feral” refers to the release of a domesticated or socialized being into the wild. The word has come to be used to describe any animal taken from the wild into captivity—a definition just the reverse of its earlier meaning” (371). In reference to an animal or human “taken from the wild into captivity,” I will use the word in the latter context

The figure of the wild child underwent a transformation during the Victorian era as works such as Darwin's theory of evolution began to affect commonly held beliefs about concepts such as "progress" and "civilisation." My article will attempt to map part of this transformation by considering the similarities and differences in the representation of two wild children: Victor "The Wild Boy of Aveyron" and Mowgli from *The Jungle Books*. While both characters are similarly portrayed as sexually innocent, an attribute which reflected something of Itard and Kipling's concerns, the discourses employed for the study and discussion about them differ greatly. Significantly the two texts are separated by almost a century: Victor was captured and first studied in 1799 while Kipling's *The Jungle Book* was first published in 1894. Another important difference is the "factual" status which is often attributed to the reports written by Itard, Virey and Bonnaterre about Victor and the conversely fictional creation of Mowgli. However, despite these differences the two characters provide an interesting study of the construction of the wild child in literature.

In 1799 Victor was captured in the Caune Woods of France and subjected to intensive study as he became part of a medical, sexual and psychological discourse on the phenomenon of wild children. Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, a recently accredited doctor, worked closely with Victor from 1801 to 1807. His interest in Victor stemmed from a hope that he might determine the construction of a pure mind unsullied by knowledge gained from experience (Candland 19). Harlan Lane's book *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* translates Itard's reports and some correspondence relating to Victor, thus providing a structural model for considering wild children and their subjectivity. In applying this model to the construction of the wild child in many Victorian texts I pose the following questions: how closely does Rudyard Kipling's character Mowgli reflect the prototypical wild child as manifest in Harlan Lane's text? And what changes did the image of the wild child experience during the Victorian era?

In his initial chapter Lane considers "the nature of man" and the role of the wild child in connecting "man and animal."³ He details much of the early interest shown in the wild children of Europe, studies which were conducted in a field later called physical and cultural anthropology and the establishment of institutions such as the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme whose objective was to "venture a systematic classification of the different races" (21). Lane noted that by 1799:

The growing body of comparative data and analysis tended to undermine the standing of the traditional criteria for manhood: human appearance, vertical station, and speech. The behaviour of the wild children was critical in the controversy . . . The difference in appearance between man and animal seemed . . . more a matter of degree than of kind, especially when the most humanoid animals (the orangs) and the most animal-like humans (the wild children) were considered. Perhaps apes and wild children should be admitted to

³ Throughout the text Lane uses "man" or "mankind" as the generic term for human or humankind. I will follow his example only when quoting directly from the text; any other references will be non-gendered.

humankind provisionally . . . until time would show what they are able to accomplish with proper training. (21-22)

According to Dr Itard the process of “proper training” established much of the criterion for what it meant to be “civilised,” a state which included the ability to understand and communicate through language; to conceive of colours, shapes and sizes; to distinguish between justice and injustice; and to conform to social norms through a display of good behaviour, manners and demeanour. A child capable of conforming to these social norms would thus resemble the idealised image of the “tamed child” who had overcome (in the sense that one “overcomes” a disadvantage or disability) its wildness. It is significant that all types of children, wild or otherwise, must be taught through education and socialisation these rules of “civilisation.” Furthermore the wild child is often represented as the final link in the chain connecting animals and humans, a notion which can be interpreted as an extension of the Romantic tradition connecting all children and animals. According to Heather Scutter “there is a conflation of puritan and romantic discourses at work: on the one hand, children are seen to be wild animals in need of taming, domestication and confinement and, on the other hand, children are seen to belong, with animals, to a gentle and uncorrupted natural world” (225).

Dr Itard and his contemporaries did not portray Victor as a noble savage but rather as an “ignoble” savage; one who has been too long removed from humanity and the demands of social expectations (Lane 27) and whose deprivation of social contact was manifested in physical appearance and behaviour. Pierre-Joseph Bonnaterra noted in his observations of Victor:

He has been seen, when tired, to walk on all fours like the wild children of Hesse, Ireland and Bamberg. He defends himself by biting, like the children of Lithuania and Bamberg. Like the children of Lithuania found in 1694, he shows only feeble signs of reason. He has no articulate language and perhaps will have the same difficulty in speaking as the children found in Ireland, Lithuania, and Hanover. Like the child of Hanover and the girl of Over-Yssel, he is gentle, complacent and lets himself be caressed. (Qtd Lane 47)

These comparisons evoke many of the stereotypes which surround the figure of the wild child, especially the inclination to walk on all fours and attack by biting. Linnaeus, who first classified animals according to genus and species, cites nine cases⁴ which show the three typical characteristics of *Homo sapiens ferus* or “wild men”—*mutus*, *tetrapus*, *hirsutus*—or mute, four-legged and covered with hair (Langmeier and Matejcek 35). These particular characteristics are clearly derived from, and are indicative of, the animalistic nature which supposedly motivates these individuals.

⁴ According to Candland among others, those nine cases included: “A wolf-boy from Hesse (1344), a Lithuanian bear-boy (1661) said to have suckled at the teats of bears, an Irish sheep-boy (1672), then [a German boy] Peter (1724).and two girls, one from Cranenburg.

Stereotypes of the physical appearance of the wild children also highlighted the ambivalence with which they were viewed. These contradictions at once reminded the reader of both the similarities and differences between the "normal" child and the wild child. Bonnaterre wrote of Victor:

From external appearance, this child is no different from any other. He is 136 centimetres tall; he appears to be twelve or thirteen years old. He has a light complexion . . . a round face; he has dark deep-set eyes; long eyelashes; brown hair; a long, somewhat pointed nose, an average mouth; a round chin; an agreeable visage and a pleasant smile. . . . Since this child, by his type of life, is more like an animal than a man, the sense of smell and taste, which are the senses of the appetite, have become much more developed and perfected through exercise. (Qtd Lane 33)

In Victor's case the need to understand and tame the wild child was tempered by a conflicting need for the boy to remain innocent and untainted by the society into which he was entering. This again was evidence of the conflation of Puritan and Romantic discourses which modified perceptions of the subjectivity of the wild children. J.J. Virey shows evidence of this when he writes of Victor's predicament in his "Dissertation on a Young Child Found in the Forests of the Department of Aveyron, Compared with Savages Found in Europe in Diverse Eras, with Some Remarks on the Original State of Man:

Go forth, poor youth, on this unhappy earth, go forth and lose in your relations with men your primitiveness and simplicity! You live in the bosom of ancient forests; you found your nourishment at the foot of oaks and beech trees; you quenched your thirst at crystal springs; content with your meagre destiny, limited by your simple desires, satisfied with your sole domain. Now you can have nothing except by the beneficence of man; you are at his mercy, without property, without power, and you exchange freedom for dependence. . . . Oh, may you live happily among your countrymen, may you, man without pretension, display the sublime virtues of a generous soul and transmit to future generations this honourable example, as an eternal proof of what can be done by a student of innocent Nature. (Qtd Lane 48)

Thus the need to "civilise" Victor was tempered by the desire that he should remain innocent, a "man without pretension." This state of innocence, however, refers to more than the naiveté and simplicity which was associated with the wild child; it was also an allusion to sexual purity or sexual innocence. To many the wild child represented, and still does represent, both the innocent and unknowing child and the sexually uninhibited being: the animalistic creature who is not constrained by conformist society but rather acts on instincts and desires. Indeed the title "wild child" encapsulates these conflicting notions of sexual liberation and innocence. In a report to

the Minister of the Interior in 1806 Dr Itard explained his fears concerning Victor's need to relieve sexual frustration and his own need to maintain the notion of innocence which surrounded the boy:

I did not doubt that if I had dared to reveal the secret of his anxieties and the reason for his desires to this young man I would have reaped an incalculable benefit. But on the other hand, supposing that I could have tried such an experiment, would I not have revealed to our Savage a need which he would doubtless have sought to satisfy as publicly as his other needs and which would have led him into acts of great indecency? The fear of such an outcome inhibited my further experiments and I resigned myself to seeing my hopes disappear. (177-178)

This statement is as remarkable for Itard's presumptions about "nature" and the "naturalness" of sexual desire which he projects onto an evidently as yet undesiring youth, as it is for the ambiguity with which he viewed Victor's potential sexuality. J.J. Virey added to this sexual discourse when he wrote that Victor's "sexual organs are moderately developed, a little less than those of children of the same age living in the city, for social development hastens their growth" (Lane 34). Victor's medical and psychological state was also brought into question, particularly in relation to his ability to reason. Bonnaterre observed that:

This child is not totally without intelligence, reflection, or reasoning; however, we are obliged to say that in all those cases where it is not a matter of meeting his natural needs or of satisfying his appetite, we find only purely animal function: if he has sensations, they do not give rise to ideas; he does not even have the faculty of comparing them among themselves. One would say that there is no connection between his mind and his body, and that he reflects on nothing; consequently, he has no discernment, no imagination, no memory. This state of imbecility is reflected in his gaze. (Qtd Lane 41-42)

Through the creation and use of such stereotypes and the establishment of discursive regimes the subjectivity of the wild child was being constructed and modified. Some of the discourses which actively constructed Victor's subjectivity included: legal, educational, medical, sexual, sociological and psychological discourses. Catherine Belsey writes that subjectivity "is linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates" (qtd Cranny-Francis 7). Thus Victor was scrutinised and became the subject of a discursive practice based on the phenomenon of the wild child which in turn provides a structural model for considering the discursive construction of wild children in Victorian literature.

It could well be argued that there are multiple representations of wild children in Victorian literature, from the rebellious or non-conventional figures in Dickens and

Charlotte Brontë, to characters such as Kipling's Mowgli in *The Jungle Books*. In many ways Mowgli most closely reflects Itard's earlier model of the wild child. Like Victor Mowgli is represented as a capable and adaptable jungle dweller whose physicality is reminiscent of his surroundings and upbringing. Furthermore, like all jungle animals in the novel, Mowgli is innocent of the evil brought about by acquisition and greed, both of which are very human traits (Paffard 94). Mowgli's innocence, however, is more than just a state of ignorance or unknowingness, it represents instead a state of sexual innocence. It is not until the final chapter titled "The Spring Running" that Mowgli is able, in a limited fashion, to identify his frustrated sexuality upon seeing a girl. This marks the final turning point in the novel as Mowgli, in order to overcome his sexual frustration, must now leave the jungle and rejoin human society and in so doing rescind his innocence.

While Mowgli reflects many of the Romantic notions embedded within Itard's earlier model of the wild child, there are also obvious differences between Itard's representation of Victor and Kipling's representation of Mowgli. For example, unlike Victor who had difficulties communicating, Mowgli is fluent in the many languages of the jungle and willingly uses the "Master Words" to tame and appease all possible enemies. Furthermore during his brief foray into human society Mowgli quickly acquires the language by imitating the words of others (Kipling 61).

Another obvious difference is the way in which the two authors depict their subject. Victor is generally revealed as an individual whose behaviour and ability to reason is only slightly better than that of an animal. Mowgli conversely is "undoubtedly the young "sahib" of the jungle" (Paffard 92), a "noble savage." A depiction at odds with Victor's representation as an "ignoble savage." Complying with the prototype of the "noble savage" Mowgli is virtuous, young, beautiful, brave, a fine warrior and has been educated in the ways of humans and the jungle by Baloo. As James Harrison has pointed out Mowgli in all of his noble savagery resembles Adam, and his life among the animals has strong Edenic connotations from the outset (77). Mowgli is described by his foster mother as a "Godling of the Woods . . . strong, tall, and beautiful, his long black hair sweeping over his shoulders, the knife swinging at his neck, and his head crowned with a wreath of white jasmine" (Kipling 370-71). Mowgli's departure from the jungle follows his sighting of a village "girl in a white cloth," an image which left him "sighing" (375). The equation of Mowgli with the biblical Adam leads to an equation of the village girl with Eve, a figure who has traditionally represented both sexual knowledge and corruption. It therefore seems almost inevitable that Mowgli, after being tempted by this sight, should leave the Edenic jungle to rejoin human society.

In the century intervening between the scientific studies and the reports written by theorists on Victor's status as a "wild child" and Kipling's fictional depiction of Mowgli in *The Jungle Books*, there were obviously many social changes and textual influences which altered at least Kipling's understanding and concept of what was a "wild child." In creating Mowgli and many of the characters and stories within *The Jungle Books* Kipling clearly had many textual influences; as Mark Paffard explains, the Mowgli stories "read rather like *Paradise Lost*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Emile* rolled into one" (93). However, as Paffard argues, one of the strongest influences on Kipling's text was Darwin's theory of evolution:

A major effect of the theory of evolution . . . was to unsettle the Victorian confidence in all kinds of "progress." If civilisation was the latest stage not of conscious human endeavour so much as of the struggle for survival, there could be far less certainty that progress as a whole was universally beneficial, and "civilisation" itself could not be comfortably taken as the conquest of a mere animal existence if it might be no more than a development from it. (96)

In adopting many of these principles Kipling created a jungle with laws and rules that were as complex as human society. When Mowgli must finally leave the jungle and rejoin human society, Kipling emphasises this migration not as something progressive, a movement to a better or more civilised state, but rather as a journey into something different and strange. Indeed human society is in many ways depicted as more degenerate, hostile and base than the jungle or its occupants could ever be. The difference between the wild child and his relationship with human society in Dr Itard's study of Victor and Kipling's depiction of Mowgli is marked. In the eyes of Dr Itard Victor's capture and training were progressive, humane acts which were intended as a method of retraining him to discard his animalistic behaviour and attain instead a level of civilised decorum and human understanding.

Thus Kipling's representations of wild children, initially in Mowgli and later in the figure of Kim, undoubtedly differed from the model established by Itard. Itard's study of Victor provided a structural model for the depiction of wild children which included the need to connect the child to the animal-like state evident in his behaviour, psychology and physicality. In so doing Itard created out of Victor an ignoble savage whose ability to reason and comprehend were minimal. Essential to Itard's model was the concept of innocence which encompassed both a state of naiveté or unknowingness and sexual innocence. In *The Jungle Books* Mowgli is also characterised as sexually innocent, and in a rewriting of the Edenic narrative his departure from the jungle follows his interest in a girl. Despite this similarity Kipling's novel modifies Itard's model by challenging earlier representations of wild children as individuals without reason who are driven by animal instincts. Mowgli, and for that matter all of the jungle animals, are not only able to reason but have an intellect and a sense of fairness far superior to that of their human neighbours. Furthermore Kipling's depiction of Mowgli closely resembles the Romantic models of the noble savage and thus clearly diverges from Itard's model of ignoble savagery.

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