The social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Jaqueline Wilson's 'The illustrated mum'.

The idea of childhood is arguably a new concept, one that is ever changing through time and culture, otherwise explained by James et al (2004, p.13), who claims societal views differ across and between cultures and generations. There is no one set definition or experience of childhood, as supported by Coster (2007, p. 3), who claims childhood is dependent on the nature of a society into which an individual is born.

Influential work by Ariés (1996, p.125) states that during the middle ages, as soon as the child no longer relied on continuous care from their mother, they entered adult society. Works also by Ariés, cited in Lowe (2009, p. 22) supports the idea of childhood being a modern concept, claiming that medieval society viewed children as miniature adults, and childhood as not being recognised as a period distinctively different from that of adulthood. Through the medium of art, we can understand the dominant ideas of childhood at the time; Ariés' concept of the 'miniature adult' is emphasised through medieval paintings of children, largely depicted taking on appearances and mannerisms of those typically displayed on adults.

One of the first generalised ideas of childhood being seen as something dissimilar to adulthood came about in the seventeenth century; As supported by Ariés, cited in Lowe (2009, p.22), who claims people of middle classes began a new usage of the term 'child', and childhood came to assume some of its modern meanings. This idea is further supported by McDowall Clark (2010, p. 19), stating that in this same

period, childhood began to be more recognised with special clothing, books and playthings produced for children.

In this essay, the ideas of the social construction of childhood will be explored in relation to key historical moments, specifically the industrial revolution and how this became a pivotal point in the views and treatment of children in the United Kingdom. According to Barban (2005) children's literature reflects the values adopted by society at the time of the book's writing; With this statement in mind, this essay will also discuss ideas of childhood and dominant discourses in 'The illustrated mum', first published in 1999, by Jaqueline Wilson, as well as key themes of mental illness and poverty. It will be concluded with a brief summary on what has been discussed in the essay, as well as how this all may link to practice.

The industrial revolution is arguably one of the most influential moments in history that shaped the way we view children today. Before the industrial revolution, children mostly worked alongside their families in the cottage industry. Boys typically worked with their fathers in agricultural jobs and girls participating in domestic chores with their mothers.

The 1760's marked the beginning of the industrial revolution in Britain and saw many families of a poorer class moving to cities, seeking work opportunities. Otherwise stated by Tuttle (2018), children who had worked on farms, in their homes, or in domestic workshops began to work away from home in textile mills and mines in the late 18th century.

Growing industries utilised children from the early age of four as cheap labour to rapidly expand their wealth, as supported by History Crunch (2016) who claim children as young as four years old were often employed in factories and mines. According to British Library (No Date) Children were on average five times cheaper to employ than adults and were expected to work the same hours.

Philanthropist Anthony Ashley Cooper, formally known as the 7th Earl of Shaftsbury became a very important figure in the fight to change treatment of children and the severity of child labour.

Following no action being taken from the 1831 Factory act, which aimed to lessen the working hours for children under the age of eighteen to twelve hours a day, The Saddlers Commission: report on child labour (1832) was issued by British parliament. The report conducted by Michael Thomas Sadler, a Tory member of parliament, saw outcry amongst the general public and from Lord Shaftsbury himself, as it detailed the inhumane working schedules and conditions children faced. One particular testimony stated that from the age of ten, the worker faced sixteen-hour shifts, daily, having one forty-minute break for dinner at noon.

In 1833, Lord Shaftesbury became the leader of the factory reform movement in the house of commons and began a harsher campaign for a new Factory Act. After a failed attempt to pass the act in July 1833, the government passed a new factory act

in August of the same year, after admitting action needed to be enforced on the protection of children.

The Factory Act (1833) detailed that children under the age of nine were not permitted to work, children aged thirteen-eighteen could work a shift of up to twelve hours, children must participate in two hours of schooling a day and factory inspectors were to be employed to see the law was being enforced by the industries.

Lord Shaftesbury continued to fight for rights of children and in 1842 helped pass the Mines and Collieries Bill, this prohibited all women and girls from working in mines, as well as boys under the age of ten. This movement saw backlash by industry owners, with claims that lessening child labour will see the collapse of the coal industry. As supported by McDowall Clark (2010, p. 23), child labour contributed to Britain's industrial success and was used as an argument against control. Opponents of legislation claimed that child labour was essential to ensure the country could remain competitive in an international market.

Followers of the romantic discourse share some of the same ideologies as Lord Shaftsbury, in relation to children needing protection. According to British Library (2014) by the mid eighteenth century, the religious way of thinking about childhood became outdated and more modern ideas of innocence, creativity and freedom had been introduced.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is on of the most notable authors in relation to the romantic perceptions of childhood. His book Emile, as described by Gabriel (2010, p. 143) represents his ideal boy, who should not learn to read until after he turned twelve years old and should learn by his own interests and experiences in the natural world.

The romantic discourse emerged in the eighteenth century and famously rejected the puritan's beliefs of original sin. According to Gabriel (2010, p. 143) the romantics believe that children, as innocents, should be left to respond to nature, be sheltered from adult vices and be protected from prejudices of social institutions.

Jaqueline Wilson offers support and challenges to this discourse in her 1999 book 'The illustrated mum'. Wilson details issues of adult mental illness and poverty, in context of the impacts this has on children, as well as emphasising children's natural intellect and instincts; Posing the question that maybe, as adults, sometimes we can undermine children's natural abilities. This book follows mother, Marigold who suffers from severe mental health issues and her two young children, Star and Dolphin.

Wilson briefly shows support for the romantic discourse, in the form of character Micky, the father of Marigold's oldest daughter, Star. Wilson's character (2008, p. 114) states that Star cannot go out and do the shopping, implying he believes she is too young to do so. This shares the same beliefs of the romantic discourse, in the idea that the adult should protect the child from adult behaviours and support them in their innocence of being just a child.

Wilson challenges the romantic discourse throughout the book, specifically on the idea of children being sheltered from the vices of adults. Wilson debates this idea through a key theme of mental illness, as this was a large topic for critics during the period of writing and original publication. An article from The Guardian (2011) shares findings from a 1994 report, stating that approximately one in six people believe a main cause of mental illness is lack of self-discipline and willpower.

Wilson (2008, p. 7) explains Dolphin's reflections of her mother's behaviour, 'Marigold started going weird again on her birthday. Star remembered that birthdays were often bad times, so we had tried really hard'. Here, Wilson portrays the young children as thoughtful and aware of their mother's illness. This idea is strengthened when Dolphin explains how she views her mother's brain, in Wilson (2008, p. 50), stating 'I pictured it bright pink and purple, glowing inside her head. I could almost see the wires sparking so that silver stars exploded behind her eyes'. Here, Wilson portrays Dolphin of having a beautiful, yet naive way of thinking about her mother's condition; It is important to note that this is her child-like way of recognising Marigold's brain is different, and that she struggles with her mental health.

Star and Dolphin seem to have grown up quickly to support their mother and take over many responsibilities, such as shopping for food, as mentioned by Wilson's character, Dolphin (2008, p. 114), who claims 'Star had done the shopping ever since I could remember'. The romantic's idea of childhood being corrupted by exposure of adult concepts is questioned when Dolphin and Star display typical

child-like mannerisms and activities, such as playing television and hairdressers (2008, p. 25-26), despite being exposed to such vices.

The romantic discourse is again challenged by Wilson as she further defies the idea of children needing protection from adults and their vices, (2008, p. 208) '"im sorry," I said. It was such a silly small word for what I felt'. It can be argued that the romantic discourse lessens adult's expectations of children capabilities. This quote shows that through experiencing her mother's illness and addictions, Dolphin understands a wide range of emotions, such as sympathy and understands the complexity of the situation.

The beliefs of the puritanical discourse are of contrast to that of the romantics. The puritanical discourse was made popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the small, yet dominant Evangelicalism movement, with origins dating back to the early 1700's. According to The Atlantic (2015), the Evangelic movement is committed to the Christian gospel message that Jesus Christ is the saviour of humanity.

Attitudes towards children in the puritanical discourse are those enforced by the idea that everyone is born instinctively evil and concepts of the original sin. According to Gabriel (2010, p. 145) adults of the puritanical movement had to break the wills of stubborn children, for their own good.

Teaching and creating an understanding of the bible to one's child is the most crucial belief system in lessening the children's natural born sin, as supported by McDowall Clark (2010, p. 19), 'Children were expected to learn prayers and the catechism by heart and the prime reason for learning to read was so as to be able to read the Bible.'

The ultimate belief of puritans is that, through strict control and enforcing beliefs of the bible upon the child, it shall be enlightened by the teachings of Jesus Christ, meaning the adult may go to heaven. Otherwise explained by Gabriel (2010, p. 145), 'the prospect of heaven and the threat of hell were major sources of motivation in their attempts to 'form the minds' of their own children.' There is a moral argument as to whether it is right or not to believe a child is born evil, and whether it is just to shape ideas and beliefs of children through one's personal goal of going to heaven or one's own fear of going to hell.

Thomas (2013, p. 21) theorises that the puritanical discourse is 'most evident when children and circumstances place them beyond the realm of 'proper' and 'normal' children or childhoods.' This belief will be questioned in context of the illustrated mum.

It is evident that Star and Dolphin have an unusual relationship with their mother. Wilson's characters conflict against the views of the puritanical discourse and their beliefs that children must be controlled by their parental figures, in order for the child to develop into a good person. Marigold isn't the typical role model as she

struggles to prioritise certain important situations, evidenced by their neighbour, Mrs Luft (2008, p. 20). '' Some people take a pride in paying their bills on time. Others are down-right feckless. Spend, spend, spend – and lets the state fork out for her and her children". Here, Mrs Luft shares her frustration about Marigold seeming to not care about paying bills, clearly lacking an understanding of Marigold's unique situation. During the 1990's there was growing conflict between people of lower and higher-class systems as the gap in wealth continued to increase. According to Gordon et al (2000, p. 43) between 1983 and 1999, the average income rose by fifty-one per cent. This increase was not shared equally as the incomes and wealth of the 'richest' people increased considerably, while the incomes and wealth of the 'poorest' declined.

The views of Mrs Luft play into typical, harmful stereotypes of people living in poverty, specifically around ideas of laziness; As stated by Quinn et al (2010, p.379) 'stereotype-relevant situations place targets of stereotypes in an uncomfortable predicament that can lead to poorer performance outcomes.' This view on stereotypes may offer some explanations as to why Marigold behaves in certain ways. With Marigold having to deal with other people's negative perceptions of herself, as well as her own, it is understandable that her actions may sometimes be irrational and may also fit into these stereotypical behaviours of poverty-stricken people.

Wilson's character, Mrs Luft is consistently perceived negatively throughout the book as she holds similar beliefs to those of the puritans, specifically around ideas of

control. It may be argued that Wilson has consciously chose to portray her negatively as at the time of writing, society favoured a more romantic approach to thinking about children and childhood, as parents had increasingly become more concerned about child safety. This idea is supported by Ayre (2001), who claims that developments in digital media helped create a climate of fear, blame and mistrust, which seems to have become endemic within the field of child protection.
Mrs Luft views both Star and Dolphin as troubled or naughty children; With using language such as 'I have told you girls enough times!' (2008, p. 37) and 'don't you dare' (2008, p.191), Mrs Luft is implying that she is at a state of authority over the girls, and it is her place to give out orders of control, amongst the belief that they need to be disciplined.

Star and Dolphin are very complex, young girls and both create different conversations against the puritanical discourse. As star is the eldest daughter, she takes on many responsibilities that Marigold should be doing but will not, due to her alcohol addictions and mental illness, as explained by Dolphin (2008, p. 17) who claims 'Star was always the one who told Marigold what to do.' Although Star typically displays attitudes of maturity and understanding, she can also act irrationally, an example being 'Maybe I am growing up. When are you going to grow up, Marigold?' (2008, p. 17). Here, Star shares her frustrations of not having a role model figure in her life and having to be responsible for household chores and her younger sister. Another example being 'She wouldn't let Marigold kiss her goodbye. I kissed her twice instead'. (2008, p. 92). This quotation shares the differences of the two girls and how they act in relation to not having a parental figure to control and

guide them. Star acts selfishly sometimes, showing dislike towards her mother for not being stereotypical, whereas Dolphin always acts from kindness and concern.

Dolphin is a very emotional character, criticising the puritanical discourse's beliefs of 'natural evil' as even though she does not have a role model figure to guide her, she has innate capabilities of kindness and good. This idea is supported by Wilson (2008, p. 13), when Dolphin tries to comfort her Mother, 'You're the best ever mum. Please don't cry again'.

In this essay, it can be concluded that the definition of childhood and its social constructing nature can be broad and reinterpreted over time and through different cultures. The impacts of the industrial revolution have been discussed, focusing on moral concepts of child labour, specifically that of the views of Lord Shaftesbury.

The romantic discourse has also been discussed, in relation to child exposure of adult behaviours and the argument as to whether or not the romantic approach lessens expectations of child abilities. It can be concluded that exposure to such behaviours can be positive, as this gives the child a broader understanding of the complexities of the world and other people. This discourse has lasting effects on practice, emphasising the needs of safety and risk assessments. Stated in the EYFS (DfE, 2017, p. 16), providers must implement policy and procedures to safe guard children and also have necessary requirements in keeping children safe, this includes 'ensure the suitability of adults who have contact with children; promote good health; manage behaviour; and maintain records'.

Lastly, the puritanical discourse has been discussed, specifically around ideas of natural born sin and parental controls. To conclude, it has been evidenced through the two characters, Star and Dolphin, that each child is unique and can display a wide range of emotions, based on different circumstances. Dolphin defies the expectations of evil, as even though she is faced with hardships and lacks parental control, she acts from kindness and consideration. The puritanical discourse has effects on practice around ideas that learning from a young age, certain behaviours can lead to rewards or punishments. Having bad behaviours may lead to consequences, as explained in Babcock Prime (2019, p. 8) If a consequence is used, it must be something a child does not wish to do, in order for them to recognise negative behaviours. It is also mentioned that a practitioner should never dwell on such negative behaviours and instead, look out for positive ones. As explained Babcock Prime (2019, p. 7) good behaviours from young children can lead to rewards such as stickers, achievement charts, verbal praise and more responsibilities, such as choosing activities and being a special helper.

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