

“The Curve of an Emotion”

A Study of Change in the Portrayal of Children and
Childhood in the Literature of James Joyce

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Abstract

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Literary theorists and social historians consider fictional texts to be important for the study of children and childhood. James Joyce's fiction is considered important for understanding Irish childhoods, and Joyce's portrayal of childhood is often deemed unchanging within the major themes until the distinction between adults and children breaks down in *Finnegans Wake*. However, no extended studies of children or childhood in Joyce's fiction exist, and while Joyce scholars generally consider the literary child in Joyce's fiction to be an historical artefact within Joycean aesthetics, there exists only a limited scholarly engagement with the topic after *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This thesis seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the depiction of children and childhood in all of Joyce's major works of fiction up until *Finnegans Wake*.

This thesis is structured chronologically, beginning with *Dubliners* and finishing with *Ulysses*. The methodology used is a dialectical discussion between Joyce's texts and the social historical account. By applying this approach, each of Joyce's texts has presented unique theoretical problems for the study of children and childhood. Accordingly, an eclectic approach is employed drawing from theoretical models of the child that span from classical antiquity to contemporary Marxist perspectives. Thus, the close readings, each presented as stand-alone articles, serve to demonstrate that the topic of children and childhood is treated uniquely by Joyce in each work of fiction before *Finnegans Wake*.

These readings work towards a new way of viewing childhood in Joyce's fiction by providing evidence of an uninterrupted trajectory of change that informs the major themes. However, this does not gesture towards radical change. Rather, it is suggested that it is more useful to consider change as following a curve of revised sensibility that reaches a vertex in *Ulysses*. Accordingly, it is argued that even with the wide arch of interpretational possibilities discussed in this thesis, the literary child in *Ulysses* undermines, but does not radically break free from, adult perspectives.