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The Victorian Little Girl: Constructions of Childhood and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century England's Photographic Records

Abstract

Nineteenth-century England demonstrated a peculiar attitude toward the child. On the one hand, eighteenth-century Romanticism had brought about the idea of the Romantic Child, an idealized figure characterized by being inherently pure, innocent, and divine. On the other hand, the child was subject to intense sexualization and objectification, especially the "little girl," an eroticized figure constructed by sociocultural tendencies and convention rather than being biologically determined, i.e., defined according to her age. The coexistence of these deeply ambivalent ways of perceiving the female child are, in turn, related to restrictive gender norms, with the middle- and upper-class Victorian woman idealized as the 'angel in the house.' As these women were expected to be confined to the domestic sphere and educate their children, a cult of childhood arose, along with philosophical incursions into the psychological development of the child. Taking into consideration this context, this article aims, firstly, to analyze how the child (in general) and the female child (in particular) is, thus, constructed according to the Victorian frame of mind since she is not only perceived paradoxically but is also merged with the 'angel in the house' herself in the collective imaginary, being simultaneously an angel devoid of sexuality, and a woman-to-be on the verge of manifesting sexual desire. Secondly, the article will explore how these constructions are portrayed in photographic records of the time, namely in the works of Charles Dodgson and Julia Margaret Cameron, so as to understand how this medium conveyed these particular perspectives on childhood. An analysis of the selected photographs—all of them portraying children—allows us to conclude that eroticism, innocence, and womanhood are simultaneously represented in them,

and, as such, photography is capable of exemplarily illustrating the contradictory and gendered discourses on childhood during the Victorian Era.

Keywords: Victorian Era, childhood, femininity, photography

The so-called Victorian Era[1] was an extremely complex and ambivalent period, with a society that "valued stability, tradition, authority and grandeur in public life" (Moran 1) and ensured the upholding of strict codes of conduct which emphasized decency, respectability, duty, modesty, and self-restraint. There was, however, a gap between "the period's self-projection as confident, accomplished and 'proper,' and its untidy reality, marked by insecurities and doubt arising from vast social and intellectual change" (Moran 2). Amid this uncertain sociocultural context, Victorians evinced a peculiar and equally ambiguous attitude toward the child: on the one hand, eighteenth-century Romanticism had brought about the idea of the pure and innocent Romantic Child; on the other hand, this same child was subjected to an intense sexualization and objectification, especially the female child, an eroticized figure constructed by conventional and sociocultural tendencies of the time, rather than being biologically determined, i.e., defined according to her age, such as Steven Mintz reflects when stating that childhood is not an "unchanging biological stage of life but is, rather, a social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time" (viii). As such, the many aspects of childhood— "including children's household responsibilities, play, schooling, relationships with parents and peers, and paths to adulthood—has been transformed over the past (…) centuries" (Mintz viii). A similar perspective is put forth by James Kincaid in his work Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting, with the author arguing that "we have slowly succumbed to the collective illusion that the child is a biological category" while still managing to "hold that category open so that we can construe it any way we like" (53). As a result, the image of the child in the collective imaginary of a society, as well as the way in which it is perceived, is highly variable and dependent on a myriad of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious factors.

This article aims, firstly, to present an overview of the constructions of childhood and femininity in the Victorian Era, taking into consideration the concept of the 'angel in the house' so as to understand its sociocultural relevance and how it relates to the ambivalent image of the child which was disseminated in the Victorian collective imaginary and portrayed in numerous artistic creations

of the time. Secondly, it aims to examine a number of photographs by two prominent photographers of the Victorian Era: Charles Dodgson, best known by his pseudonym Lewis Carroll, having written the well-known Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Alice Through the Looking Glass, and Julia Margaret Cameron, an important portraitist—especially because she was a woman in a male-dominated artistic and social sphere—who was widely known among London's social and cultural elite. This research's aim is, therefore, to demonstrate how the children presented in the photographs in the analysis are perceived as innocent and pure while simultaneously being overtly sexualized and objectified, thus conveying the deeply paradoxical perspective on childhood that was conventional at the time.

Regarding the Victorian idea of femininity, it is important to mention that the term 'angel in the house,' which first appears in Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name dating from 1854, refers to a Victorian archetype and mythification of the self, defining an ideal and a code of conduct to be followed by upper- and middle-class women of the time, who should appear passive and fragile, cultivate a delicate beauty, and dedicate their time to others, consequently annulling themselves in a demonstration of self-sacrifice and abnegation. Among many philosophers, John Ruskin, whose works became deeply influential in the Victorian Era, expressed his opinion on the role women should play in the restoration of British values in his well-known essay "Of Queens' Gardens" (included in his work Sesame and Lilies, published in 1865), considering them to possess an inferior intellectual capacity than men, suited "not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (21), and should display goodness and wisdom, the latter being used "not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side" (23); additionally, an emphasis is put on domesticity and the idea of the home as a place sheltered from disruptive outside forces:

This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home. (21)

As it can be noted, and as Sarah Fitzpatrick states in her article "Separate Spheres: A Closer Look at Ideological Gender Roles in Victorian England through the Sensation Novel," Ruskin "suggests an innate, possibly even biological, imperative that pushes men out into the world and keeps women in the home, arguing that these arenas are where their respective natural talents lie" (Fitzpatrick 2). This sharp distinction takes into account another archetypal figure that featured prominently in the Victorian middle- and upper-class imaginary: the gentleman, which presented an ideal of Victorian masculinity in direct opposition to the 'angel in the house,' defining a set of traits that should ideally be followed by men, who should present themselves as honorable and virtuous, energetic and strong, and display resilience, determination, and common sense, rising financially through honest and healthy competition (Terci 10; Ramos 124, 175, 193-95). Good work performance would guarantee a consequent good reputation that would, in turn, assure their ability to provide for the family, including wife and children, and ideally spend a part of their income for the benefit of society, demonstrating a philanthropic and benevolent spirit. However, men should not present themselves as overly sentimental, curbing their emotions and sensitivity, with the Victorians applying the epithet "manly" to qualify masculinity in the sense of a man displaying a strong character and resilience, as opposed to the concept of sentimentality (Ramos 126). However, like many other sociocultural constructions of the time, the figure of the gentleman was characterized by its ambiguous nature, which can be pinpointed when analyzing the requirements for a man to be considered a gentleman, as there was no established code for this: members of the British aristocracy were considered inherently gentlemen by right of birth, however, it was also emphasized that a man's birth did not determine whether he was considered a gentleman or not, especially within the industrial and mercantile elites, whose individuals attributed their gentlemanliness to the effort they put into establishing and maintaining business relations and influence, as well as the monetary gains that came from it. As for clergymen, soldiers, and members of Parliament, these were considered gentlemanly in the course of the recognized virtue of their occupation, while other professions, although socially respectable, were not considered sufficient to automatically confer the gentleman status to the professional (Terci 10).

Many Victorian thinkers besides Ruskin, however, came to comment on this conventional distinction between the sexes and the condition of women, albeit expressing a different view. John

Stuart Mill, in his famous work The Subjection of Women (1869), also states that women were relegated to a secondary role in Victorian society, with a doctrine that envisioned them as being "under an obligation to obey" (5), unfit for ruling (5), without political agency—namely through suffrage (59), and slaves in their own home (89). However, Mill, with a utilitarian perspective in mind—one that proclaimed the enrichment and development of society as well as individual well-being—suggested, in the same work, that "the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and (…) one of the chief hindrances to human improvement" (Subjection 3). Inspired by his stepdaughter Helen Taylor and the "innumerable conversations and discussions on [the] topic" (Autobiography ch. 7) with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, Stuart Mill came to irreverently support greater freedom for women on the basis that "the natural differences between the two sexes" (Subjection 27) are but a fallacy, as the medical practitioners of the time constructed their numerous observations based on conventional assumptions, with little testimony on the part of the women themselves.

Nevertheless, the ideology of separate spheres, along with the idea that women should be unfailingly faithful to their husbands, taking care of the house and children in their absence while showing obedience, submission, humility, and kindness in their presence, would undoubtedly connect the repression of the feminine gender with the construction of childhood. As the home was the domain of women and the education of children her responsibility, an extreme emphasis was put on childhood as an idyllic stage of life, and children were, thus, regarded as outcasts in the adult social spheres, in need of constant protection.

Furthermore, the emotional, sexual, and social repression required to live up to the standards personified by the archetypal figures of the 'angel in the house' and the gentleman largely explains the need to isolate the child in a separate sphere from the adult, similar to the separation between genders or between public and private life, as explained. The perception of children as "a refuge from the trap represented by the web of expectations surrounding adulthood," as Claudia Nelson describes (8), places them as an outsider in the adult world and, therefore, in need of protection. This dynamic is manifested, for instance, in the different divisions within Victorian homes, especially the nursery, which, as Abigail Nusbaum states in her dissertation on Victorian domesticity, was a revered space, with much of the action taking place in that division; there was,

also, the issue of the transition of the child within the home, since the nursery had no accompanying space, thus creating a problem when it was time for the child to leave childhood behind (7). The absence of a space that accompanies the child's natural development is also symptomatic of the adults' inability to respond to what for them was undesirable but inevitable—the children's growth and their entry into adulthood and the public sphere. For the child, however, the passage from the idyllic and isolated space of the nursery to the ruthless and chaotic Victorian public life fostered, from an early age, the most diverse anxieties and the idea of loss and nostalgia.

Expectedly, on account of these social dynamics, the bond between women and children was so notable that the cultural construction of these two figures, as Helena Vasconcelos argues, became marked by ambiguity and a blurring between them, which came to be expressed in the figure of the "woman-child," another tendency of the century, in which childhood came to have a special and distinctive status (44). As children gained importance due to the fact that they were the image of purity and innocence or, in other words, of Beauty, in contrast to the ugliness of a mechanized and industrialized landscape, so did women come to be infantilized in a way that allowed them to be adored and sung about in verses which alluded to their fragility, purity, paleness, and gentleness (Vasconcelos 44). This idealization of childhood, with its purity and innocence, as Vasconcelos describes, came, in part, from the literary production of eighteenth-century Romanticism, which conveyed a very particular image of the child, contributing to its conceptual delimitation and definition as the so-called Romantic Child. Ann Rowland, in her work Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture, summarizes this cultural construction, stating that the Romantic Child "earns its sobriquet because it is essentially an idealized, nostalgic, sentimental figure of childhood," characterized by "innocence, imagination, nature and primitivism, qualities associated with Romanticism that survive today in very few cultural figures, the child being one of the most enduring" (9). This was the child written by William Wordsworth in The Prelude or the "Lucy poems," by William Blake in his renowned work Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, or by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight," inspired, doubtlessly, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Émile, ou de L'Éducation, published in 1762, which advocated for the monitoring of the development of the child, with close attention to a number of things, mostly

disregarded at the time, such as the change of teeth (69), the learning of the first steps (60) and personal hygiene (55), as well as the connection established with the outside world and with nature in particular, which Rousseau considered to be extremely important since it challenged and consequently developed the child's skills (47, 73-78).

However, the child was not merely perceived as an innocent being during the Victorian Era. As previously mentioned, society came to demonstrate yet another attitude toward children, especially female children, by eroticizing them and perceiving them as repositories of repressed sexual desires and fetishes, unfulfilled fantasies, and numerous anxieties, thus constructing a child that would be, ideally, shaped according to the adults' wishes. This comes into fruition partly from the construction of the Romantic Child by negation, as James Kincaid argues, stating that, for the Romantic poets, the child packaged a host of attributes that could be made into a poetics and a politics, being everything that the rational adult was not, gifted with spontaneity, imagination, and a divine quality, but that was as far as its positive attributes went; more prominent were the negatives, as "[t]he child was figured as free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, morality, and sexuality; liberated from 'the light of common day'" (15). Thus, innocence is not seen as a positive quality but rather as a lack of something, in this case, sexual knowledge and desire. Constructing the child as such produces an idea of absence, of a void that needs to be filled and bridged in some way. Catharine Lumby shares this perspective in her article "Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality," pointing out that the contradictory discourses on childhood during the Victorian Era are, indeed, constructed through negation; on the one hand, children are portrayed as pure beings excluded from the adult sphere and yet, on the other hand, they are always represented as being on the threshold of becoming sexual (5). From this duality, children acquire their seductive quality, with an innocence that is about to end and a latent sexuality that is close to emerging, with, as Steven Marcus argues, no "middle ground or connection" (15) between these two extreme states that form Victorians' double consciousness.

If the idea of innocence is solely associated with a lack of sexuality, it is inevitable, as James Kincaid further explains, that this negation would only bring out precisely what one is trying to banish since the idea of the child became inevitably dominated by sexuality—"negative sexuality, of course, but sexuality all the same"—and innocence came to mean "little more than virginity

coupled with ignorance" (55). As such, the child was an entity not capable of practicing or inciting sex, and thus, the irony becomes apparent: "[D]efining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we're trying to banish" (Kincaid 55). It is this ambiguous conception of the child that should be taken into account when analyzing Victorian portrayals of childhood, namely in photography.

Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, photography contributed to this obsession with the child, offering a new way of portraying childhood that would, naturally, evince this deep ambivalence, further contributing to the eroticization and objectification of the child. The postmortem photography of children who had recently died, for instance, demonstrates a morbid desire to preserve childhood and a refusal of its finitude while also mitigating the fear and anxiety regarding change, loss, and death, as the photograph is capable of fixing a moment in eternity. It is, therefore, the perfect object of fetishism. It is certainly not coincidental that the modern conception of childhood, with its paradoxes and ambiguities, was consolidated precisely when photography was beginning to emerge, as Carol Mavor points out in her work Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs:

> *[U]nlike any era before, we have photographic records of Alice, of Carroll, of the fashions of the time, of Queen Victoria herself: photography was invented hand-in-hand with our modern conception of childhood. The child and the photography were commodified, fetishized, developed alongside each other: they were laminated and framed as one. (3)*

Commodification is also one way of making sense of the intersection between childhood and photography since, with the arrival of handheld cameras and the opening of photography studios, children came to be viewed often and, inevitably but probably unconsciously, as a commercial product, with the (often) unauthorized circulation of photographs within many social circles. As Sarah Parsons and Vanessa Nicholas state, Victorian studios did not only employ personnel merely to take photographs but, instead, "created image repositories, sold photographs, promoted their services and ushered in a culture of display that drew on their repositories. Within this crucial context, portraits were commodities, and that fact shaped the period's wider norms of photographic consumption and circulation" (228). Photojournalism also flourished at the end of the nineteenth

century (in journals such as the Strand or the Illustrated London), contributing to a wider circulation of the photographed image, as well as its use by the police as a means to record the faces of those in custody (Daly 53-54). Photography's impact on Victorian society would also foster the obsession with this new way of (seemingly) representing reality, especially because it had the potential to engage with other art forms, many of them "far beyond the visual arts," challenging "the definitions of central aesthetic categories like realism, authenticity, authorship, time, memory, and the nature of art" (Novak 1276). Besides, photography also seemed to inspire a number of writers—including Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, George Eliot, Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, H. G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, and Amy Levy—to engage with the very idea of photography in the most diverse ways, such as through criticism, appropriation, adaptation, parody and transformation (Novak 1276).

Inevitably, Charles Dodgson, later known as Lewis Carroll, would also be inspired by this medium. While Louis Daguerre was responsible for the invention of the eponymous daguerreotype and discovered how to make permanent the images of the camera obscura, and William Fox Talbot developed the calotype process, Dodgson would make use of the collodion or wet-plate method, which garnered a crop of new practitioners, including Julia Margaret Cameron, and shifted the focus from landscapes and architecture as photographed subjects to the portrait genre, although consisting of a time-consuming and complicated process, and long-exposure times that required children, for instance, to spend more than one minute stock-still (Robson 130-2). Being responsible for what is undoubtedly one of the best-known Victorian photographs, Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child, Dodgson would consistently make use of the collodion method. Taken in 1858, this photograph clearly evokes the contradictory attitudes of the Victorian adult toward the child. Possibly inspired by the poem "The Beggar Maid" (published in 1844 by Lord Alfred Tennyson), the photograph shows Alice Liddell partially naked, with one hand on her waist and the other in a supplicant gesture, accompanied by a seductive gaze; she is also wearing torn robes which discreetly show a nipple. This description undoubtedly evokes an eroticism based on an insinuating semi-exposure that gains expression through the hand on the waist, the exposed left nipple, and a provoking and enticing gaze. This eroticism is, however, accompanied by an innocence pertaining to the narrative brought forth by the photograph itself—this is a helpless and

innocent little girl who lives in poverty and is being forced, by the vicissitudes of life, to survive through her wit and cunning, assuming a seductive demeanor in order to convince the adult to help her.

The photograph is clearly constructed based on a role-play fantasy, presupposing the objectification of the child and articulation between the idealized childhood of the Romantics and the sexualization of this stage of life, concentrating in itself an imagery of eroticism, humiliation, repugnance, appreciation, pity, and fascination. Alice's beauty is ever present, not tainted in the least by what her representation implies—a girl belonging to the working classes—due to the performance of poverty, and not poverty in itself, that is operated in the photograph, since Alice is known to have belonged to the upper-middle class (Winchester 30-32). This role-play places the Victorian adult in the privileged role of the observer, fantasizing and constructing the child while distancing themselves from the harsh reality of the lower classes that mainly inhabited London's East End. These were mostly exempt from the orthodox and complex codes of behavior that governed the middle and upper classes, to which most photographers and photography enthusiasts belonged, and evinced the darker side of London's supposed cosmopolitanism. Living in extreme poverty, the working classes occupied dilapidated and overcrowded houses, traveled through dirty roads and streets that did not possess an efficient sanitation system, and subsisted on poverty food. As a result, illnesses were common and usually fatal, encompassing not only infections easily transmitted between people but also work-related injuries in a context where labor protection was almost non-existent and the conditions in the workhouses extremely degrading, with wages being highly variable and financially insufficient, forcing many workers into the life of crime (Moran 40-41).

However, still on the subject of Alice Liddell, and as it is widely known, Dodgson's most iconic child model took pride of place among the child-friends of the writer, inspiring him to create the Alice novels, and these narratives are also extremely paradoxical in their themes and the way their child protagonist Alice is constructed. Though Wonderland can be perceived as a paradisiacal island of the mind, where Alice can take refuge from the dullness of real life, there is also a tremendous amount of pressure put on the seven-year-old, namely by the numerous characters she encounters, all of whom "are far from being pleasant. Most of them are rude, indifferent and

aggressive in front of Alice. Alice is mistreated and belittled from time to time" (Aihong 129). In some way or another, they hinder her journey and subject her to conventional codes of conduct: those in the mad tea party, for instance, exclude her from a masculine circle, while the Duchess tries to convince her to become a mother; Humpty Dumpty and the Caterpillar try to lecture her while belittling her imagination and creativity, and the Red Queen stands as a metaphorical representation of Alice's future, being, as Dodgson himself described: "(…) cold and calm; (…) formal and strict, yet not unkindly; pedantic to the tenth degree, the concentrated essence of all governesses!" (Carroll, "Alice on the Stage"). Alice, then, oscillates between being a female child, who, by transgressing sociocultural expectations in her journey through Wonderland and the Looking Glass, is deliciously fascinating for the Victorian adult, and being a reminder of the adult sphere and the longing for childhood since she, too, ends up succumbing to the restrictive Victorian adulthood, as the endings of both novels suggest (Carroll, Alice's Adventures 141-44, 278).

Highly contrasting with the way Alice constantly moves throughout the novels is the process that the child models of Dodgson had to go through. As the collodion method required, "the subject of the portrait—a living, breathing fidgeting human being—had to be there, in place, seated in a formal and fixed position, ready to be photographed, while the potions were mixed and the camera prepared" (Winchester 51). To ask a child to remain in this position presented its challenges, but it was crucial to obtain the photographs that we presently have access to. However, the resulting photograph and the process itself inevitably objectified and sexualized the child due to their necessary immobility and the role of the photographer—the latter conceived the picture and had the ability to look at it whenever they pleased, thus enforcing the voyeuristic gaze of the adult, with the subjects "surrendering their images to [the photographer] for ever" (Woolf 241). In the particular case of Dodgson, and as Catherine Robson argues, the "effacement of the adult male appears to allow him to invoke the liberating fantasy of the little girl's power—to create a little girl" (141), who could remind him of his lost childhood and to serve as a repository of his possibly unfulfilled fantasies and anxieties, for enabling, in Nelson's words, "the same appreciation of erotic 'allure' as to love a woman, but without the potential for guilt," as the little girl would not "suppose herself a romantic object and thus [would] neither lose her girlhood nor ask anything of the man" (130).

With similar overtones to those displayed in Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child and emphasizing the signifying power of the immobile girl, Dodgson later photographed Evelyn Hatch, who became the subject of many of his photographs, along with her sister, Beatrice Hatch. The Portrait of Evelyn Hatch, taken in 1878, is a prime example. As Carol Mavor affirms, the photograph features a child whose pose recalls that of a courtesan (11). Her pose evokes passivity, innocence, hinted at by the absence of pubic hair, and vulnerability, especially by the way Evelyn exposes her waist and places her arms behind her head. Her gaze is, nonetheless, inviting and even animalistic, as if she was aware of the desire and longing that her primordial nudity could provoke and, additionally, fear. Quoting Mavor, "the animal hidden in Evelyn Hatch not only gives the image power but plays into the Victorian fear of the animal in woman. Animality ran riot in the bodies of the hysteric and the prostitute" (18).

Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood (1857) also plays with this duality between animal and human, revealing a young woman who possesses a distinctly predatory and seductive gaze and an assertive pose; she seems to mysteriously emerge from between a wall of overgrown vegetation, holding a basket, and leaving the observer wondering if she is, indeed, the Little Red Riding Hood or, on the contrary, the menacing and mischievous Wolf since "hers are the eyes of the wolf that has presumably just eaten her grandmother" (Mavor 29). Additionally, the open basket, unabashedly displaying its contents, is sexually suggestive, as well as the background with what is presumed to be a wall overfilled with vegetation, evoking the enclosed garden, symbolizing "the intimate areas of the female body" (Herder Dictionary 84). With her wolfish eyes, Agnes Grace establishes herself as a Little Red Riding Hood who seems to do well without the Woodcutter's help, for she displays a confidence that is simultaneously protective, inviting, and threatening, thus advising caution to those who approach. Agnes disrupts the expected order and familiar narrative of a much-recognized folktale (Robson 142). Innocence, then, intertwines with sensuality and aggressiveness to create a deliciously transgressive figure that is identified with Victorian outcasts so as to serve as a fantasy for the adult reader and observer. As was mentioned, Charles Dodgson had also photographed Evelyn's sister Beatrice and produced a similar result to the one that was to be observed later in Evelyn's portrait: Hatch, Beatrice (1873) shows the child naked, between waves and a distant cliff, with loose hair, a gaze which is both thoughtful and curious, and a small

hand caressing her leg, recalling a seductive mermaid and evoking the dangerous eroticism associated with these mythological, independent and sexually free creatures; curiously, this little girl is surrounded by a typically romantic landscape, thus disseminating the paradoxical perspective on childhood.

One other model frequently photographed by Dodgson may be addressed presently: Alexandra "Xie" Kitchin, daughter of George William Kitchin (a colleague of Dodgson's when he attended Christ Church) and who is recurrently photographed in oriental settings, such as in the photographs Tea Merchant (on duty) (1873) and Tea Merchant (off duty) (1873), among others. However, it is also worth mentioning The Prettiest Doll in the World (1870), a photograph that very much replicates the aura and imagery already presented in Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child, especially through the use of partial nudity, a torn dress which evokes carelessness or even violence (possibly sexual), and a seductive and defiant pose, emphasized by the emulsion peeling from the edges of the negative, framing her persona. However, it is mostly the title of the photograph itself that indicates a profound objectification of the child by using the word "doll." As mentioned, the photograph does not constitute a clean print but rather one that blatantly calls attention to the adult hands that manipulate it, along with the young woman stripped of her humanity and individuality, by associating her with a (man-made) doll.

The series of photographs of Alexandra as Penelope Boothby, taken in 1876, are also deeply ambivalent in the way their subject is put forth. Penelope Boothby was an icon of Romantic art in the eighteenth century, inspiring not only Charles Dodgson but also Henry Fuseli, John Everett Millais, and Thomas Banks, standing out as a visual representation of the Romantic Child, and serving as a model for the painter Joshua Reynolds who immortalized her in 1788, with an aura of innocence and purity, painting her in a characteristically passive pose, with rosy cheeks and in white and lacy clothes, surrounded by a typically Romantic landscape. In the photographs of Alexandra, in which Dodgson photographed her incarnating the person of Boothby, innocence seems, however, virtually nonexistent. Alexandra is clearly older than Boothby, and several parts of her body are exposed or covered by tight clothes, highlighting her body shape, something that is absent in Reynolds' painting. Also worth noting is the presence of dark colors in her clothing, subverting the white color typically used by young women, as counseled by Victorian etiquette

books. From the 1830s onward, these books came to be perceived as fundamental in Victorian society, especially for women, promoting social scrutiny and helping to maintain rigid codes of conduct, presenting an exhaustive set of codes of behavior that dictated the respectability, acceptance, and reputation of Victorian individuals on a social level, on any and all occasions. The Victorians should, with the help of these books, develop their inner self and their virtues, including honesty, purity of heart, modesty, and chastity; in the particular case of women, they were to learn what behaviors were to be adopted in various settings and which were considered appropriate for them, as well as what to wear in different occasions.[2] In this matter, an emphasis was placed on how women should ideally wear light colors. Jane Aster, author of Sensible Etiquette and Good Manners of the Best Society (1882), one among the numerous etiquette books of the time, counsels: “White tulle over white silk (or white lace), and bouquets of flowers (…) on the head, are the favourite dress of the young lady” (202).

The previously mentioned reclined pose was to be seen once again, such as in the photograph Xie (Ecksy) Kitchin partly in the Penelope Boothby dress, on a garden chair, with Japanese sunshade (1876), as well as the recurrent presence of dark colors. Furthermore, and as was common in several photographs by Dodgson, Alexandra is also associated with a stereotypical—albeit ambiguous—image of the Orient, which was very present in the Victorian imaginary. As Edward W. Said states in his renowned work Orientalism, and drawing on the perspectives of Edward William Lanea, the Victorian orientalist and translator who published works of paramount importance in understanding the British view of the Orient during the nineteenth century, “the Orient seemed to have offended sexual propriety; everything about the Orient—or at least Lane’s Orient-in-Egypt—exuded dangerous sex, threatened hygiene and domestic seemliness with an excessive ‘freedom of intercourse’” (167). The author clarifies that these Western perspectives about the Orient are problematic since they originate from an imperialist point of view, based on the exaggeration of the difference between cultures and the presumption of the superiority of the West (Said 1). As a European invention, the Orient thus came to be perceived in the Victorian collective imaginary as a place where Western conventions did not apply and therefore served as a repository of Victorian fantasies, being associated with romance, exotic beings, haunted memories, and landscapes and unforgettable experiences (Said 1). In this context, Alexandra Kitchin

becomes the target of this peculiar orientalization and fascination for the exotic, subsequently promoting certain constructions of femininity that served as a response to predominantly masculine anxieties related to repressed sexual desires, such as the Oriental Woman who, imagined as being wild, sexually powerful and independent, would fulfill the Victorian man's fantasies, offering him a seductive experience, free of social reprehension and extremely distinct from the experience offered by the ideally complacent Victorian woman.

Furthermore, as Lindsay Smith argues in her work Lewis Carroll: Photography on the Move, Dodgson was influenced not only by these preconceived notions of the Orient, existing and collectively disseminated during the Victorian Era, but also by a monumental trip he made to Russia by train, in the Summer of 1867, and accompanied by his lifelong friend and preacher Henry Parry Liddon, on what would be Dodgson's only time abroad (134). From March 1872, Dodgson would produce a number of photographs of children masquerading in ethnic costumes, based on encounters with a diverse range of ethnic groups during the trip, alongside representations included in Russian visiting cards (Smith, Lewis Carroll 134-135). As such, the photographer came to rehearse in his photographs "fantasies of racial, cultural and sexual difference through the visual intricacies of costume dramas and child masquerade," with his "dressing up or dressing down of the child" (Smith, "'Take Back Your Mink'" 371).

However, this fetichism surrounding the female child and the endless possibilities in her representation through photography was not a by-product of an exclusively male gaze. Julia Margaret Cameron is another well-known Victorian photographer whose works fall into the perspectives on childhood exposed in this article. Cameron came to be known as a photographer only in her late forties after receiving a camera as a gift from one of her daughters. After traveling between Calcutta and London, where she established herself among the upper social classes, Cameron eventually came to live in the Isle of Wight in Britain. Her self-promotion among the elites made her well-known in a world almost exclusively dominated by men, but her blurred photographs, or those on which fingerprints, scratches, and smudges were clearly visible, were subjected to negative criticism since they presented "errors" the so-called experienced photographers should address and avoid (Vicente; Pereira 121).

However, this blurriness that is so characteristic of Cameron's work conveys important meanings and symbolisms when considering the construction of the Victorian female child. It appears that the photographs have been touched all over, and the very entity of childhood has been smeared into them (Mavor 25), producing images that were dissensual because they defied the cleanliness and clearness that were majorly desired at a time when people were witnessing a revolution in the ways of portraying themselves and others. Despite this, Cameron's photographs of little children were "distinctly fleshy, dreamy, blurry, delightfully sloppy, otherworldly" (Mavor 25) and, as such, mimicking the very skin of children, and disclosing a notorious eroticism in their representation and availability as photographed subjects. One needs only to look at Spring (1865), which depicts an adult woman surrounded by two children, to see how sex, sexuality, and androgyny are overtly presented, as Carol Mavor suggests:

[O]ne is struck by the charming and seductive looks on the faces of the children – flirtatious really. And how about their beautiful skin, their unkempt precious hair (to be cut and saved later) and their tiny exposed shoulders, soft and round? It is an 'erotics of tininess.' (22)

This "erotics of tininess" also includes, as expected, exposed genitals, as well as a seemingly discrete hand that one of the children uses to vigorously clutch at the adult woman's clothes. The clash between the Romantic idealization of the child and their sexualization can be thoroughly seen in this photograph as a moving force that opposes the two very different notions about children that coexisted in the Victorian Era. On the one hand, the children, unlike Alexandra Kitchin, for instance, are surrounded by a vase of flowers and a background that resembles a bower, a frequent motif in William Wordsworth's poetry, as well as being dressed in white (with this color symbolizing the sum of all colors and, thus, the child's potential, purity and closeness to a divine state, as explained by Juan Eduardo Cirlot: "In Revelations, the righteous are dressed in white (...) Jesus as judge is represented with 'his head and his hair white like wool' (...) whiteness symbolizes the celestial state" (485), as well as by Chevalier and Gheerbrant: "White is the colour of purity (…), virginal whiteness" (1107). On the other hand, they are clearly sexualized by the gestures they are implied to be making, as well as their nakedness and a touch of savagery and

primitive sexuality in the way their hair flows wildly, their clothes crumpled, and their eyes inviting and seductive, yet menacing at the same time.

In a similar fashion, Florence/Study of St. John the Baptist (1872) shares most of these characteristics as well, from the voluptuousness of the female child portrayed to the way the implied gesture of her left hand is purposely ambiguous, leaving the viewer wondering if she is holding up or removing a shawl that barely covers her; similarly, her right hand spreads two fingers in a childlike gesture that is simultaneously erotic for what it opens up (Mavor 24-25). As Julian Cox suggests, Cameron's children test the notion of chaste eroticism by appearing in a half-clothed state and by the fleshiness of the photographs themselves (68), which characterize many of her works, including, besides Florence/Study of St. John the Baptist, photographs such as Florence, after the Manner of the Old Masters (1872), which shows the little girl clutching the roses to her chest, with the rose being representative of femininity, in particular, of female sexuality and genitalia (Frownfelter 4; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 814); Goodness (1864), where the child's genitals appear almost completely exposed, and her hands in a supplicant gesture (just like in Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child, thus evoking a similar narrative); Paul and Virginia (1864), again portraying half-naked children with wild hair and rugged clothes, and whose gazes appear to be threatening and inviting at the same time; The Double Star (1864), where two little girls kiss and touch each other, in what is perhaps one of the most sexually suggestive photographs of children in the Victorian Era; among others.

Cameron also comes to conceive The Shunamite Woman and Her Dead Son (1865), alluding to the theme of death, which figures prominently in Victorian art—including painting, literature, and photography—especially with the postmortem photography of both children and adults. The child death-bed scene, or the dead child, was "highly sentimentalized and emphasized the beauty and purity of death" while also helping to rationalize these deaths in Christian terms (Cox 69-70) and providing a "safe space" to observe objectified children—even more so due to their condition as immobile corpses, instead of living entities. The photograph, however, plays with both death and life by representing a dead child through a living model, appealing to a voyeuristic fantasy revolving around the desire to see this child model, who is not a little girl but a little boy, open his eyes and grace the viewer with an almost ethereal beauty. This appeal is, once again, closely related to the

sensuality in the photograph, in the opened thighs, the shirt which covers little of the boy's body, and his reclined pose. There is, then, a playful yet disturbing dynamic between the liveliness of the child, the sadness of his loss—the need to find consolation in the face of a dying or dead child, especially considering the high child mortality rate during the nineteenth century—and the (secret) opportunity to view and revel in the woman's "dead son" by means of an unsaid invitation in the form of the seductiveness of the boy. On another note, yet still of upmost importance, the photograph's imagery is also typically present in photographs of female children, and so this little boy is feminized, which is also evinced by his androgynous appearance. The viewer would certainly be doubtful whether or not this child was a little boy, and they are only informed of the child's gender by the photograph's title. Ultimately, as Carol Mavor concludes, this boy embodies death and, simultaneously, negates it, just like he and other child models of the time embody sexuality while also denying it through their supposed innocence, thus echoing Kincaid's idea of the child as the embodiment of desire and its negation (Mavor 56).

In conclusion, it can be said that all these photographed children share the absence of sexual attributes while preserving, nevertheless, an image of femininity, offering, on the one hand, safety—due to their condition as children—and, on the other hand, an erotic fantasy to the adult observer. This is demonstrated by their inviting poses and nudity, the presence of flowers and transparent fabrics (Mavor 16), as well as by their deliberate and provocative gazes that completely dispel the Victorian preconceived notion of female docility (Robson 142). Womanhood is simultaneously present and absent from the photographs, reaffirming the adult gaze and the sexualization of the female child while evoking the construction of the child by negation. Catherine Robson offers a commentary on this matter, stating that Victorian children convey various binaries, being able to signal childish immaturity and allude to adult sexuality, invoking the period of childhood and that of adulthood (142-144), which is a theme that figures prominently in Victorian literature and the visual arts, capturing the imagination of the reader/viewer by hinting at something Other in idealized children. The analysis of these and other nineteenth-century photographs and photographers that are concerned with the representation of children (such as the studio Southworth & Hawes or the photographers Henry Peach Robinson and J. M. Barrie) enriches our understanding of Victorian visual culture, as the photographs exemplarily illustrate the

contradictory and gendered discourses on childhood. Due to the availability of this medium in the upper-middle classes, it can effectively be stated that photography shaped societal attitudes toward gender and childhood constructions in the Victorian Era, as many scholars have argued (Woolf 240; Mavor 3-4; Gernsheim 21-22; Moran 62; Daly 53-54; Robson 129-37), thus constituting itself as “the most characteristic of Victorian media” (Altick 218), an idea which this article reinforces.

Future venues of research might explore, for instance, how the representations of childhood in the Victorian Era continue to influence how we perceive the child today, with contemporary audiences swooning over children with baby-smooth and pale skin, big round and expressionless eyes, blond hair, and small and delicate body parts, in what is effectively a “dwarfing of cute adults into children,” since these characteristics are usually attached to young girls and women represented and sexualized in fashion magazines, television sitcoms, beauty contests, advertising, and even cartoons (Kincaid 19-20). Already in Victorian photography, as it was explored, the innocent little girl merges with the sexual adult woman to create a profoundly ambiguous child, who, far from existing only in the Victorian Era, is also found in current artistic productions,[3] partly explaining the reason why these photographs continue to be carefully and enthusiastically observed, analyzed and looked at with wonder and fascination.

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[1]Regarding the periodization chosen in this article, it should be noted that the "Victorian Era" evokes, naturally, the name of the reigning monarch at the time, Victoria, thus pointing directly to the period between her accession to the throne in 1837 and her death in 1901. However, given the extraordinary length of her reign and its impact on English society, it is possible to conceive of the Victorian Era as a broader time frame, identifying it with the whole of the nineteenth century (Ramos 17). It is this more flexible conception that the present article will take into account, a perspective also conveyed by Maureen Moran in Victorian Literature and Culture, who explains: "[A] distinctive cultural outlook does not suddenly begin and cease. Well before 1837, we can track ideas and events that seem characteristically 'Victorian.' The Victorian period is a flexible framework marked by continuities, innovation and diversity" (2).

[2]Many of these etiquette books, especially those directed toward women, were focused on domesticity, offering advice on cleanliness, house management, and how to properly take care of a child (Tag Yardimci 30-31).

[3]See, for example, Sally Mann's The Wet Bed (1987).

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