8. Constructing Childhood and Home

The Western idea of childhood evolved slowly; only gradually did childhood become a separate state with its own defined space (a nursery), clothes, food, rules, and ways of being nurtured and educated. The contours of modern ideas of childhood developed largely in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in response to two defining forces. One was the move toward articulating a separate household space for children; another was the emergence of childhood as a theme for philosophical consideration—most notably, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with their famous treatises on children and education, wielded a growing influence during the eighteenth century upon child-rearing practices and normative behaviors.

This course is about defining the contours of childhood and childhood culture, looking particularly at the historical and philosophical features that shaped our generalized assumptions about what children are, what’s good for them, and what children are like. It begins in the history of constructing childhood, then examines philosophical ideas and their influence on contemporary thought. The course moves on to destabilize the totalizing idea of “the child” and set up contrasts between male and female, urban and rural, rich and poor.

Part 1: What Children Look Like (3-4 weeks)

This section of the course looks at changing pictures of children, as they shift from eighteenth-century “miniature adults” to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Romantic
innocents, to late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century children androgynously dressed in jeans and tee-shirts—just like their parents.

In addition to the texts listed below, the last segment of Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* features a collage of racist representations of African Americans, including children, that were common in American broadcast media up through the nineteen sixties.

**Texts in NACL (listed by illustrator)**

Kate Greenaway, *A Apple Pie* (Alphabets) and *Under the Window* (Picture Books)

Randolph Caldecott, *Sing a Song of Sixpence* (Picture Books)

Edward Ardizzone, *Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain* (Picture Books)

Edward Gorey, *The Shrinking of Treehorn* (Picture Books)

Quentin Blake, *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen*

E. L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Adventure Stories)

Windsor McCay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (Comics)

*Funny Folks* (Comics)

Helen Bannerman, *The Story Little Black Sambo* (Picture Books)

Jerry Pinkney, *Sam and the Tigers* (Picture Books)

Evaline Ness, *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson* (Verse)

**Suggested Further Reading**

Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*

Carroll Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*


John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (especially pp.151–160)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, books 1 and 2

Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*


The rest of the course, discussed in the next sections, is set up as a series of comparisons to demonstrate that while adults tend to generalize children (that is, to speak of “the child” or “children” liking or disliking things, or asserting what is “good for them” or not), childhood is infinitely varied and conditioned by gender, race, class, historical moment, and personal expression. Each pairing demonstrates differences.

**Part 2: Home** (2 weeks)

Jean Fritz’s *Homesick* plays out the contrasts between her sense of home as defined by her early childhood in pre-revolutionary China as the daughter of missionary parents, and her long sought-after home in America—where she discovers that she is still an outsider.

Consider other divided perceptions of home in Bruce Brook’s “Out” from *What Hearts* (Domestic Fiction) and Lloyd Alexander’s *Book of Three* (Fantasy).

**Suggested Further Reading**
Part 3: Mothers (1-2 weeks)

_NACL_ is filled with variations on mothering. Roch Carrier’s “The Hockey Sweater” (Domestic Fiction) provides an ironic version; Bruce Brooks’ “Out” from _What Hearts_ (Domestic Fiction) a poignant one. The scariest version is Lucy Lane Clifford’s _The New Mother_ (Fantasy), in which the lesson on obedience and submission links clearly with others in NACL (see Part 8 of this course).

For another interesting depiction of the monster/mother dichotomy and how it reflects a complex view of the child, try Donna Jo Napoli’s retelling of Hansel and Gretel, _The Magic Circle_.

_Suggested Further Reading_

David Grylls, _Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature_

T.G.A. Nelson, _Children, Parents, and the Rise of the Novel_

Part 4: Male and Female (2 weeks)

Cultural gender roles have historically placed expectations on the behavior of girls and boys early in life. In Western society, girls are often regarded as domestically oriented and expected to stay home, while boys are regarded as unruly and adventurous and expected to go beyond the garden gate. One way to compare these roles in classic children’s literature is by looking at Louisa May Alcott’s _Little Women_ and Mark Twain’s _The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_, both available in Norton Critical Editions that can be packaged with NACL. One could
also examine the influence of gender in E. Nesbit’s *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and Ruth Park’s *Playing Beatie Bow* (both in Fantasy).

Similarly, it’s useful to study twentieth-century gender models against those of the nineteenth century, examining how the later characterization of female protagonists (such as in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Podkayne of Mars* [Science Fiction], Beverley Cleary’s *Ramona and Her Father* [Domestic Fiction], or Vonda N. McIntyre’s “Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand,” [Science Fiction]) and male protagonists (such as in Bruce Brooks’s “Out,” [Domestic Fiction] and Aidan Chamber’s *The Present Takers*) evolve from earlier and perhaps more restrictive models.

**Suggested Further Reading**

Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*


**Part 5: Rich and Poor (2–3 weeks)**

Poor children do not experience childhood in the same way as rich children. Many stories in NACL exhibit these socioeconomic differences.

Among the many stories that portray underprivileged children or reflect on economic hardship are “The History of Goody Two-Shoes” (Chapbooks), Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Hannukah in the Poorhouse” (Religion), Ruth Park’s *Playing Beatie Bow* (Fantasy), Hesba Stretton’s *Jessica’s First Prayer* (Religion), Lawrence Yep’s *Dragonwings* (Plays), E. Nesbit’s *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (Fantasy), Beverly Cleary’s *Ramona and Her Father* (Domestic Fiction), Lensey Namioka’s *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* (Domestic Fiction),
Fiction), and Eleanor Estes’s *The Hundred Dresses* (School Stories). Any of these can be compared with the stories that depict children of a higher socioeconomic class, including in E. L. Konigsburg’s *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Adventure Stories), Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (Fairy Tales), Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (School Stories), Frances Hodgson Burnett’s “Editha’s Burglar” (Domestic Fiction), and Maria Edgeworth’s stories from *The Parent’s Assistant* (Domestic Fiction). As one way of examining the issue of class, instructors can look at issues of how value is established (how someone or some thing is recognized as possessing power or meaning), and the relationship between wealth and traditional human values.

**Part 6: Obedience and Resistance** (2 weeks)

This section focuses on the idea that children, particularly girls, are expected to obey and submit to cultural rules about behavior. Clara Balfour’s “Women Worth Emulating” (Books of Instruction) and Minna Thomas Antrim’s *Don’ts for Girls* (Books of Instruction) both set out clearly circumscribed lives for girls and women. By way of contrast, Ted Hughes’s *The Iron Giant* (Fairy Tales) portrays another kind of child, an independent thinker who figures out how to take the monstrous external thing—the intrusion of a potentially catastrophic element into one’s normal life—and turn it to good. The active male and passive female stereotypes form a *cantus firmus* that repeats throughout all of children’s literature, either implicitly or explicitly.

Alternate texts might include Aidan Chambers’ *The Present Takers* (School Stories) and Bruce Brooks’ “Out” (Domestic Fiction).

**Suggested Further Reading**