

“To Make Others Happy”¹

The Changing Perspectives on Childhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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The concept of childhood is centuries old, and people throughout history have recognized that children cannot become adults at the moment they are born. One of these periods was nineteenth-century America, which, under the influence of the Romantic movement's idealization of childhood, increasingly focused on its innocence, sentimentalizing it and upholding it as the purest stage of life. This notion transferred from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century and modern times and strongly influenced adoption policies from both eras, but ideas about the best way to mold the young innocents and how they were treated by their adoptive families changed. The Children's Aid Society's "Orphan Train" program demonstrates the dominant mid-nineteenth century belief that children should grow up working in "good Christian homes" as part of the family to build their character and to preserve their innocence. However, as time progressed into the twentieth century, children were increasingly seen as a way to complete an ideal family, preferably by biological reproduction, or by adoption if necessary.

Both of these periods recognized the purity and innocence of childhood as idealized in some versions of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, but "child savers," social workers and adoptive parents have, at various times and places, sought to shape and uphold childhood in different ways. While, the nineteenth century appraised children for their economic role and adults sought to build their character through work as part of an ideal Christian family in the Romanticized frontier, the twentieth century saw them become increasingly sentimentalized, and they were wanted for their emotional value and for their role in completing an ideal family. In both cases, the child was serving a function the adults needed, and to some extent they were seen as a means to an end, rather than a being that exists for themselves. Thus the child was

commodified and marketed in both eras, though the reason behind the marketing changed.

The "Orphan Train" program was initiated by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of New York City. Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the CAS, said that the goal of the program was to send what they saw as vagrant city children "to friendly homes [in the country], where they would be removed from the overwhelming temptations which poverty and neglect certainly occasion in a great city."² The CAS wanted to "draw them under the influence of the moral and fortunate classes, that they shall grow up as useful producers and members of society."³ The CAS was abhorred by the way some street children lived; they survived by begging, stealing, selling newspapers, and prostituting for the girls.⁴ They were arrested for their illegal activities such as prostituting and stealing and confined to jail, but as their numbers grew, they became increasingly difficult to keep track of, and jail was not a suitable place for the children to stay.⁵ Brace used various propaganda methods such as news articles and speeches to tell the people of New York City that the children were going to spread vice over the city. This confirmed what the people wanted to believe about the dirty street urchins, giving credit to their idea that city crime rates would decrease if the children were dealt with properly.⁶ Brace also appealed to the sympathies of the rich to gain money for his program, saying that "these little ragged outcasts, in their loneliness and bitter poverty, battling for a hard living in the snow and mud of the street, pressed by every foul temptation, are still children of our common Father."⁷ However, Brace believed that children were mainly "victims of social evils" of the time; such as poverty, poor living and working conditions, but also that the vice was inherited from their impure ancestors.⁸

The CAS tried programs such as lodging houses and orphanages that provided the children

with meals, a place to sleep, and honest work. Unfortunately there was not enough money nor staff to keep the program running for the large amount of children they wanted to address.⁹ The lodging houses and orphanages were also compared to factories and were criticized for their rigid routines, harsh discipline, and their failure to produce independent hard-working children.¹⁰ Remarkably, Brace said himself that “the machinery of an ‘institution’ does not prepare for the thousand petty hand-labors of a poor man’s cottage” and that “these experiments [workshops], of which we made at many different times, were not successful.”¹¹ The programs removed many of the children from the streets, but reformers believed the workshops were not transforming the children into the good workers and citizens they were supposed to be developing into, as they retained many of what Brace called “street morals.” The CAS needed a program that truly transformed these “street Arabs” into good Christian American citizens, and Brace himself said in a CAS report that he believed that the children needed to be “drained” from the city like raw sewage that had stagnated too long.¹²

Brace and his colleagues thought of the ideal place to send the children: out West to small country towns and farms. Brace, like many people of his time, harbored a Romanticized view of the country and its inhabitants; he had a “vague promise of a pure western frontier” that was going to mold the city “vagrants” into upstanding, respectable Christian citizens.¹³ His fantasy about western farm life included a domestic notion of the West as a place full of friendly homes, and a romantic notion of the West as a place for the children to gain independence.¹⁴ This placing-out system embodied the CAS’ philosophies of self-help, the gospel of work, education, and raising a child in a good environment.¹⁵ Brace firmly believed in the “superiority of the Christian family” to train and educate the city children, because he thought that family homes were the best environment to raise a child, a notion influenced by his Romantic view of the Western family.¹⁶

His work emphasized turning these children into sociable, independent and industrious citizens, and the CAS’ program clearly reflects this belief.¹⁷ The children would provide their new families with labor in return for room, board, an education, and character-building.¹⁸ The CAS workers felt confident and safe sending these children to small country towns because many of them had come from small-

town backgrounds themselves, so they placed a great amount of trust in these frontier families. They thought that this was the best way to save the children from their “immoral vices” and preserve the innocence of childhood. A newspaper article wrote that the children needed to “be given a fair chance to develop into a useful man or woman,” which demonstrates the primary goal of the relocations was to make useful members of society.¹⁹ The CAS also saw this as a good way to build the children’s character, because the work the children received on the farms was a useful way to expend their energy and develop a sense of unselfishness and family solidarity.²⁰

Though the children were being placed “for their own good,” the system was simultaneously practical and convenient. It was not only cheaper than boarding the children in the city lodges, but the cities had a way of deporting what they saw as a large cause of the city’s high crime rates and providing the West a supply of cheap labor at the same time. When children were selected from their stops along the rail line, the new family had a sort of employment contract with the CAS as the child agreed to work as part of the new family and the adult would educate them and lodge them. However, the child’s position within the family was ambiguous because of the program’s resemblance to indentureship, so the child could be treated as a servant, as part of the family, or somewhere in between. Even though the child may have been confused about assimilating themselves into their new family, one thing was for certain in most cases: the goal was not to complete the family. The new parents often already had children of their own, so the motivation for bringing home a new child was to have another cheap farmhand. The child was not supposed to be filling some hole that made the family complete and socially acceptable. In addition, many children who were sent out in the early years of the program chose employment arrangement rather than familial relationships, which shows that the children initially expected to be sent out West for work and saw the CAS primarily as an employment agency, but did not expect to become part of a family.²¹ This demonstrates that the children were typically seen as workers, quite possibly part of the family, but still pulling their own weight. However, there are reports of children that were loved by the families they were placed with, so not all of them experienced a strict employer-employee relationship.

The fact that the children were mainly wanted

for their manual labor and not for the emotional attachment led the new parents to choose older, more capable boys over younger girls. The useful child was older than ten and a boy, and three times as many boys were placed as girls by the CAS.²² Families took in older boys for economic reasons: they needed the physical labor to help keep their farmland profitable.²³ Girls in general, no matter what age, were not wanted for these farm chores because they were considered to be incapable of performing hard labor and intensive agriculture like the boys. There was also a moral dilemma and the girls' reputations to consider; many families did not want to see their girls ruined if they were sent away to strange farms to do domestic work.²⁴ In addition, the girls could usually earn higher wages in the city than in domestic work, so they would be more of a help to their families if they worked in the city.²⁵ In this sense children were seen as more an economic asset to their families than a sentimental asset in the nineteenth century, and there is little evidence that portrays the "Orphan Train" program providing a complete family for a childless couple, making boys the obvious economic choice.

In addition, the manner in which the program was conducted commodified the children because they were often put on display and inspected like goods at a market to see if they would be well-behaved additions and workers to their new families. Some surviving adults recount their experiences in a documentary film called "The Orphan Trains:" one person describes marching down an aisle of a church, another had a farmer inspect her teeth, and a boy's muscles were tested by a man looking for a good farm hand.²⁶ These people were effectively "shopping" for the best-behaved children and strongest workers of the bunch. The children were often put up onto stages or platforms, and the prospective parents came around and inspected their qualities. One "Orphan Train" rider recalls an adult saying "I'll take that one," as if he were selecting an animal from a pen.²⁷ Like damaged or imperfect goods, they also could be sent back to New York City if they caused problems;²⁸ a newspaper article even proclaimed that "should the child prove unsatisfactory it will be taken back by the society."²⁹ While the new family or the child could theoretically terminate the contract at any time if they were dissatisfied, since these small children were leagues away from home living with perfect strangers, this was easier said than done.³⁰ Children could find themselves in abusive

situations but be afraid to leave because they felt that they had nowhere to go and no one to contact. This treatment of the children was comparable to slavery in these situations, and the children were hot commodities to be had because they were useful farmhands free of charge, and virtually free of any obligation to treat them well.

Like any popular market item, the children even came with their own marketing strategy, as formulated by the CAS, who used marketing ploys to "sell" the children to the "good Christian people" out West. They were marketed as impoverished, immoral city children in need of Christian salvation and loving farm families willing to take them in. The CAS' advertisements emphasized the good homes that the children needed and the children's potential for work, and did not mention that the children might have criminal pasts and come from less than reputable backgrounds. Want ads were placed in papers out West advertising the children, and newspaper articles announced what children had arrived and who had taken them home, like announcing who had brought home the prize animals.³¹ This was the exact opposite marketing strategy that Brace used to earn donations from city people to help "drain" the children to the West. He sold the city people the image of dirty immigrant children that needed to be removed because their crime rates were making the city an unpleasant place to live, a far cry from what he tried to sell the farmers out West.³² The children needed to be "drain[ed]" from the city, as Brace said, and the best way to do it was to convince the "good Christian homes" that the children were a good investment. Taking children out of the city would result in "so much expense lessened to courts and prisons" and "so much poisonous influence removed from the city."³³

The children were also sent to the country because Brace thought that he was doing the work of God by placing the children (many of whom were not Protestant) in Protestant homes and saving them through these families. Religion was the most powerful force in humankind in Brace's eyes, and he used Protestantism and its morals as a foundation for the program and the CAS,³⁴ and he said himself that, "we would not breathe a word against the absolute necessity of Christianity in any scheme of thorough social reform."³⁵ Brace had a belief in preparing children and adults for salvation, and asserted that the family was the best way for God to shape people, which is clearly seen in his work with the

CAS and the “Orphan Train” program.³⁶ However, his early religious reform attempts did not work right away; he tried to place the orphanage children in church, but they would fidget and become distracted, so he realized that sermons would not reform children who had to choose between theft and starvation.³⁷ Instead, he decided that living with Christian families every day would allow the children to experience the saving power of God through family.

Even though the “Orphan Train” program of the CAS gained popularity over the course of its duration, people began to criticize the methods of the CAS because of the program’s close resemblance to slavery and the failure of the agents to perform consistent follow-ups with the placed children. The CAS workers were notoriously lax with their follow-ups, resulting in abused and lost children in some cases. In addition, in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the mindset of America began to change about the values of work versus the benefits of play for children; it was thought that nurturing would be better for the children as a method for preserving their innocence rather than reforming them through labor.³⁸ The new Progressive Era of the early twentieth century also ushered in a new focus on the family and an emphasis on preserving it, which reduced the focus of helping displaced children by finding completely new families to keeping the families together.³⁹ There were also growing obstacles to the “Orphan Train” program itself because of new laws against the interstate trafficking of children, and new mandatory education laws that “discouraged the use of dependent children as indentured labor.”⁴⁰ Increased specialization in the child welfare system caused social work to become more professional and people began to research better ways to help dependent children.⁴¹ America began to frown on adoption for a short time because there was such a strong emphasis on keeping blood ties intact, and children who were adopted were viewed as unnatural and tainted. Keeping the natural family together was therefore emphasized over the needs of the children.⁴²

However, American views shortly changed again after World War II into the 1950’s; the number of illegitimate births increased, and wartime prosperity allowed people who could not have children of their own to adopt babies that were given away by unwed mothers.⁴³ There was a “deep cultural shift in the valuation of children,”⁴⁴

and children became “economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless.’”⁴⁵ This shift and the reasons for it are discussed in Viviana Zelizer’s book *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, where the author argues that children became increasingly sentimentalized and “sacralized” as the twentieth century progressed, and explains how Americans changed their views of children through various shifts in American society. This book allows for the close examination of how the marketplace world affects the adoption of children, and Zelizer’s research has uncovered some surprising facts about the commodification of children through the adoption process.

One of the aspects of commodification that Zelizer discusses is the nineteenth century’s valuation of children for their work during the industrialization boom; they were a useful asset to the family income,⁴⁶ which applied to farm labor as well. While some types of child labor came under attack, such as factory work, “farm labor... was almost blindly and romantically categorized as ‘good’ work” and was not considered a social problem, even though children could be injured by large farm animals and equipment.⁴⁷ However, as children became increasingly sentimentalized, even some farm labor was considered unacceptable because parents might be exploiting their children for economic productivity. Parents could use their children for house chores, but there had to be limits as to how much they were allowed to do. Moreover, with the growing economic prosperity, parents were increasingly likely to see more worth in their children’s education than in their labor, because with an education, children could have higher-paying jobs in the future.⁴⁸ So, “as children’s labor value disappeared, their new emotional worth became increasingly monetized and commercialized.”⁴⁹ There was a “new demand for infants [that] coincided with the rise of the ‘compassionate’ family, the end result of the marked transformation in the family’s social role over the course of the nineteenth century from performing ‘economic, educational, and welfare functions’ to providing emotional and psychological contentment for its members.”⁵⁰

Adoption for the sake of having a child to love increased as a result of this shift toward sentimentalization, and compounded with the need for parents to complete their “ideal” families, the adoption business was booming in the twentieth century. The new emotional benefits that children

supplied led to a change in the demand of the types of children for adoption. So couples, “imbued with new ideas about the emotional benefits of parenting...began rejecting adoption as a charitable gesture and framed it instead as a way to indulge in the rewards of a family life.”⁵¹ The parents’ main goal was not to have to a worker who could help around the house, but to have a cute, cuddly, emotional investment to raise as their own. Therefore, there was an increased demand for pretty little girls under the age of three.⁵² Because babies were now judged by their physical appearance and personalities, child life became increasingly “sacralized,” and this contributed to a fad-like adoption demand. Girls had more sentimental value than boys, and since the parents were not looking to supply their household or farm with a strong yet cheap farmhand, girls became the obvious choice. With the new sentimentalization came a new view of the mid-twentieth-century household’s ideal family. Since the parents wanted to have the baby as their own for its entire life, infants became more popular to adopt, and the babies were even matched to the parents to make sure the family looked as normal as possible.⁵³ One woman who gave up her baby during this time said that she knew her baby’s adoptive family was “sort of like [her own] family...conservative, Catholic, Italian.”⁵⁴ It was like parents were picking out a couch to match the rest of the decorations and furniture in their house, and agencies were the dealers that sold the only acceptable commodity, a perfect couch if you will, to complete the house. In this way, the ideal situation was created because both the birth mother and adoptive parents received a stigma-free life by either relinquishing or adding a child.

Thus, in the twentieth century children came to be viewed as the way to make a family complete and whole, and most importantly, normal.⁵⁵ “Normality” was the most sought-after quality for parents across America in the twentieth century, and having a baby was expected of any couple who was married. This notion caused “the desire to parent, and to conform to the normal social and family expectations of the time, [and] imposed substantial strain on couples who could not conceive.”⁵⁶ This shift toward the desire to have the perfect normal family also contributed to the increase in the number of babies available for adoption; young, unwed mothers in most cases could not keep the babies they bore out of wedlock because it went against societal norms, and society dictated that a baby

belonged with a family. As a result, many babies that would have otherwise stayed with the birth mother were sent away to have a “better life” with a complete nuclear family. This idea was also seen in the nineteenth century because the “Orphan Train” children were sent away from what society saw as “bad” parents to whole families so their lives could be influenced by the goodness of a Christian family. However, unlike the CAS program, the twentieth century did not want to save the babies from their vices because they were not old enough to have any yet; the parents wanted them as an emotional asset saved from the “immoral” birth mother.

Because of this, the emphasis on religion and saving the child from its immoral habits were periphery concerns in these twentieth century adoptions. The babies were a pure, perfect, package delivered from the adoption agency, with a past that was largely ignored by adoptive parents. So the birth mother’s relinquishment allowed herself and her baby to be “cleansed of stigma and [the baby] made into a highly marketable commodity,” which adoptive parents took advantage of.⁵⁷ The new adoptive family usually had no interests in where the baby came from, as long as the birth parents were healthy and did not interfere with any of the adoption arrangements. In the CAS program, however, children arrived partly grown, so they were supposed to be taught to forget their past and “immoral street ways.” There were some children that came from a certain religious background and were given to parents of that same religion in the twentieth century, but the placement of the child was not a religious effort to save it from its own sin, only from the stigma of being a baby with a single mother in an extremely judgmental society.

Adoption practices have changed drastically since the CAS and the nineteenth-century “Orphan Train” placement program, and they are still changing today. However, continuity still exists with the change and many adoptive parents still want the perfect little boy or girl to complete their nuclear family dream and to have a child to love and raise as their own. Even today parents are one-third more likely to adopt a baby girl than a boy, so the sentimentalization of children persists.⁵⁸ There is also still a societal stigma against having children out of wedlock and married couples failing to be reproductively fruitful, but the stigma is not as strong as it used to be. Adoption agencies will still be marketing babies because Americans grow up in a hyper-commercialized world; we want what we

want and we will often pay anything to get what we think will completely fulfill our lives. Because of this, there is a risk of unregulated and “black market” adoptions when parents do not want to wait as long or think they can acquire a “better” baby through illegal means. There is also the danger of believing that one is acting strictly in the “best interests of the child,” even though one is truly commodifying

the child, so people might be reluctant to face the fact that we are commodifying children through adoption. Because of our “sacralized” view of children, we may be tricking ourselves into thinking that this charade all for the “best interests of the child,” when its really also, always for the benefits of the parents.

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