'We're Not Little Babies Anymore': A Cultural History of Small Girls in America, 1920-1945

Stella A. Ress
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/911

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2014 Stella A. Ress
“WE’RE NOT LITTLE BABIES ANYMORE”: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SMALL GIRLS IN AMERICA, 1920-1945

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

STELLA A. RESS

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Despite the fact that writing a dissertation seemed like a lonely endeavor as I was enmeshed in the process, upon reflection, I truly realized that its completion was only possible with the help of a great many others. Thus, I am truly humbled by all the assistance I received throughout the years from Loyola University and many of the faculty from its Department of History, from my friends and colleagues, and from my family.

First, thank you to my knowledgeable committee members. Dr. Patricia Mooney-Melvin, I view your assistance throughout my academic career (from my first days as a masters student to my final days working on my dissertation) as nothing less than heroic. You are more than a mentor; you are a friend. Dr. Susan Hirsch, your insights and suggestions completely transformed (and elevated) my final copy. You are the teacher who I most try to emulate in the classroom. Dr. Lewis Erenberg, the person most responsible for this labor of love and for shaping me into the historian who I am today, I owe you a great debt of gratitude. A heartfelt thank you to you all.

Thank you also to Loyola Chicago’s Department of History. In many ways, these have been the best years of my life (so far). And a great many thanks to the Loyola University Chicago Graduate School who funded many years of my research through my various assistantships, the Advanced Dissertation Fellowship, and the Arthur J. Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship. Thank you to my friends and colleagues, many of whom pored
over various drafts of chapters and/or listened to me talk incessantly about my topic. I
dare not try to mention you all by name, but you know who you are.

To my growing family, a most hearty εμχαριστω. You encouraged me when I
was down, and never gave up on me. I leaned on each of you throughout the years and
for your steadfastness, I am most grateful. I love you all.

And finally, grazie a Francesco. I wouldn’t have finished without you and your
support. You are the love of my life.
To my family
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii  
ABSTRACT vii  
INTRODUCTION: ‘TO THE LADIES’: THE RISE OF DEPICTIONS OF YOUNG GIRLS IN POPULAR MEDIA 1  
CHAPTER 1: ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE: THE PREADOLESCENT ACTRESS, 1840-1920 26  
CHAPTER 2: CLOSING THE GAPS: LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S 59  
CHAPTER 3: DADDY’S GIRL AND MOMMY’S RIVAL: SHIRLEY TEMPLE AND THE ANSWER TO THE 1930S GENDER CRISIS 116  
CHAPTER 4: SUPPORTER, SOLDIER, SHOPPER, AND SIDEKICK: AMERICAN GIRLS ON THE HOME FRONT 157  
CONCLUSION 212  
BIBLIOGRAPHY 218  
VITA 242
ABSTRACT

The appearance of high-profile girl characters in popular culture media of all types soared between the years from 1924, when *Little Orphan Annie* first appeared in the comic section of newspapers, to 1945, when teenage girls replaced their younger sisters in the spotlight. As such, girl culture of the 1920s through the 1940s experienced a boon in popularity never before witnessed. And yet, despite substantial evidence that point to the impact preadolescent girls had on society during this time, surprisingly scholars have left the experiences of these girls and their depictions in popular entertainment unexplored. For historians, this raises a number of questions. Why were young girls so ubiquitous within popular media during this time? Why have they been ignored until now? And more to the point, what purpose(s) did their characterizations serve and for whom?

“We’re Not Little Babies Anymore: A Cultural History of Small Girls in America, 1920-1945,” explores these questions within an historical context and utilizes a different medium of popular culture for each era. Thus, in the 1920s, comic strips of the newspapers are explored; in the 1930s, it is actresses in film. Finally, in the 1940s, voice actresses in children’s radio programming.

As the first true “case study” of my dissertation, chapter two, “Closing the Gaps: *Little Orphan Annie* in the 1920s and 1930s,” is a close analysis of *Little Orphan Annie* in her many incarnations. As Americans grappled with significant and growing tensions
between the worlds of the adult and of the child, between rural versus urban living, and between traditional views of women and children and of modern ones, Annie provided one solution to their anxieties: she helped bridge the gap between such tensions. Thus, through her varied appearances throughout popular media, Annie brought parents and their children nearer to each other in attitude and experience, brought a new understanding of city life to rural folks (and vice versa), and helped pave the way for a modern interpretation of the value of children in general, and girls and orphans in particular.

Shirley Temple, the most famous child actress of the era, is the focus of chapter three, “Daddy’s Girl and Mommy’s Rival: Shirley Temple and the Answer to the 1930s Gender Crisis.” Actresses such as Shirley Temple became society’s solution to a growing gender crisis that was exacerbated by Depression. This chapter shows how Shirley Temple provided the answer to a growing tension between men and women. In her films and public persona, Temple gave men a purpose. At the same time, she deflated the burgeoning power women enjoyed in the earlier years of the financial crisis. Thus, Temple helped to restore the “traditional” balance of power between men and women that was threatened by Depression.

Chapter four, “Supporter, Soldier, Shopper, and Sidekick: Girls on the Home Front,” is a close examination of the small girl in the medium of radio. As the cheapest and most accessible form of entertainment during the war, radio democratized news and entertainment like no other medium before it. Programs geared for children, such as Jack Armstrong—The All American Boy and Terry and the Pirates, engaged children in the war effort. They also entertained new models of behavior and roles for young girls.
Girls, during this time period, helped Americans endure war and envision a future of peace.

Ultimately, the research indicates that generators of popular culture, as well as their audiences, used the pre-adolescent girl as a visual representation on which to project their fears and hopes of today and tomorrow. Society championed the image of a strong female character, albeit in the form of a little girl, which demonstrates that Americans wanted to afford all (white) women the opportunity to grow beyond the Victorian feminine ideal. That being said, they chose to promote the image of the “small” girl because she would always be subordinated to the patriarchy. Despite her rise in depictions and the power she enjoyed because of it, in the end, the preadolescent girl was still just a little girl and at most, she would only grow up to be a member of yet another marginalized group in America: that of women. Thus, unlike a little boy, a little girl’s power had limits and always would. With her perceived physical, mental, and emotional limitations, she could never grow up to truly challenge the adult man and thus, the patriarchal status quo.
INTRODUCTION
‘TO THE LADIES’:
THE RISE OF DEPICTIONS OF YOUNG GIRLS IN POPULAR MEDIA

“Have you ever noticed,” one letter writer rhetorically asked in the January 1936 issue of *Photoplay* magazine, “that, although the most exciting phrase in any language is said to be: “It’s a boy!” the world’s most interesting and famous children at present are all girls?”¹ For evidence, Mary Crary, the letter-writer from New York with an apparent affinity for popular culture, cited three international examples: Child star Shirley Temple from the United States, Princess Elizabeth of York (better known by her later name, Queen Elizabeth II) from Great Britain, and the world’s first surviving quintuplets, the Dionne sisters from Canada. As Crary’s $1 prize-winning opinion piece titled “To the Ladies” continued, she commended motion pictures for “making us realize as photographs and written articles alone could never do, how completely appealing small girls can be.”² Indeed, though scholars often refer to the twentieth-century as the century of the child, female youngsters’ overwhelming presence in popular culture indicates that the late 1920s through the early 1940s belonged solely to the young girl.³ During these

² Ibid.
³ Ellen Key began the discussion in 1909 when her Swedish text imploring the world’s social activists to focus on children in the new century, was translated into English as *The Century of the Child* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909).
years, female children between the stages of preschooler to preadolescent captivated audiences through their many striking appearances in the funny pages, on the big screen, and over radio airwaves.

Although young girls were present in popular media from its inception, from 1924 through 1945, their appearances were more ubiquitous and more substantial. They were no longer relegated to inconsequential roles or forced to conceal their preadolescent female bodies by playing grown men, for example, as the Bateman sisters did. Rather, during this time period, preadolescent girls stood front and center in a variety of media. In comic strips, for example, from the moment she first appeared in the Chicago Daily Tribune in 1924, Little Orphan Annie gained immense popularity. While “kid” characters were a common occurrence in the funny pages, most of them were male. Because she was a young girl, Annie stood out as a new breed of main character. Indeed, her sex was integral to her creation. According to Bruce Smith, an historian of Little Orphan Annie, when Annie’s creator Harold Gray first introduced the orphaned mop to Joseph Patterson, the editor at the Tribune, Gray called the strip Little Orphan Otto.\footnote{Bruce Smith, The History of Little Orphan Annie (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 9.} Patterson, however, had other ideas; he thought that Gray’s orphan was too feminine looking, thus he had Gray “put a skirt on him” and call her Annie.\footnote{Ibid.} Though Annie started off as the lone female protagonist in the comics section, she was soon joined by a legion of others: the mischievous Little Lulu in the Saturday Evening Post (1935-1944); AP Newsfeatures syndicated fantasy strip The Adventures of Patsy (1935-1954); and the
chubby “everygirl” Nancy Ritz of the *Nancy* strip, which was distributed by United Features Syndicate (1933-present) are just a few examples.

As the comic strips make clear, strong, preadolescent girl characters were particularly prevalent during the lean years of the Great Depression. Though Shirley Temple is the most famous child starlet of that era, she was certainly not alone. Actually, she was just one of many talented girls who descended upon Hollywood. Perhaps it was Temple’s success that encouraged other mothers and fathers to bring their children to studio casting calls for a chance to sing and dance in the movies. One of Temple’s biggest “rivals” (i.e. another girl approximately Temple’s age who also worked in Hollywood at the same time of Temple) was Jane Withers. Tall for her age, and with straight, dark chocolate hair and brown eyes, Withers was the physical opposite of Temple. The roles in which she was cast played up that fact and thus, in the only movie they made together during their young youth, Withers played Temple’s bratty arch nemesis in *Bright Eyes.*

Other famous female child actresses of the time include Virginia Weidler, Juanita Quigley, and Deanna Durbin.

In fact, Deanna Durbin was a double threat. Although she received accolades in films such as *Every Sunday* (1936) and *Three Smart Girls* (1936), she was first and foremost known for her voice. Indeed, her initial stardom came over the radio. Radio was yet another popular culture medium in which young girls were ever-present; Durbin is only one famous example. Small girls propelled many of the plots of children’s programs such as *Let’s Pretend, Tom Mix Ralston’s Straight Shooters, Sky King,* and

---

*Bright Eyes! DVD, directed by David Butler, 1934, Los Angeles, CA: Fox Film, Corp. 2002.*
Terry and the Pirates. They were also featured in adult-focused dramas such as Front Line Family, soap operas like One Man’s Family, and comedies such as Baby Snooks.

As evidenced then, the appearance of high-profile girl characters in popular culture media of all types soared between the years from 1924, when Little Orphan Annie first appeared in the comic section of newspapers, to 1945, when teenage girls replaced their younger sisters in the spotlight. As such, girl culture of the 1920s through the 1940s experienced a boon in popularity never before witnessed. For historians, the presence of preadolescent girls raises a number of questions. Why were young girls so ubiquitous within popular media during this time? Why have they been ignored until now, and more to the point, what purpose(s) did their characterizations serve and for whom?

To explore these questions within an historical context, my dissertation utilizes a different medium of popular culture for each era. These three media were immensely popular during the specific time frame in which I analyzed them. Thus, in the 1920s, I examine newspaper comic strips of the newspapers. In the 1930s, I move to film. Finally, in the 1940s, I analyze radio programming. As the parameters of my research are situated between significant “watershed” moments in American history, i.e. the Great Depression and World War II, (events which historians so often use as excuses to explain shifts over time), an initial interpretation of the heyday of the presence of young girls in popular media must include an analysis of the effects these catastrophic events had upon American society. Can the major events of Depression and War, alone, provide all the clues as to why society became transfixed with preadolescent girls during this time period?
Upon further scrutiny, however, an analysis of these two events cannot explain in full, neither the significance of the rise of depictions of preadolescent girls in popular media, nor the impact these representations had on American culture. Instead, one needs to dig deeper to uncover the answers to such problems. Keeping this in mind, this dissertation investigates the ways in which both the generators of popular culture, as well as the various audiences who consumed their products, used young girls to alleviate American anxieties over long-simmering problems that Depression and War made more visible; problems such as increasingly obvious generational conflict, a gender crisis further exacerbated by the transformation of long-established age-gender conceits, and finally, changing gender norms and sexual mores. Images of white, preadolescent girl characters in popular culture (because all the portrayals were almost exclusively white) became a means by which concerned Americans reconciled their fear of change to their desire, not only to participate in a modern culture and outlook, but to be at the forefront of creating it.

And yet, despite substantial evidence that points to the impact preadolescent girls exerted on society during this time, scholars have left the experiences of these girls and their depictions in popular entertainment unexplored. To be fair, Susan Douglas’ book *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* is one of the first historical examinations on this topic.⁷ Douglas, however, uses the term “girl” when she is really talking about teenage and young adult women. Thus, the study of the preadolescent girl in popular culture has gotten the short shrift. This fact is attributed to

---

the relatively new study of children and childhood, as well as to an apparent
discriminating taste historians hold with regard to girls and girl culture.

First, historical studies of children and childhood are still relatively new. Along
with other areas of interest to young scholars of the New Social History movement, the
beginnings of this subject as legitimate historical inquiry began in the 1960s. Since then,
scholars have studied a variety of aspects about children and childhood. They have
zeroed in on three main areas, however: the role of the child within the family and/or
society at large, the experiences of the child, and the autonomy of the child. My
dissertation has been shaped by these three foci in obvious and, I’m sure, in unintentional
ways.

One of the largest matters that have occupied scholars of children and childhood
has been the relationship between the child and the adults around him/her, i.e. the role of
the child within the family and society. Scholarship of this type really began with the
publication of Philippe Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* in
1962.⁸ The book, divided into three parts, considered life before the concept of
childhood, examined childhood’s creation, and located its invention in the modern era
(i.e. the seventeenth century). Aries suggested that the concept of childhood was not
understood in the medieval world, as children were dressed as miniature adults and
treated as such after an initial infancy/dependent stage. Not only did he essentially write
the first history of childhood, but also by opening the door, he allowed others to follow

---

his footsteps in methodology, assumptions, and in underlying principles. Since the publication of his book in 1962, studies on and about children exploded in popularity.

In the initial years following the work done by Aries, most historians like Aries himself, focused on the relationship of children to family and society. Viviana Zelizer’s *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, in particular, has influenced the historical scholarship of childhood in America. In this text Zelizer looked at children through the eyes of the adults around them—primarily through the eyes of their parents. According to Zelizer’s main thesis, the value that parents have placed on their children has changed over time from one based on economic contribution to one based on sentimental value. In order to best demonstrate her thesis, Zelizer closely examined adult reaction to child death, the creation of child labor laws, the difficulty inherent in selling child life insurance, the paradoxes involved in wrongful death compensation, and the complications that arose with the adoption of children. Ultimately, Zelizer concluded that modern economists in particular and Americans in general have overestimated the “power of the market”—attributing to it all sorts of authority, from corrupting children to ruining family life. According to her, if the

---


11 Ibid., 57.
market was, indeed, all-powerful, then children would still be working sixteen-hour days in factories. Instead, the “cultural process of ‘sacralization’ of children’s lives,” holds absolute authority and children now live that short period of their lives in the safety of the classroom.\(^\text{12}\)

Zelizer’s work and others like it spend so much time analyzing the nature of the child and his/her relationship with the adults around them, that they rarely illuminate the life of the child him/herself. Indeed, in some of the earlier writings about children in America, children make small appearances and seem to be spectators rather than players. For example, legislation is enacted for them without their input or their consideration.\(^\text{13}\)

As the literature in the field matured, however, scholars made painstaking efforts to illustrate children as autonomous figures. Such scholars minimized their analysis of the child in society in order to focus on the day-to-day lives of the child him/herself. Usually these studies are focused on either the broad experience of children over time, or on the experiences of children during a specific time period.

Steven Mintz’s *Huck’s Raft* is a good example of a broad general history of children in America.\(^\text{14}\) Published in 2005, *Huck’s Raft* recounts the varied experiences of children from pre-colonial America to the modern day. From the horrific tales of

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^\text{13}\) See Wollon’s *Children at Risk*.

enslaved children to stories of the privileged and politically active teens during the 1960s, Mintz pulls from a wide array of sources to create a picture of diversity. Despite the fact that children, adults, and society itself have changed with each generation, Mintz argues that the relationship between children and their elders has usually been one of antagonism. Thus, for Mintz, though there are differences that separate children, there are many more similarities across time, space, and gender, racial and socio-economic statuses.

By its nature, Mintz’s text on childhood in America, (and others like it), are long and broad. Although they provide a general overview of the subject, they cover hundreds of years in just a few hundred of pages. Fortunately, more narrow studies on specific time periods or events in United States history abound. Most of these works examine defining moments of US history such as war, social upheaval, and the Great Depression. In her text, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* Kriste Lindemeyer argues that the Great Depression changed not only the experiences of the

15 Ibid., vii.

child, but also how he or she was viewed in the eyes of the larger society.17 “Important shifts in the cultural and legal construction of childhood that shaped the lives of children and adolescents” for years to come, she contends, were created or magnified during the Great Depression.18 Her work examines a variety of examples that signified this shift. Such examples include an increase of the age of consent laws in every state, a legal definition of childhood dependency, and state-enforced mandatory education.

Lindemeyer’s study also focuses on the ways that children “both influenced and were targets of important social and political changes during the Great Depression years.”19 One example which illustrates children’s ability to influence change from both of these angles is the “Baby Strike” of 1933 in Allentown, Pennsylvania where teenage girls joined adults in their demand for higher pay and shorter hours at work. Because their wages meant more than just expendable cash, these young girls possessed real stakes in the pursuit of making more money. Thus, according to Lindemeyer, children, such as those who participated in the Baby Strike, exerted a certain degree of influence and autonomy that was evident during this particular economic catastrophe.

One of the best examples of literature that focuses on child autonomy is the edited text, Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950.20 In this

---


18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid.

collection, scholars such as David Nasaw, Vicki Ruiz, Bernard Mergen, and N. Ray Hiner analyzed source materials as diverse as movie pictures, interviews conducted with young Mexican American women, toy “artifacts,” and photographs, respectively, to uncover the all too often silenced voices of the children they so desperately wanted to understand. They showed that with daring and a little imagination scholars have the potential to insert children into the historical narrative. In this edited book, children manipulate their parents into buying them certain toys and cajole nickelodeon operators and owners into letting them catch a free glimpse of nearly naked women on the peep-show machine. With their efforts, children no longer were relegated the role of bystanders, but instead, have become instigators and participants of their own lives.

David Nasaw’s article, “Children and Commercial Culture: Moving Pictures in the Early Twentieth Century,” opened the door to the many scholars such as Gary Cross, Lisa Jacobson, and David Thomas Cook, who, in subsequent years, would explore the child’s relationship to the larger consumer culture. According to Nasaw, “because children were incapable of resisting temptation, because their parents could not or would not protect them, because the movie exhibitors were driven only by profit, and because


the state would not...interpose itself between a business and its consumers,” advertisers and the companies that they worked for targeted children as early as the late nineteenth century. 23 Scrapping together nickels and dimes from their after school jobs or from their allowances, children found that “adults who would otherwise have treated them with disdain opened their doors to welcome them inside.”24 In fact, these very same adults tried their hardest to attract child business. They recognized that hundreds of children, with only pocket change to spare, “meant thousands of nickels every afternoon.”25

Businessmen were very different than progressive reformers. Unlike the savvy businessmen who respected, or at the very least understood, child taste and tried to accommodate it, reformers thought that children watched violent movies, not because they liked them, but because there were no other choices available to them. Nasaw suggested that progressive reformers thought of children, much as they thought of young woman—as innocent angels easily manipulated.26 They believed that negligent parents, greedy businessmen, and wayward friends could easily turn an angelic, model child into a delinquent. Businessmen, on the other hand, tried to accommodate to child taste. It was

24 Ibid., 19.
25 Ibid., 19.
not that they necessarily understood children any better than the progressive reformers, it was simply that they listened to what their nickels had to say.

Twenty-first century historians continue to examine the choices that children make and the outcomes of their decisions. With the rise of the tween—the pre-teen adolescent girl or boy with a particular concern for plugging into the in-crowd through purchases—recent scholars have devoted much attention to child consumerism. They have made great strides in trying to argue for child agency. In *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, for example, sociologist Daniel Cook proves, however, that there is a delicate balance between agency and manipulation.

Cook railed against those scholars who came before him who insisted upon seeing children in two simple ways—as victims of exploitation or as free and active participants in the consumer culture. Instead, he relied heavily on economic models to describe the relationship between children and the consumer culture at large. He saw the child consumer as the co-creation between marketers who pushed products onto children, and children who absent-mindedly accepted them and asked for more. Marketers realized that they could sell more products by further subdividing age categories. Consequently, there is the development and use of age distinctive terms such as toddler, girl, and even adolescent. By the 1930s, advertisers bypassed parents and targeted children in their own right. As a result, in this period in America, the child, in all of his/her phases, became a target for consumption. In addition, because they were targeted as consumers, Americans

---


28 Cook, *Commodification of Childhood*. 
started to see their children in a new light. A child became, “a person with self-
knowledge, desire, and growing social right to express that desire.”29 Parents started to
give in to their children’s demands with alarming regularity, because as Cook suggested,
parents began to see their children as individuals with the right to buy and own property.
This is a view that remains to this day.

Despite the fact that many of these texts are critical to understanding children as a
whole, the common critique that new social historians elevate the story of the masses in
lieu of the individual, also applies to this branch of history. Scholars of children and
childhood have rarely managed to examine individual children or groups of children.
Instead, they have overwhelmingly examined the life of the nameless, raceless,
genderless, general “child.” Indeed, these studies lack the refinement necessary to
separate children into age categories. Thus, the “child” they refer to could be, without
distinction, between the ages of one or twenty-one. Moreover, these studies seldom
investigated the differing experiences of girl and boy children, let alone what those varied
experiences meant to the society at large. Thus, although these texts have illuminated the
perceived nature of children over time, their role in the family, their level of autonomy,
and children’s experiences as a whole, these books lack the proper conceptual framework
for studying girls, girl culture, and its relevance in a specific time period in America.

Just like in the scholarship of the adult world, where everyone, prior to the
women’s social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, was assumed to be male, the same
erroneous assumption is true of the literature on and about the world of the child. But we

29 Ibid., 69-70.
cannot continue to ignore the difference in experiences of boys and girls and posit one
ungendered childhood if we are to understand the impact of childhood experiences on the
actions and beliefs of adult men and women. Although “socialization and resocialization
can occur at any point in the life cycle,” according to psychologist Eleanor E. Maccoby,
“childhood is a particularly malleable period.”30 Moreover, it is a “period of life when
enduring skills, personality attributes, and social orientation and values are laid down.”31
In other words, child socialization produces the men and women of tomorrow. Thus, as
Maccoby suggests we cannot ignore this process today.

Much has been written about the new boys and men of the twentieth century, as
well as the new woman.32 Preadolescent girls of the twentieth century, however, have

30 Eleanor E. Maccoby, “The Role of Parents in Socialization of Children: An Historical

31 Ibid.

32 For examples of the literature on boys and men of the turn of the twentieth century, see
Timothy Gilfoyle, “Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes: Child Pickpockets and Street Culture in New
York City, 1850-1900,” Journal of Social History 37, no. 4 (2004): 853-882; Kenneth B. Kidd,
Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Kevin White, The First Sexual Revolution: The
Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America (New York: New York University Press,
1993); John F. Kasson, Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the
Challenge of Modernity in America (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and Mick LaSalle,
Dangerous Men: Pre-Code Hollywood and the Birth of the Modern Man (New York: Thomas
Dunne Press, 2002); For examples of the work on the New Woman, see Paula Fass, The Damned
and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920’s, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977);
James McGovern, “The American Woman’s Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals,”
Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s,” The Journal of American History 61 no. 2
Cultural Studies 1 (1987): 179-194; Sumiko Higashi, Virgins, Vamps, and Flappers: The
American Silent Movie Heroine, (St. Albans, VT: Eden Press Women’s Publications, 1978); and
Liz Conor, The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s, (Bloomington, IN:
not been studied with such intellectual vigor. Partly this is a problem with source material. Primary sources, or rather lack thereof, present particular problems for historians studying children in general and girls in particular. Children typically do not leave behind traditional historical sources as their parents might, for example. They rarely keep diaries, and those who do are fortunate enough to have an education and time to write in them. These prerequisites effectively eliminate the younger children and lower-class children of previous eras who had neither the time nor language skills to keep journals. Moreover, children do not write memoirs—though older versions of themselves do. This begs the question, however, can you really trust the seventy-year-old version of yourself to remember the seven-year-old one that used to be? In addition, common historical sources such as newspaper and magazine articles are written about children, not by them. These articles demonstrate author/adult bias and tend to address children as either victims of some adult or modern technological brutality or as menaces to themselves and to society as a whole.

Finally, it is hard to separate the child from those who “protect” him and her. Children are dependent both on their parents and on their greater father—the government. At home, in the schools, and in the courts, it is the child’s job not to create legislation but to obey it. Thus, until they come of age, children are often times understood to be passive spectators or are regarded as misguided pawns in some larger game of life. In historical studies then, children are rarely allowed to become active players in their own lives.
By examining popular culture sources, however, one can literally hear the child’s voice. For the most part, children acted as children in the movies and on the radio. Among the radio serials examined for this study, all the voice actors employed were roughly the same age as the characters they portrayed. This type of casting brought realism to the sometimes-fantastical plotlines created by writers to engage children’s imagination and interest. Despite the story’s incredible premise, for instance, in the 1937 holiday special The Cinnamon Bear, young audience members could relate to some of situations that the brother-and-sister duo, Judy and Jimmy found themselves in, as well as some of the feelings Judy and Jimmy exhibited throughout their adventures.\[^{33}\] Although, for example, Judy and Jimmy befriended a four-inch tall, talking teddy bear who shrunk them and took them to Maybe Land (a miniature realm inhabited by Christmas-themed “monsters” like dragons made of quilts and paper dolls sporting pens as spears), this brother and sister team also did and felt things that some members of their pint-sized audience may have felt and done as well. In the first episode, “Paddy O’Cinnamon,” children heard Judy and Jimmy bicker over the length and scope of their letters to Santa, with Judy chastising Jimmy for asking for too many things as he had done the previous year.\[^{34}\] Jimmy counters, “Oh, you girls are all alike!” He goes on to list the many presents that Judy has asked for, some of which she is now “too old” to enjoy. Much to the chagrin of their parents, no doubt this type of quarreling was something that many of those listening may have done over and over again with their own siblings. Judy and

\[^{33}\] The Cinnamon Bear, Transco, Hollywood, California: syndicated, November 26, 1937-December 25, 1937. This program repeated yearly through the 1950s.

Jimmy’s actions were not the only behaviors that audience members would have recognized, however. Throughout this short serial, Judy and Jimmy demonstrated a wide spectrum of feelings from surprise to concern, from fear to annoyance, from wonder to happiness, once again exhibiting feelings that young audience members might understand and share as well. Listening to children about their own age go through these journeys and through the subsequent emotional ups and downs helped the audience of children feel connected to a story that may have otherwise seemed unbelievable and not relatable.

In fact, children were sometimes so inspired by popular representations of themselves that they often felt compelled to write to these characters or to those who made them. When her film company was looking for the lead in their adaptation of the popular Jimmy Hatlo comic strip *Little Iodine*, Mary Pickford was inundated with handwritten “try-outs.” Her papers, housed at the Margaret Herrick Library in West Hollywood, California, illustrate the mindset of a great many girls who were eager to move to Hollywood and become the next big child star. Eight-year-old Betsy Badger boasted, “My sister says I am just like Little Iodine only more so.”35 She continued, “Daddy says Little Iodine can’t hold a candle to me.” Shirley Shubin listed her qualifications like a pro.36 She ticked off, “At school I have taken part in plays and sung songs for teas that the school holds every year. I have played the piano and recited in front of crowds. I have also taken dance lessons.” Many young girls such as ten-year-old Margie Ann Nash of Louisville, Kentucky wanted desperately “to have a chance” at the

35 Betsy Badger to Mary Pickford, 29 January 1946, Mary Pickford Papers Collection—*Little Iodine* (1946)—Correspondence—Casting, Margaret Herrick Library, Hollywood, California (hereafter *Little Iodine*—MHL).

36 Shirley Shubin, February 1946, Little Iodine—MHL.
Little Iodine part.\textsuperscript{37} Many of them, like Nash, gushed that they have “always loved the movies.”

The archives of Harold Gray, the creator of Little Orphan Annie, also provides the interested scholar with hundreds of letters written by both young boy and girl fans of the comic strip. These letters illuminate the kinds of concerns that children had about a variety of topics that may have been unknown had one examined only “traditional” historical sources. Too often when one thinks of letters children wrote during the Great Depression, one recalls the letters of want and need that children wrote to President Roosevelt and his wife. Yet those were not the only concerns of the youth at that time.

The letters children and teens who wrote to Gray (or to Annie) seemed to focus on getting something less lucrative from their idols; usually these children asked for Gray’s autograph, or a personalized drawing of Annie, Daddy Warbucks, or Annie’s dog, Sandy. Sometimes, they needed Gray’s approval of their own drawings (which they always included). A short letter from ten-year-old James Mullen, for instance, demonstrated Mullen’s anxiety over the drawings of Annie and Sandy he included.\textsuperscript{38} “I can draw Annie and Sandy,” James wrote and then added, “but not good.” He self-consciously asked Gray for his opinion, “…would like you to tell me if they are ok.”\textsuperscript{39}

Many youngsters also wrote numerous letters regarding the events of the comic strips themselves; clearly child readers took Gray’s comic very seriously. Sometimes

\textsuperscript{37} Margie Ann Nash to Mary Pickford, 15 February 1946, Little Iodine—MHL.

\textsuperscript{38} James Mullen to Harold Gray, undated, Box 1, fol. 3, Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University (hereafter referred to as HG-HGARC).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
parents wrote on behalf of their children who they claimed were sick with worrying over Annie. Mrs. S. Lowell pleaded with Gray to “try and make everything turn out all right for Annie,” otherwise her eight-year-old daughter Cora would become “deathly sick.”

At other times, the children themselves picked up their pencils and wrote to Gray demanding a happy resolution for Annie, Daddy Warbucks, and, of course, Sandy. Eight-year-old Thelma Anderson warned Gray that her “brother will take a billy [sic] club after you if you don’t save orphan Annie’s dog.” She herself took a softer stance with Gray, however, asking him politely to spare Sandy’s life “for [Sandy] is a friend of mine.”

Other letters penned by children also requested that Gray change Annie’s costume, give Annie eyes, allow her to age, or by the mid-1940s, find a boyfriend. A group of youths who had been “reading Little Orphan Annie since [they] were toddlers,” demanded that Annie “blossom into a good American woman, settle down, and marry a nice sailor, soldier, or marine.” In many ways then, in order to see and hear what girls of this era were experiencing, one has to examine the things that interested them. One must, as historian Susan Douglas says, “go where the girls are.” In this case, the girls are found in popular culture resources and in the personal correspondence they inspired.

40 Mrs. S. Lowell to Harold Gray, 14 March 1945, Box 1, fol. 4, HG-HGARC.

41 Thelma Anderson to Harold Gray, 18 October 1944, Box 1, fol. 3, HG-HGARC.

42 Ibid.

43 Evelyn Merril “and Friends” to Harold Gray, 26 June 1945, Box 1, fol. 4, HG-HGARC.

44 Susan J. Douglas, Where the Girls Are, 10.
Another explanation for the dearth of scholarship on girls and girl culture of this time period is that scholars have inadvertently discriminated against girls and girl culture. Shirley Temple was the biggest box-office draw of the mid-1930s yet in historical scholarship, at least until recently, other young male actors such as Mickey Rooney and Jackie Cooper had eclipsed her star.\(^{45}\) In her text, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female in the Mass Media*, Susan Douglas attributes this slight to the idea that female teen culture, at least in the 1960s was seen as “kitsch” and “none of what [teen girls] did, apparently had any redeeming value at all.”\(^{46}\) While girls were portrayed as “flying nuns, witches, genies, twig-thin models, and go-go-boot-clad dancers in cages,” boys on the other hand, “were the thoughtful, dedicated rebels, the counter-culture leaders, the ones who made history.” “According to the prevailing cultural history of our times,” Douglas continued, “the impact of the girls was fleeting, superficial, trivial.” Though Douglas is talking about teen girl culture of the 1960s, her statement rings true with regard to how we have remembered the preadolescent girl in popular culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s as well. Orphan Annie was a nosy brat, Shirley Temple was a doll, and the various voice actresses heard on the radio in the 1940s were as inconsequential as the radio


programs they worked on. Clearly then, for most historians, it seems as if small girls had no impact on society during these decades, let alone in the many years afterward.

In her final analysis, however, Douglas decides that female teen culture of the 1960s was notable. She challenged her readers to “rewatch and relisten” to the popular media of the 1960s to discover the value of young women of the era.\(^{47}\) Similarly, my project requires the same methodology on my part and demands the same actions on the part of my readers. Though Douglas focused on teen girls and young women, this study examines even those Douglas misses—girl children and preadolescent girls. Since Freud first popularized the notion in America, many have come to believe that childhood experiences shape our adult attitudes, behaviors, and actions. This belief has made its way from psychologists and psychiatrists, trickled down through our judicial system (see, for example, the Menendez brothers defense), and filtered into society at large (see for example, the ABC dramedy, *The Wonder Years*, 1988-1993). Therefore, in order to understand our society today, it is imperative that we start to examine and historicize the experiences our youngest and most recent ancestors lived through.

By rewatching and relistening to popular representations of girls during the years that led up to the Great Depression and continued through World War II, one notices a world not only filled with little girls but also, in fact, dominated by them. This world was certainly atypical from the years preceding and succeeding this time frame. Although girls showed up in popular media since it first evolved, never before had they been such an overwhelming presence and influential force. Moreover, by the late 1940s,

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 10.
preadolescent girls were no longer center stage; teenage women such as Natalie Wood and Debbie Reynolds started to dominate Hollywood, Betty and Veronica made Archie’s world spin in the comics realm, and the child actors of Let’s Pretend grew up to be the teenage actors of Let’s Pretend.

As part of my attempt to follow Susan Douglas’s model and to rewatch and relisten to the girl culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, I analyzed a variety of historical and popular culture resources such as articles from newspapers and fan magazines, autobiographies, radio programs, publicity materials, etc., and shaped my study in the following ways. In the first chapter, ‘Sex & Stature are No Impediments to Talents so Overwhelming’: Young Actresses of the Stage and Early Screen,” I examine the evolution of the young girl image in popular culture from Kate and Ellen Bateman’s depiction of Richmond and Richard III, respectively, to Mary Pickford’s Poor Little Rich Girl. I then look at the explosion of girls in popular culture that preceded the Great Depression and the war years. Preadolescent girls were always present in popular media, but during this time period, they were not allowed to (literally) act their age. This is very different from the subsequent depictions of young girls beginning with Little Orphan Annie in the mid-1920s.

As the first true “case study” of my dissertation, chapter two, “Closing the Gaps: Little Orphan Annie in the 1920s and 1930s,” is a close analysis of Little Orphan Annie in her many incarnations. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which popular culture in general, and Annie in particular became the solution to the growing problems that arose from modern living: problems such as modern ideology versus a traditional one, city life
versus rural living, as well as the mounting generational crisis that concerned Americans at this time. Comic strips proved to be an effective medium at bridging the so-called generation gap between parents and their children as both groups were avid consumers of this product. Moreover, Annie also crossed over into other cultural media such as radio and film; these additional products helped build her audience and transformed her into a common household name that parents and their children discussed freely when perhaps they had little else to talk about.

As the most famous child actress of the era, Shirley Temple is the focus of chapter three, “Daddy’s Girl and Mommy’s Rival: Shirley Temple and the Answer to the 1930s Gender Crisis.” As one of the few “Depression-proof” industries in America, film was the natural medium to study in this era. Preadolescent actresses became society’s solution to a growing gender crisis that was exacerbated by Depression. Perhaps no one better encapsulates the 1930s than child-star Shirley Temple, a film actress. Temple provided depression-weary men with an opportunity to once again, exert their masculinity, both emotionally and physically. Through Temple’s healing touch and through their interactions with her on the screen, men were invigorated and therefore felt the pangs of guilt and shame less markedly. So often seen as benefitting from man’s loss of status, women, on the other hand, were neutralized through Temple, her films, and her publicity.

---

48 Although the movie industry was not entirely immune to the effects of the Depression, as its numbers suffered between the years 1930 and 1933, the industry, as a whole, not only rebounded quickly, but also flourished. According to historian Lary May in his book The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way, “evidence reveals that over the entire fifteen-year period attendance underwent an unprecedented expansion of about 100 percent from the thirties through World War II,” (p. 122).
Chapter four, “Supporter, Soldier, Shopper, and Sidekick: Girls on the Home Front,” is a close examination of the small girl in the medium of radio. As the cheapest and most accessible form of entertainment during the war, radio democratized news and entertainment like no other medium before it. Programs geared for children, such as *Jack Armstrong—The All American Boy* and *Terry and the Pirates*, engaged children in the war effort. They also entertained new models of behavior and roles for young girls. Girls, during this time period, helped Americans endure war and envision a future of peace. At the same time, however, depictions of preadolescent girls started to wane, both in frequency and in fortitude. This chapter examines reasons behind the fact that young girls were starting to lose their power with the end of war.

Choosing these case studies demonstrates how the images of small girls invaded a variety of media, or, to put it another way, by focusing on three different media, I show just how omnipresent the image of the small girl was between 1924 and 1945. My conclusion reveals that the end of World War II also spelled the end of the strong, preadolescent girl protagonist across a variety of popular culture media. What happened to the image of the preadolescent girl across these media? What does her decline mean for the status of young girls in general? Once again, the young girls of this case study—by and large, now adult women in post-war America, provide, a way to answer these questions.
CHAPTER 1

ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE: THE PREADOLESCENT ACTRESS, 1840-1920

In the fall of 1853, eleven-year-old Kate Bateman, and her nine-year-old sister Ellen, toured America’s largest cities as Richmond and Richard III respectively, in two acts of William Shakespeare’s classic play *Richard III*. The young thespians drew crowds wherever they went and were likened to “idols” who were praised in both “clubs” as well as “private circles, by railway and [by] steamer.”¹ In October of that year, *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, a Boston illustrated periodical, published an engraved daguerreotype of the sisters costumed in their *Richard III* attire.²

On the left-hand side of the print, dressed as Richard III, with crown, cape, and moustache, Ellen’s expression elicits part pain and part disgust; she shirks the eye of her audience, shrinking into the background—a true outcast. To her right, Kate, in full armor with a scroll in her hand and arms crossed defiantly over her chest, looks to the sky; she stands confidently, with legs open, seemingly foreshadowing her victory over Richard.

As young theatrical prodigies, Kate and Ellen Bateman performed on stages across America and Britain. Though they were mere toddlers when they debuted (Kate was no more than four and Ellen only two!), the Bateman sisters played adult roles

¹ *Spirit of the Times*, 4 October 1851.

throughout their careers. Nor were their young years the only obstacle the sisters had to overcome while acting, as they not only had to play adults on stage, they were also frequently cast as men. Indeed, unlike the female child stars who inhabited comic strips, film, and radio between 1924 and 1945, with very few exceptions the young girl whose image populated various forms of popular culture between the mid-to-late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized, not by promoting a picture of herself, but rather, by playing against her type and form. In the rare instances when the young girl was allowed to play her own age and sex, she was, as in the case of Little Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, typically killed off before reaching adolescence. Instead, the young girl hid behind the veils of adulthood and masculinity; she threw her youthfulness and her sex aside as she masqueraded around as a young boy, a grown woman, or even a grown man. Thus, although the young girl may have been present in popular culture, her value lay not in presenting a true portrait of herself to her audiences, but rather, in getting them to buy into her act. Boys, on the other hand, were able to cash in at face value. Their images, unsullied by pretense, dominated popular media such as print advertisements, comic strips, and early film.

Images of children have been used throughout print advertisements from their inception. Though girls were used to sell material goods, such as “the Clabber girl (from 1899)…and the Morton salt girl (from 1914),” for the most part when a child’s image was used in advertisements around the turn of the century, it was that of a male child.³

Little boys hawked a diverse assortment of goods. Starting from 1906, for example, the Dutch Boy Painter, in his blue overalls, wooden clogs, and with his page-boy blond hair hidden under a cap, urged consumers to buy his “white lead paint.” Or, to cite another famous advertiser, the bespectacled Winthrop Wise saved Americans money by helping them “save the surface” of their decks and wood floors with Kyanize. Similarly, the Clicquot Eskimo Boy, covered in white fur, but with a smile and spirit just as effervescent as the ginger drink he was peddling, encouraged “everybody” to drink up.4

Like these other sales boys, Buster Brown, the mischievous male child who had his start in the comics, soon became synonymous with consumer goods and advertising. According to comic scholar Ian Gordon, Buster Brown was such an effective salesman, “he cannot be understood solely as a comic strip.” Indeed, Gordon continues, “all of his incarnations contributed to the make-up of his character, and each reinforced, or advertised the other.”5 Thus, though he may have gotten his start in the funny papers, Buster Brown truly became the image of synergic advertisement. He could sell just about anything including children’s shoes and adult items such as “cigars and whiskey.”6

Although, according to historian Ann Douglas, early ad men produced all advertisements (“even those for men’s items”) with mothers in mind, clearly these businessmen thought

4 Clayton Lindsay Smith, The History of Trade Marks (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1923), 32-35.


that the way to get mothers to open their purses was by bombarding them with impish images of her sons.  

Boys and their images were not only used to sell goods, however, they also readily appeared in other forms of popular media. At the turn of the twentieth century the funny pages, where Buster Brown got his start, were actually teeming with male children. Newspapers and magazines such as the New York Daily News, The New Yorker and the Saturday Evening Post featured an array of young, male characters such as the bald-headed street rat, Mickey Dugan as The Yellow Kid (1895-1898), the naughty boys Hans and Fritz of the Katzenjammer Kids (1897-present), the title character in Little Nemo (1905-1911), the three brothers of the Kinderkids strip (1906), and Wee Willie Winkie in Wee Willie Winkie’s World (1906-1907). These mischievous young boys were quite different from the Victorian ideal promoted by the likes of Frances Hodges Burnett in books such as Little Lord Fauntleroy. Unlike the goody-goody actions of Lord Fauntleroy, for example, the boys from the comic strips, e.g. Buster Brown, Mickey Dugan, and the Katzenjammer Kids, often behaved badly. Week after week, Buster Brown made an empty promise to “Be a good boy from now on.”

---


8 Frances Hodges Burnett, Little Lord Fauntleroy, reprint (Charlestown, SC: BiblioBazaar, 1885/2007).

Fritz Katzenjammer usually ended up (no pun intended) bent over the knee of some wronged adult.

These rambunctious and mischievous little boys appealed to “a middle class caught up in [the] dread of lifelessness” brought about by modern, urban living. The young boys of these strips became “symbolic agents[s] of anarchic cultural protest.” As “the antithesis of the innocent Victorian child,” these “naughty boys” were suitable heroes for (the sometimes disgruntled and) displaced rural men who had recently moved to urban centers for work. When Hans and Fritz bested a nameless adult antagonist each week, for example, readers may have felt like their triumph was akin to turning the tables on those employers who controlled the readers’ own fate.

This speaks to the fact that during this time frame, i.e. between 1880 and 1900, society started to revise its perception of little boys. The Victorian ideal of self-restraint no longer applied to young boys. Instead, a new understanding of boys championed by educator G. Stanley Hall came to the forefront. According to Hall, the key to eliminating effeminate traits in men was by allowing the younger versions of them, i.e. young boys, to embrace their inherent barbaric natures. Or, as Gail Bederman made clear in her seminal study *Manliness and Civilization*, “The key to building powerful virility in American men…was to encourage primitive savagery in American boys.”

---

10 King, “The Kid,” 5.

11 Cross, Cute and the Cool, 59.

depictions reveal the changing notion of boys’ development. By the beginning of the twentieth century, boys were encouraged to move beyond the unrealistic Victorian notion of the angel in the house; now, they were to unselfconsciously unbridge their childish emotion and celebrate their impish actions and behavior.

The creators of the “bad” boys found in the comic strips of the turn of the twentieth century looked to literature for more than just examples of who not to be (i.e. Lord Fauntleroy). In American literature, they also found models of this “new boy,” i.e. the naughty, adventurous boy. Early examples of the new boy are found in Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870), Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* series (1868-1870), as well as in the *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* books by Mark Twain (1876-1896). Whether because of their lies, their naivety, their behavior, or their use of slang, in these tales, the boys get in trouble frequently and often run off without guardians to begin adventures of their own. Such stories “allayed children’s fears while providing them with fantasies of escape and empowerment.”

---


Unlike the boy characters of the comic strips, however, these boys, even despite their ability to behave badly, were not only inherently good, but also sure to grow up and take their place in the normative middle class. According to children’s literature scholar, Bert Anderson Roller, with few exceptions, “this American boy knows little of the underworld life and less of aristocracy.”\(^{16}\) Indeed, “he is middle-class, of decent parentage, and a victim of only the inhibitions forced on him by an adult world.” Their perilous, but ultimately harmless adventures, “allowed middle-class [boy] children to imagine adventures and challenges no longer attainable in real life.”\(^ {17}\)

The boys of the comic strips, however, were different. First and foremost, with few exceptions, they were usually from the working classes. Like the Yellow Kid and Hanz and Fritz, they might also be ethnic minorities. Thus, they served “as the stand-in for working-class or ethnic minorities” in the urban centers.\(^ {18}\) Although they had their bad boy roots in the middle-class stories of the nineteenth century, they expanded their audiences into the twentieth century by providing an example to those boys and men who may have lived outside of the middle-class categorization.

With this expanded notion of the bad boy, which included ethnic, economic, and even racial minorities, the cultural influence of little boys did not remain solely within the funny pages. The new boy was also featured predominantly in films. *Our Gang*, for


\(^{17}\) Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 186; emphasis mine.

\(^{18}\) Cross, *Cute and the Cool*, 59.
example, has been lauded as an extraordinarily diverse cast of boys and girls, both black and white. That being said, it was, after all, based around a mostly male-driven plot and as a consequence featured a largely young male ensemble. The 1924 short where the gang builds its own train, “The Sundown Limited,” is a prime example.\textsuperscript{19} In this short film Mickey and Joe literally engineer the entire story: they go on a train ride; they accidentally start the train and fuel the ensuing shenanigans; their idea leads to a reconstructed train; and they make the rules and the train schedule. The girls, such as Jackie and Mary, were there for filler: to wave as the train passes, to be rescued on the tracks, and to instigate an argument between the male leads. Indeed, one slide reads “Mary—she causes all the fights in the neighborhood—and there’s lots of them.”\textsuperscript{20} Mary is not important, but rather, her influence on the actions of the boys around her is. Thus, even when early filmmakers included young girl characters, these actresses were not always relevant to the main storyline; their roles were ancillary to the true purpose of the act.

Despite the successes of the co-ed cast of \textit{Our Gang}, all other child actors and actresses of the silent era paled in comparison to the fame of Jackie Coogan, who between the ages of seven in 1921 and thirteen in 1927, starred in sixteen major films. Though Jackie Coogan’s success “initiated the child-star era in Hollywood,” he did not

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Sundown Limited}, streaming, directed by Robert F. McGowan (Buffalo, NY: Pathé Exchange, 1924).

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
start his career in film. Coogan was born into a trouping family in Los Angeles in 1914. His mother was a former child star and his father was a vaudeville comedian. Coogan started making his first appearances with his father on the vaudeville circuit. From the time he was a toddler, Coogan wowed spectators with his impressions, comic timing, and his ability to dance “his version of the ‘naughty new ‘shimmy. ’”

A young Jackie Coogan got his first big movie break in 1921 when he was cast as the “angel child, complete with luminous spirituality and truly awesome redemptive powers” opposite of the established film star Charlie Chaplin. This film made Jackie Coogan a star in his own right. In this aptly named comedic-drama The Kid, the tramp (Chaplin) finds and eventually informally adopts an orphan baby boy (Coogan).

Although the tramp initially tries to pass the baby off on unsuspecting strangers, such as a woman who already has a child and an elderly gentleman walking the streets, a police officer thwarts his every maneuver. Frustrated, Chaplin plops himself down on a curb. For a moment he contemplates setting the child adrift in the sewer. Fortunately for the orphan, the tramp changes his mind when he finds a hand-written note on the baby

---


24 The Kid, streaming, directed by Charles Chaplin (NY: Associated First National Pictures, 1921).
imploring, “Please love and care for this orphan child.” Chaplin looks back upon the baby and only then does he smile and take him home.

_The Kid_ moves forward five years later, and the baby has grown into Jackie Coogan—a pint-sized, expressive, dark-eyed child with a dirty-blond mane cut in a page-boy style. Coogan’s turn as a waif allowed him to show diversity as a young actor. In one scene of the film, he garners laughs by beating a bully twice his size. In another, Coogan elicits tears from his audience as he cries and pulls his hair in torment when he is taken away from the tramp, the only father he has ever known. To a country dealing with its share of war orphans, this scene was particularly heart-wrenching and effective.

Indeed, Chaplin believed that Coogan, “provided something the [war-ravaged] world needed, a lost child to take to its heart and comfort.” Whether or not one agrees with Chaplin’s sentimental assessment, one cannot deny Coogan’s popularity. Coogan was such a hit, that his name recognition was compared to that of the president of the time, Warren G. Harding.

Unlike the rambunctious boys of the comic strip, according to scholar Robert King, Coogan’s “cultural significance was at least partly grounded in his appeal to an imaginary past,” where all children, even boys, were still considered “angels in the

---

25 Ibid.

26 Cary, _The Boy King_, 58.

27 King, _The Kid_, 4.
Encouraging a comparison between the angelic Coogan and their own son or daughter, parents readily and literally bought into Coogan’s charm. They purchased Coogan pencil boxes for their children because it was educational, books of his films “in the name of cultural enhancement,” and persuaded their children to wear caps and clothes they bought them in a style reminiscent of what Jackie Coogan wore in *The Kid*. All of this was an attempt “not to make a fashion statement, but to be in touch with [Coogan’s] magnetic personality.”

Indeed, Coogan’s “personality” seemed to be the key to his success. Cultural historian Warren Susman has argued that the culture of character, developed over the long nineteenth century and focused on “citizenship, duty, democracy, work, building, golden deeds, outdoor life, conquest, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity, and above all, manhood,” was replaced by the culture of personality and its association with adjectives such as “fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, [and] forceful.” In *The Kid*, as well as in his subsequent film work, Coogan exuded the qualities of personality as outlined by Susman. Much like the cult of character that preceded it, the cult of personality left little room for young girls. Though boys such as Coogan, for example, might be able to take on the traits of dominance and

28 Ibid., 5.


30 Ibid., 235.

forcefulness, girls had a more difficult task as they were rarely allowed to take on roles or parts of this kind of substance.

Thus, with their dominating presence in advertisements, in comic strips, and even in early film, little boys had the corner on the popular culture market around the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, as already mentioned, and as the presence of the Bateman sisters on the stage demonstrate, little girls also were always present in popular media. By and large, however, they were hidden in plain sight. Though their appearances in popular media grew between the years of 1840 and 1920, often times, these “girls” were not all what they appeared to be. In fact, little girls were often encouraged to stay babies or to play parts meant for older children (or even adults). Additionally, if a part was created especially for a young female child, an adult was often cast for the role.

Unlike society’s understanding of the young boy, which started to shift in the mid-nineteenth century to encompass the “new boy” as well, the young girl, at least through the first decade of the twentieth century, was still primarily seen through a Victorian lens. Though adult women were entering the public world, demanding the right to vote, and even, to a certain degree, insisting on sexual freedom, the weight of public opinion was against these changes, if not in politics, than certainly in women’s personal lives. Young girls were still raised to be good women and therefore, exemplary models of the “cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”

fact was reflected in the roles in which they were cast. Girls could not appear as forceful characters, unless in death.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s little Eva is perhaps the most renowned young girl of the mid-nineteenth century and therefore the best example of the Victorian girlhood ideal in action. In the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Evangeline St. Claire is the daughter of a slave owner, who is rescued by drowning, by the slave, Tom.33 After her rescue, Eva convinces her father to purchase Tom and she helps educate the slave, and others in her house, about Christianity. Little Eva’s life and especially her death, demonstrate that the young girl represented, even better than her mother, “the quintessential [and literal] angel in the house.”34 She was childlike, sexually pure, and an “unambiguous model of feminine dependence.”35 Despite all of her good qualities and characteristics, however, as historian Ann Douglas has noted, Eva’s “greatest act [was] dying, something that we all can and must do.”36 Thus, for Douglas, Eva’s importance lie in the fact that through her supposed normalcy, we, as the readers, when exalting Eva, exalt the average. Though that may have been true with regard to the original text, reading about the death of an average, young girl was not quite the same as seeing it in production. For that, only an inspired actress, not an average one, could tackle the part.

35 Ibid.
In the years after the book’s publication, it was adapted to the stage by a variety of playwrights, including George L. Aiken, a member of the famed Howard Theater Company. Aiken was, apparently, even more gifted in the literary arts than he was in the theatrical ones. His play opened on September 27, 1852 in Troy, Michigan and it was, by all accounts, a theatrical hit. It ran for “an unprecedented 325 consecutive performances,” and made a household name of the Howard family, particularly Cordelia Howard, the young girl who, before her dramatic deathbed sequence, breathed life into the character of little Eva. Cordelia Howard’s little Eva was such a compelling character, in fact, that Aiken’s original play actually ended with her death! Eventually, to be more truthful to Stowe’s original story, Aiken tacked on three more acts to the play, but was sure to include “Eva’s ghost” in the last scene. “In this production,” it was clear, “the adult’s supported the starring child.” Even the playbills elevated Cordelia Howard as little Eva, over all other characters, including the titular one.

In her memoirs, Howard recounts tale after tale of the difficulty audiences found in separating her, from the part she played. Howard herself was often overcome with


emotion during her scenes. Perhaps it was no surprise that her audience felt similarly.

In one recollection, Howard tells of befriending two girls. After the girls kept favorably comparing their playmate to the “real” Cordelia Howard, Howard finally and reluctantly, revealed her identity. Just as she knew would happen, she was “hoisted on a pedestal, and they were down below, worshipping vigorously.”

Little Eva, and by extension, the actress who was most noted for playing her, was above reproach. As her memoirs state explicitly, both girls were to be worshipped. They were not girls, as much as unrealistic imitations of them; or rather, they were more like “angels” as Eva’s/Howard’s suffering and death, save and redeem those around her, particularly the slaves (who she convinces to convert to Christianity) and her father (who embraces his faith and even agrees to free his slaves).

Little Eva was not the only preadolescent character to take to the stage in Aiken’s adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In fact, the slave Topsy was another integral character to the story, if only because she proved a foil to Eva. Whereas Eva was light, both in skin color and in spirit, Topsy was dark. Eva was ethereal and almost perfect; Topsy, on the other hand, was earthly and flawed. Eva was concerned with religion and with spirituality; Topsy was more pragmatic than that. Perhaps most important to this analysis, however, was the fact that in the play, ten-year old Topsy was played by Cordelia’s mother, Caroline. Cordelia could play the young girl, but she must die in the role; she could not be allowed to mature and therefore threaten her status as the good

---

Victorian woman/girl. Thus, a young girl could not play Topsy, not only because Topsy was the opposite of the true woman in her inability to act pious, pure, submissive, and domestic, but rather because Topsy would not die; she was a survivor and as such could never rise to the potential of the “angel in the house.”

With so few parts their own age available to them, preadolescent stage actresses often found themselves acting in other types of roles. The Bateman sisters provide a good example of this phenomenon occurring in American popular culture. In the 1840s and 1850s, the Bateman sisters toured the United States and Great Britain playing parts suitable for much older performers. In addition to their turns as Richmond and Richard, respectively, the girls also tackled the Shakespearean roles of Portia, Lady Macbeth, and grizzled old Shylock. Their talents were not solely relegated to drama, however, as some of their most notable performances were from the comedies “The Young Couple” and “Her Royal Highness,” the latter being a play written expressly for the duo.42

In their publicity stills, the sisters never appeared “cute, angelic, or enticing,” but rather, “homely and serious.”43 Their tender years as well as their sex were obstacles to the Bateman’s success. As already noted, theatrical parts for young girls were limited. Therefore, their crafty, manager-parents eradicated those traits in the girls’ publicity and in their theatrical education. According to another Bateman daughter, their mother, Sydney Bateman, was so smart and talented, “she thought everyone else should and could


43 Mullenneaux, Our Genius, 289.
Thus, she and her husband forced their children to memorize all of Shakespeare’s plays and to read history books at “absurd ages.” Moreover, Kate herself “once admitted that her ‘father used to scold her terribly’ when she was unable to hold certain dramatic poses.” As one reviewer from the *Daily Missouri Democrat* revealed, their parents’ antics apparently worked as the duo were successful in their acting endeavors. The reviewer was rather impressed with the Bateman children’s’ skills and boasted, “Sex and stature are no impediments to talents so overwhelming.”

The reason their parents were so strict was the same reason the girls were so popular. At a time when childhood was a malady one was encouraged to get over quickly, less he/she succumb to early death, like little Eva, for instance, the Bateman sisters’ genius proved it could be done. Clearly these girls’ popularity and livelihood relied on their ability and talent to conceal both their age and their sex. They calmed parental fears stemming from childhood death and disease. If the Bateman sisters could grow up fast (and remain healthy while doing so), so could any other young boy or girl.

Of course, the Bateman’s were the exception to the rule. Their talents were not found too often among children their own age. Moreover, according to historian Gary

---

45 Ibid.
46 Mullenneaux, Our Genius, 302.
Cross, “directors believed that real kids were incapable of enduring the pressures of live (or even film) performance.” Thus, with the lack of children who were skilled enough to play dramatic roles, coupled with the fact that adults feared that stage life was too taxing for young girls, directors often cast adults in the roles that should have went to young girls. Indeed, arguably the most famous female “child” of the silent-film era was an adult actress.

Though she began her career as “Baby Gladys,” a child entertainer on the vaudeville circuit, she enjoyed her greatest celebrity when she changed her name to Mary Pickford and began acting in the movies. Pickford played a variety of characters throughout her adult acting career. Her numerous portrayals of young, often orphaned girls, however, earned her the nickname of “Little Mary Pickford” or even, the possessive “Our Mary.” The parts Mary Pickford played cast her as the twentieth century embodiment of the Victorian true woman: pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the nickname “Our Mary” made reference to the Christian saint.

Gladys Smith, a.k.a. Mary Pickford, was born in Toronto in 1892. The early death of her father forced Smith into acting by the tender age of five. Her younger siblings Lottie and Jack soon followed in her footsteps. Smith and her siblings started in stock companies and by the time Smith was fourteen, she and her family had moved to New York to further their stage careers. While in New York, Smith (re-christened “Mary

48 Cross, Cute and the Cool, 57.
Pickford” by David Belasco, a Broadway heavyweight director and impresario) quickly found her niche: working on stage during the peak performance season, but supplementing her income by acting in the “flickers” when the theater season ended in early summer. In 1909 alone, Pickford acted in forty of D.W. Griffith’s short American Biograph Company features garnering her yet another youthful nickname: The Biograph Girl.

Small in stature and youthful in appearance, Pickford was the perfect “child” actress. In her interview with Pickford, Helen Ferguson of the *Los Angeles Times* stressed the actress’s childlike qualities. With her “feet curled under her…little old rose frock,” and her “hands fluttering in unconscious gestures as she talked,” according to the reporter, Pickford did not exhibit the behavior nor appearance of an adult, but rather, those of an unselfconscious child—a part she often portrayed. Though at times Pickford vocally resented “the fact that [she] had allowed [herself] to be hypnotized by the public into remaining a little girl,” it was a profitable endeavor.

---


52 Ibid.

In fact, without her little-girl roles, Pickford may not have been so recognizable. As a young actress, for example, Pickford often played parts more appropriate to her own age, where she, the young woman, was met with hardship but overcame such adversity by falling in love and marrying the man of her dreams. In D.W. Griffith’s 1912 short film, *The New York Hat*, for instance, Pickford portrays a young girl whose mother, overworked by her miserly husband, has died. Before her death, however, the woman gave the local minister some money for her young daughter (Pickford) so that he may purchase for her the kind of “finery which she has always been denied.”

Though Pickford was twenty when she was cast in this role, she played a girl on the cusp of womanhood, a reality demarcated by her hair. For example, in the beginning of the film, Pickford wears her uncovered curls down, a symbol of girlhood. Despite this, however, she covets a hat, a sure sign of her impending maturity as every young lady she meets in the film, has her hair covered by her own, embellished hat. Utilizing the money that the dying woman gave him, the minister purchases the most expensive and most sought-after hat in town. He delivers it to Pickford who tries it on and practices walking like a lady in the hat for a few minutes before she leaves the house with the hat on.

Pickford’s transformation into a woman is not complete, however, until she receives a proposal from the minister. Even at this event, she vacillates between

---


55 Ibid.
childhood and adulthood, initially scurrying away from the minister and his proposal and then, only accepting it after her father’s encouragement. Finally, with the minister’s love, and her father’s acquiescence, Pickford blooms into a young woman; she sheds the last vestiges of her girlhood, takes the minister’s hand, and beams. Although Mary Pickford received accolades in these early films, such roles were not memorable and certainly did not lead her to ultimate stardom. For that, Pickford had to play-act much younger.

Indeed, as she grew older, Mary Pickford’s roles became younger and younger so that “between her twenty-fourth and thirty-fourth birthdays, she starred in a baker’s dozen of famous films in which she played children twelve years of age or under.” One of the greatest disparities between Pickford’s real age and her reel age came in one of her most beloved vehicles, Poor Little Rich Girl. Directed by Maurice Tourneur and produced by Pickford’s long-time collaborator, movie producer Adolph Zukor, Poor Little Rich Girl followed the then twenty-five-year-old Mary Pickford as an eleven-year-old named Gwendolyn, who although she came from a moneyed family, was not rich in love and kindness. In fact, Gwendolyn goes unappreciated in her life by both her servants, who boss her around, and her parents, who cannot be bothered with her.

In one scene, Gwendolyn, who is riding in a car driven by a chauffeur she insists she does not like, is starved for affection. She looks up into her nanny, Jane’s, face but is

56 Cary, Hollywood’s Children, 43.

57 Poor Little Rich Girl, streaming, directed by Maurice Tourneur (New York: Artcraft Pictures Corporation, 1917).
met with an unwavering façade. Gwendolyn then amuses herself by fogging up a window and drawing a happy face on it. Literally creating her own happiness, she smiles at the face. For her efforts, however, Jane smacks Gwendolyn’s hand and then resumes her stoic and impersonal gaze toward the front of the vehicle. In this way, the screenwriter tells us that those who live in Gwendolyn’s world have both, “Empty Hearts,” and “Empty Lives.”

Eventually, and through Gwendolyn’s own suffering, however, her guardians and staff realize the errors of their ways. When her scheming nanny accidentally gives her an overdose of sleeping medicine, Gwendolyn, in a stupor, stumbles down the stairs and falls into a coma. Throughout her ailment, Gwendolyn’s parents keep vigil at her bedside. They hear their sick child say things to her father such as “They say you’re made of money,” and then hug her doctor for comfort, and then to her mother, “In the Land where they burn candles at both ends. Perhaps I can find my mother there.” Riddled with guilt, her parents cry with joy when Gwendolyn does finally awaken. All ends well when her parents realize through Gwendolyn’s fight with death, “what is truly precious,” i.e. their daughter. Her father forsakes his busy Wall Street life and together, mom and dad cradle their daughter in her sickbed, presumably nursing Gwendolyn back to health through their love and affection. The little girl (much like her sentimental ancestor Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) has fulfilled the promise of salvation through death (or, in this case, almost death). No wonder her parents realized

---

58 Ibid.
how “truly precious” their young daughter was. The little girl, played by the grown woman, has saved the day by showing her parents the error of their ways. In order to be good parents, they must adhere to the sentimental values of their Victorian past.

In addition to combing her hair in long curls and dressing in skirts and hoops, common styles of an eleven-year old girl of the time, Pickford’s petite stature was made even smaller by the other actors and actresses in Poor Little Rich Girl (as in the other films she made where she played a young girl). The casting director made sure to cast tall co-stars. Moreover, the furniture was built especially large, so that when a chastised Pickford runs into a chair for comfort, she is practically swallowed by its girth. Finally, even when she played with other children in the course of the movie, Hollywood trickery ensured that Pickford was among the smallest of the bunch. In these ways, Mary Pickford was recognizable to the audience of the time, not as a young lady, but rather, as a young girl. In a 1917 review of Poor Little Rich Girl, the reviewer noted how Mary Pickford “in short dresses or in pajamas with her curls framing her sensitive face, [did] not look older than the [11-year-old] child in the story.” Thus, she and her film crew were successful in making Pickford look the role of the child.

Why was this so essential? According to scholars Gaylyn Studler and John C. Tibbetts, Pickford’s juvenation—or her attempt to interact with audiences through an act

---


of youthfulness—was essential to her success. Film authority John C. Tibbetts believes that Pickford’s “little-girl roles established her indisputably as the highest paid, most recognized, most idolized, and most powerful female in the entertainment business.”

Gaylyn Studler agrees, writing that Pickford’s childishness “enabled her remarkable success.” Clearly Americans were ready to see the little girl in the spotlight, but not quite ready for an actual girl to play herself. Instead, they embraced an adult actress who supposedly embodied a girl’s physicality and spirit. One fan remarked that Pickford did such a fine job of portraying a youngster, that in fact, “any attempt to discard it is resented.”

Pickford also realized that she was hemmed in by her type-casting and whined, “whenever I try to do something different, the public complains.” As such comments clarify, when Pickford strayed away from her little girl roles, her fans rebelled. Indeed, her turn as the title character in 1925’s Little Annie Rooney was Pickford’s attempt to win back audiences after a bevy of underwhelming box office performances in films such as Rosita which cast Pickford in more adult roles.

---

64 Evelyn Wells, “Big Film Roles, Four Babies, Pickford’s Wish,” San Francisco Call 22 March 1921, Pickford Collection, Scrapbook 29, Academy of Motion Pictures of Arts and Sciences, Hollywood, CA.
Of course, Pickford did not create the model of the juvenated starlet. Instead, she was just following the example laid out by her predecessors. Perhaps one of the most successful actresses who preceded Pickford in her juvenated role was Charlotte “Lotta” Crabtree. Born into a poor family with a father who often went missing for years on end, Lotta Crabtree, much like her successor Mary Pickford, became the primary breadwinner for her family at a young age. Crabtree first started performing at age six for the unpolished hoi polloi in small towns across America’s wild west. Her tours were profitable, but perhaps not surprisingly, she enjoyed her greatest successes at a more mature age. Indeed, Crabtree’s popularity grew as she herself did. What singled Crabtree out from other famous female performers of the time, however, was not necessarily her talent, but rather, her act. As historian Nan Mullenneaux points out, despite the fact that Crabtree “appeared on stage to…be about twelve years old, played girls and boys of that age in all her productions, and was referred to in reviews as ‘child star,’” in actuality, she “was a woman in her twenties, thirties, and forties.” Again, like Pickford, Lotta Crabtree’s fortunes clearly lay within her embodiment of the young girl.

These women became famous because they capitalized on Americans’ obsession with the young girl, in a safe way. They managed to protect the girl by taking these demanding roles on themselves. Their “sacrifice” allowed their audiences to glimpse

---

65 As used in this chapter, the terms “juvenation” and “juvenated” were first presented by John Hartley in his essay, “When Your Child Grows Up Too Fast: Juvenation and the Boundaries of the Social in the News Media,” in Continuum: The Journal of Media and Cultural Studies 12, no. 1 (1998), 9-30. I owe a great debt to Gaylyn Studlar, whose aforementioned text is where I first heard the terms and of Hartley.

66 Mullenneaux, “Our Genius,” 296 [italics are my own].
both the goodness and the frivolity of the lives of the young, and yet safeguard them from guilty feelings resultant from commodifying, and perhaps even sexualizing, little girls. In his controversial history *Child-Loving*, scholar James Kincaid looks at the Victorian origins of pedophilia.\(^{67}\) For Kincaid, Victorians praised the child so much, it was no wonder that adults loved him/her. Though Kincaid sees little difference in the genders and the ability of adults to desire both equally, as the “weaker” sex, adults may have felt that girls needed more protection than boys.\(^{68}\) This sentiment translated into the fact that images of the real-life, sexualized and commodified small girl was practically non-existent. Instead, adult women like Pickford, Crabtree, and Gish played the young girl. Adults did not have to feel guilty for their longing, as these “little girls” were fictitious. The actresses who played them were adult women.

As Gaylyn Studlar affirms, “The idea that Pickford had anything to do with sexual desire aimed at a child would have scandalized her admirers in the 1910s and 1920s.”\(^ {69}\) And yet, one cannot deny that part of Pickford’s charm was her captivating beauty and her playful femininity. Although she often played the part of a small girl, the truth was, she was a consenting, adult woman and thus, fair game. One admirer’s lengthy love letter “To Mary Pickford” featured in the March 1916 volume of *Motion Picture Magazine* demonstrates Pickford’s physical appeal. About Pickford’s appearance he


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{69}\) Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, p. 41.
wrote, “Those deep, dark places that the shadows kiss, ‘neath long, long lashes; Those long arms of you[rs]; Those curling lips.”

All of these attributes, he continued, added to Pickford’s “tender girlish bliss,” which was apparently quite attractive, at least to this letter writer. Mere months later, another Pickford devotee claimed that Pickford was the most “humanly irresistible thing” he ever saw. Studler believes that Pickford’s childish persona “appealed to and through a kind of cultural pedophilia that looked to the adorable and innocent ‘child-woman’ to personify nostalgic ideals of femininity that were inseparable from erotic value.”

It is irresponsible, however, to read Pickford and Crabtree’s immense popularity as the sole result of their abilities to connect contemporary audiences to “nostalgic ideals of femininity” and therefore eroticism. First and foremost, these two stars were not contemporaries themselves; they were a generation apart. Crabtree retired in 1891, one year before Pickford’s birth, and was dead by the mid-1920s, a time when Pickford’s career as a young girl on screen was still in full swing. Moreover, Lotta Crabtree was never considered quite the astounding beauty as Pickford was. Sure, she was cute, but reviewers consistently “dubbed her ‘kitten,’ ‘sunbeam,’ and ‘sparkling ingot,’” not

---


71 Ibid.


73 Studlar, Precocious Charms, 41.
beautiful or even just plain pretty. Finally, whereas Pickford preferred sentimental vehicles where she could put her versatile skills on display in these tragicomedies, Crabtree was mostly known for her comedic roles (such as Jenny Leatherlungs, “which spoofed the world-famous soprano Jenny Lind”), as well as her willingness to tackle roles which called for male actors. Indeed, “Lotta was fond of portraying young men.”

What the women did have in common, however, was their overbearing “stage mothers” who manipulated their daughters’ careers, and to a certain extent, their personal lives. These women helped their daughters to cultivate an inherently youthful public image. Pickford frequently talked about her mother in her interviews making it seem as though her mother helped her make daily decisions well past adulthood and into marriage. Crabtree’s mother, on the other hand, was such an intimidating force in her daughter’s life that “a legend began to grow that Mrs. Crabtree was drawing a ring of fire around her daughter.” As Lotta Crabtree was “hustled directly to performances and home again,” her mother enshrined Crabtree’s youthful image and some started to call her daughter, “Lotta, the Unapproachable.” In fact, Lotta Crabtree never married.

---

74 Mullenneaux, Our Genius, 295.


78 Chartier and Enss, With Great Hope, 36.
Crabtree and Pickford’s mothers were so good at cultivating their daughters’ images that both Lotta and Mary ended up belonging to America itself. These girls were not just their mothers’ daughters, they were the nation’s daughters. With possessive monikers such as “Our Mary” and “Our Little Lotta” both Pickford and Crabtree became national treasures. In fact, as Nan Mullenoux has pointed out, journalists often referred to Crabtree as “‘a true child of the people’” and even as “property of the nation.”79 For her part, Pickford was christened “America’s Sweetheart.” Perhaps this then, is the key to understanding both women’s popularity.

Mary Pickford is notable for another reason, as her public persona also provides us with an example of the infantilized girl, a popular long-nineteenth century depiction of women. As Baby Gladys, Pickford’s start in the entertainment industry demonstrates how female starlets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were encouraged to remain, not only young, but in fact to reverse time and become babies once more. This theory is not a far stretch, particularly given the history of Mary Pickford who, though she eventually graduated to “Little Mary,” remained small, not just in stature, but also in nomenclature. “Babies” such as Baby Gladys, Baby Lillian Gish, Baby Dorothy Gish, and Baby Marie Osborne were in fact, young girls ranging in age from pre-adolescent to teenager. Although, according to Baby Peggy, her moniker stemmed from the fact that “the director thought that [it] was a good short name for the marquee,” more was at play

79 Mullenexaux, Our Genius, 294 and 292, respectively.
At a time when women were systematically threatening male hegemony and authority, infantilizing them, even the youngest ones, took away their power.

By shrinking the woman (at least in name), you diminished her authority. Scholar Carolyn Kitch discusses this type of discursive and pictorial warfare in her article, “Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman and Power in the 1910s.” According to Kitch, in cartoons as early as Charles Dana Gibson’s of the 1890s, the New Woman appeared to dwarf the men around her and in some cases to literally toy with them. In her analysis of one drawing titled “Summer Sports,” three women appear to be flying kites. Upon further scrutiny, however, one realizes that the “kites” are actually small men, attached by strings that the women are holding. Pictures such as these “referenced turn-of-the-century men’s anxieties about women’s economic as well as sexual power.” Moreover, they obviously ridiculed strong, powerful women, as well as the men who courted them. Thus, the popularity of (and even the existence of!) such infantilized girls and women like Pickford and the Gish sisters was the direct product of male anxieties regarding the New Woman—and women’s own fears that if they became powerful they would prove unattractive to men and hence remain spinsters.


82 Ibid.
Unlike the images of the sexualized New Woman as giant, which were so popular in the early part of the twentieth century, these “girls” were, at least verbally, cut down to size.

Perhaps surprisingly, the reverse of this phenomenon, i.e. where small girls were transformed into adult women, also occurred. Despite the fact that the Bateman sisters played at being androgynous, and even asexualized, adults, there are more examples of the young girl acting the part of a sexualized adult woman. Such instances can be noted in advertisements and in film. In a 1919 Pearl Soap ad, a young female child has her hair positioned on top of her head, in a popular style of adult women of that time. As Elizabeth Gitter has demonstrated in her essay, “The Power of Women’s Hair in Victorian Imagination,” such long locks did not only signify adulthood. Indeed, “The more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display.”

Or, to put it another way, and in Gary Cross’s words, this “baby is already an attractive female.”

A more obvious example of the sexualizing of the female child comes in the form of Lilita “Lita” Grey who, at the age of twelve, was cast as the of-age angel-love interest of Charlie Chaplin in his film The Kid. Her role “was to flirt with and “sweetly tease” the

84 Ibid, 938.
85 Cross, Cute and Cool, 78.
Little Tramp.”

She is dressed head-to-toe in white, yet it is not innocence that she exudes. Instead, channeling the sexualized flapper, Grey’s hair is bobbed and her ankles exposed as she prances around in her kitten heels. Instructed by a devilish character to “Vamp him,” the angel Lilita tempts Chaplin with a hypnotic dance. At first, he ignores her. Moments later, however, with the devil whispering in his ear and Lilita flashing him her ankle, Chaplin relents and chases Lilita around; he is desperate to plant a kiss upon her lips. During her screen time, which lasts approximately two minutes, the twelve-year-old Lilita kisses both Chaplin and another adult male suitor twice each. Her overt sexuality is clearly on display. As an aside, an affair and subsequent marriage to the under-aged Lilita Grey would eventually lead to an investigation and cause Chaplin to flee to England for fear of felony charges. Clearly, American society at this time did not know what to do with the little girl who was between the ages of sucking at her mother’s breast and having a grown man play with her own.

By the mid-1920s little girls no longer had to channel the role of “baby” (a la Baby Gladys) or adult (like the Bateman sisters or Lita Grey) to make it big. Moreover, better movie and sound quality made it progressively more difficult for adults to pass as children. Thus, the days when a grown woman, such as “little” Mary Pickford, was realistic and convincing playing the part of the young girl were numbered. Increasingly, real child actresses were cast to play little girls in film and on the radio. With regard to comic strips, small girls made, perhaps, the biggest leap in both appearance and

---

importance as in 1924 *Little Orphan Annie* made her debut in the papers. *Little Orphan Annie*’s entrance, and consequent worldwide popularity, marked a significant change in the relevance of small girls within popular media. Her popularity showed that public opinion on women and their capabilities had shifted.
CHAPTER 2

CLOSING THE GAPS:

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

In a knee-length checkered dress, and short, wily curls adorning her head, a small girl stands erect, arms behind her back, listening intently to the stern-faced, tight-lipped Miss Asthma, the matron of her orphanage.¹ “You have been sheltered, clothed and fed since you were a baby entirely by charity,” Asthma reminds the child. “I hope you’ll always remember what a lot we’ve done for you here,” she continues. In the next two frames, we witness Asthma’s idea of “charity” as the small girl, on hands and knees, scrubs the floors; and standing on a chair, washes the dishes. Clearly, this youngster has worked hard for her food, clothing, and lodging. Although she appears to be the picture of obedience, the girl talks to herself while performing her chores. “When she keeps reminding me I’m an orphan and that I’m a charity girl, it makes me hate her and hate the “home” and hate myself too,” she mutters. Then, looking on the bright side, an ability she will keep throughout her travails over eight decades, she stops her negative rant and dares to dream, “I wish some nice folks would adopt me—then I could have a real papa

¹ Harold Gray, Little Orphan Annie (5 August 1924); reprinted in The Complete Little Orphan Annie, vol. 1: Will Tomorrow Ever Come? (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2008), 36. All Little Orphan Annie references between 1924 and 1927 refer to this publication unless otherwise noted.
and mama like other kids.” Thus, on August 5, 1924, the world was introduced to *Little Orphan Annie*.

Though a mere orphan praying for a family in the comic strip, in the weeks, months, years, and decades of her tenure in newspapers across the United States, Annie became something of a daughter, sister, and friend to millions of Americans. In fact, she was certainly the first high-profile, young heroine of the era and, as such, she inspired other real-life girls to emulate her drive and claim some of her power. In this and in other ways, Annie was perhaps the first “small girl” to make a difference in American attitudes and behaviors. As Americans grappled with significant and growing tensions between the worlds of the adult and the child, between rural versus urban living, and between traditional views of women and children and of modern ones, Annie provided one solution to their anxieties: she helped bridge the gap between such tensions. Thus, through her varied appearances throughout popular media, Annie brought parents and their children nearer to each other in attitude and experience, brought a new understanding of city life to rural folks (and vice versa), and helped pave the way for a modern interpretation of the value of children in general, and girls and orphans in particular.

From her humblest beginnings as an orphaned waif in a heartless and soulless orphanage, Annie rose to become so indispensable to the American psyche that New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia read her strip aloud to his radio audience during the newspaper deliveryman strike of 1945. Reportedly, LaGuardia could not bear the fact
that “kids—and their parents—would miss an installment of their favorite strip.”

Truly, Little Orphan Annie had become America’s favored daughter; a new daughter, one who took charge, was active, and was competent and confident like a boy. This was a new girl; not the Victorian girl who masquerading about during her youngest years as a tomboy, biding her time until she could bloom into a woman and marry.

Although Annie’s popularity with average Americans was seemingly instantaneous, she was almost not given the chance to meet them in the first place; her creation and publication were far from trouble-free. Little Orphan Annie’s creator, Harold Gray, was born to struggling Midwestern horse and cattle farmers on January 20, 1894 in Kankakee, Illinois. Out of economic necessity, Gray exhibited the same kind of pragmatism and work ethic that he endowed his fictional character with. As a youngster, Gray worked on the family farm with his parents, but also worked “odds and ends” jobs when he could. It was during one of these short-lived jaunts as a “gofer and jack-of-all-trades at the Lafayette Morning Journal,” where Gray first became interested in drawing and in journalism. Thus, by the time he was seventeen, he knew he wanted to study journalism at a large university away from home. As “funds were tight,” however, he chose practicality and instead studied engineering at nearby Purdue University and “lived at home with his parents all through his university years.”

Upon graduation, Gray

---


moved to Chicago and started working as a beat reporter for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* during the rough-and-tumble era of Al Capone. His few, short months on the job would have a huge impact on him, often working its way into his strip and even into his everyday life. “When he got together with a bunch of his cronies,” his friend, George Longstreth remembered, Gray “used to reminisce about the criminals in Chicago.”

By the year’s end, Gray had switched over to his dream job and started working in the art department under the direction of “Captain” Joseph Patterson, a newspaper mogul who also founded the nation’s first tabloid, the *New York Illustrated Daily News*, later simply called the *New York Daily News*. For years, Gray plugged away as Sidney Smith’s, the creator of *The Gumps*, literal second-hand. *The Gumps* was a world-famous comic strip which espoused an anti-Victorian notion of both women and men. It followed a bumbling husband and his average, middle-class family. It was such a success with audiences, that Smith became the highest paid cartoonist of the time. Smith’s fame and exacting personality meant that he needed someone to help him draw the popular strip. Harold Gray became his man. Gray, however, had other plans. Perfecting his drawing ability under Smith’s guidance, Gray started creating his own characters. “Comic brainstorms attacked me with increasing frequency and violence,” Gray wrote. At some point during these “attacks” in 1924, he conceived of his orphan.

Like the birth of gods, Annie’s creation story is, perhaps, pure myth. A number of stories have circulated about her development. One of the earliest stories, and

---


therefore, one of the more probable, had Gray creating a “cute and sweet” orphan boy with “golden curls” who would appeal to the waning sentimental vestiges of the Victorian ideal of women readers.  He named him, Little Orphan Otto.  Reportedly, Otto was so angelic, and thus feminine, that Captain Patterson, the Tribune editor, remarked, “That kid looks like a pansy to me.”  That is to say, Otto was not like the new boys who had sprung up in the novels of the late nineteenth century.  Thus, Patterson demanded that Gray “put a skirt on him and we’ll call it Little Orphan Annie.” Gray obliged.  Still, unsure of Annie’s appeal, Patterson relegated Annie to the “pink” section, i.e. the midday version, of the smallest of his papers, the New York Daily News.  Quickly, however, Little Orphan Annie moved up the ranks.  By November of 1924, the orphan was ensconced in the Chicago Daily Tribune and was nationally syndicated.

Though Gray introduced Annie as a single and lonely character, he eventually brought to his strip a host of reoccurring characters, the most significant of these being Annie’s adoptive father, Daddy Warbucks, her caretakers when Warbucks was away, Mr. and Mrs. Silo, and her faithful pet mutt and side-kick, Sandy.  Gray created these characters to befriend Annie, but they were also strategic plot devices.  To rescue Annie (and her readers!) from the dull world of the orphanage, for example, in 1924 Gray allowed Annie to cross paths with the benevolent capitalist, Daddy Warbucks.  As his moniker suggests, “Daddy” Warbucks eventually adopts the child, giving Annie access to

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
the world outside of Miss Asthma’s clutches. Similarly, Mr. and Mrs. Silo entered and exited the strip from time to time, to provide for Annie when her “Daddy” left on one of his numerous business trips. Moreover, the juxtaposition between Annie’s worlds when she was with Warbucks positioned in the city, or with the Silos flitting about in the country-side, gave readers of all backgrounds an opportunity to connect with her at a time when America was experiencing a significant and disruptive demographic shift from rural to urban settings. Whether she was living with Warbucks in the city, or with the Silos on the farm, one constant in Annie’s life was her dog, Sandy. Keen not to make Annie’s life too lonely and pathetic (as audience members would be turned away), Gray introduced Annie to Sandy, her lifelong friend in the first week of 1925.

In fact, connecting with his audience was one of the objectives Gray achieved by pairing Annie with her canine companion. According to comic strip critics David Manning White and Robert Abel, when comic strips first appeared in the papers, they “were originally addressed to children.” As society “looked on children as small, stupid, rough adults,” artists and cartoonists tended to produce slap-stick funnies, crude drawings, and, at times, incoherent dialogue, which supposedly attracted youth. Thus, using her as a vehicle to draw in child followers, Gray introduced Annie to Sandy in January of 1925. Throughout their many years together, Sandy accompanied Annie on her constant back-and-forth from city to farm, she followed Annie across the globe, saved


11 Ibid.
Annie’s life numerous times, and was saved by Annie a couple of times in return. Though a cartoon, many children felt as if Sandy was just as much their pet, as she was Annie’s. When kidnappers threatened Sandy in the fall of 1944, for example, eight-year-old Thelma Anderson wrote Gray and implored that he save Sandy “for she is a friend of mine.” Of course, children were not the only ones who worried about Sandy. When Sandy found herself in another tight spot in January of 1933, famed industrialist Henry Ford sent Gray a telegraph pleading with him to preserve Sandy’s life. “Please do all you can to help Annie find Sandy,” he begged. “We are all interested.” Ford was truthful. Millions of Americans fell in love with the duo.

With Sandy such a hit with children and adults alike, early on in the strip, Gray also experimented with adding in new animal characters. In 1931, for example, Annie befriends a bear, Willie. In one scene, entitled “Strange Behavior,” Annie and her tutor enter a room and close the door. In the second frame, Willie the bear and Sandy the dog peak out from a curtain. Frame three depicts Sandy and Willie walking side-by-side down the long hallway. In the fourth and final frame, both bear and dog look at the closed door with question marks above their heads. This seemingly meaningless day’s strip appears to be an opportunity for Gray to rest his mind and his hand, but also it was

12 Thelma Anderson to Harold Gray, 18 October 1944, Box 1, Folder 3, Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gottleib Special Collection, Boston University (hereafter referred to as HG-HGARC).

13 Smith, Little Orphan Annie, 35.

this kind of nonsensical scene that represented the perfect example of Gray’s attempt
at appealing to children through the use of animals.

Shortly after Gray first created Annie, however, there was a shift in the targeted
audiences. Editors no longer wanted to see the comics addressed solely to money-less
youngsters, because “only adults had the money to buy the paper regularly.”15 Instead,
editors such as the New York News’ “Captain” Joseph Patterson believed that daily
comics should attempt to draw in adult readers, while full-color Sunday strips should
continue to be patterned for children as well as the adult crowd. Patterson forced Gray
and his other contracted cartoonists to create their cartoon around each kind of
readership, the daily readers and the Sunday ones, i.e. the adults and the children.
Therefore, Gray had to relate Annie’s daily adventures Monday through Friday, which
then climaxed in an adventure-packed elongated Sunday strip. Because not all daily
readers received the Sunday paper, Monday’s inevitably were a day of recount. Under
the assumption that children primarily read the colored Sunday strip, Gray made his
Sunday offerings more action-filled, but toned down any unwarranted violence. He also
continued to use the animal motif as an attraction to children. In one sequence from
1935, for example, Annie befriends an elephant while filming as an understudy to a
spoiled childhood starlet.

Conversely, the daily strip was filled with violent deaths and mayhem, as well as
verbose soliloquies and heavy-worded exchanges between characters. For example, in

---

15 R.C. Harvey, “Fantasy and Reality in Harold Gray’s Masterpiece,” introduction to Little
Orphan Annie, Volume V, 1935, by Harold Gray (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books,
the 1935 storyline when Annie goes to Hollywood, most of the daily strips contained around thirty-five words per frame. In the Sunday version, however, Gray cut the strip to around eighteen words per frame. This proved a capital strategy because, as Annie historian, R.C. Harvey explained, “action [was] more appealing to Sunday’s youthful readers and [was] easier for them to comprehend than long speeches.” Thus, Gray masterly wove his narrative between the story-driven demands of his mature audience and their action-loving tots.

In the early days of the strip, many of the story lines revolved around Annie’s experience in the orphanage, or what she dubbed, “the home.” In the stories of Horatio Alger, Charles Dickens, and of Mark Twain, orphan usually meant boy. Starting with the popularity of the tales from Frances Hodges Burnett, however, books started to feature young girls in the role of orphan as well. This is significant because it showcases the fact that adventure and a desire to leave the home were universal ideas that spoke of freedom and were shared by most children had, regardless of sex.

Indeed, as a parentless child, Annie was a ward of the state, housed in an archaic orphanage run by the cruel Miss Asthma. This setting provided the backdrop for Gray to articulate modern ideas about children in general and orphans in particular. In her very first day’s strip in the Tribune, audiences glimpsed Annie’s abysmal world which was filled with “Work, work, work, eight or ten days a week,” wishful thinking, and prayers!

---


for a better tomorrow. In those first days of her Tribune run, Annie played the orphanage “Cinderella” as she was forced to cook and clean for the entire household, and even to take her meals alone. Sometimes, she was “loaned” out to families, such as the Bottles, who used their three months of “trial” time to abuse her and force her to work without pay. Gray’s grim depiction of the orphanage life, and of Annie’s travails while there, riled many readers.

Some claimed that his depiction was true to life. One letter writer, Mickey Malone, orphaned at age eight, spent four years in a home apparently much like the one Annie was stuck in. “I never knew what it was like to be a child,” Malone lamented. Also, like Annie, Malone was “loaned” out to families for three months at a time. “Believe me,” Mickey divulged to Gray, “they only wanted us as house slaves.” Others, however, lambasted Gray for his “misrepresentation” of their profession. In addition to skewering Gray for “his ideas” about the orphanage, which were “at least twenty years behind time,” social worker Eunice Gottlieb seemed to take the greatest issue with Gray’s portrayal of the social worker/matron of the orphanage. “Child Welfare Workers are not all frustrated old maids,” she scolded. “Many of them are liberal minded, understanding, young girls and women, trained in up-to-date social service schools,” she continued.

---


19 Mickey Malone to Harold Gray, 11 November 1944, Box 1, Folder 3, HG-HGARC.

20 Ibid.

21 Eunice Gottlieb to Harold Gray, 17 September 1944, Box 1, Folder 3, HG-HGARC.
Gottleib’s diatribe is a reminder that Gray was situated in specific time. Growing up during the height of progressivism, Gray witnessed the professionalization of a great many careers, including social work. Like all of society at the time, Gray tried to reconcile his attitude regarding the old way of dealing with parentless children (i.e. orphanages) to the new one (i.e. foster care and adoption).

Adoption, as Americans understand it today, was born in the 1920s. Prior to that era, formal adoption of children was relatively uncommon. During most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, American families often opened their homes to orphaned youngsters, but usually out of obligation to a dead relative or because they were in desperate need of physical labor around the farm. They rarely officially adopted the child, instead taking part in systems of “‘putting out’ (the placement of children in other homes, for domestic service, for varying periods of time), indenture, [or] apprenticeship.”22 Thus, the formality of signing papers and turning children over to others was neither wanted nor necessary.

This informal family-care system did, however, cause problems. Most notably, it did not provide adoptive children with legal parentage; they remained orphans and carried that social stigma with them indefinitely. In most instances, these informally adopted children were often excluded from wills or their claims on their adoptive parents’ estates were frequently refuted in the courts. They had no legal rights as members of any family. Moreover, those who took orphaned children in sometimes had malevolent

intentions in mind. The “padrone” system provides one such cruel and unfortunate example. According to child historian Vivian Zelizer, the “padrones bought young Italian children from their parents and brought them to the United States” to work, beg, and steal money that the padrones would then forcibly confiscate. It was becoming clear that even orphan children needed protection under the law.

In the nineteenth century, social reformers wanted “to give legal status to children whose care had been transferred and to encourage more available and better care for dependent children.” To do so, they began to systematize the adoption process. Massachusetts led the way and in 1851 passed a comprehensive adoption bill. The statute required that the parents of the child give their consent and that ultimately, a judge determined whether or not the new parents were fit to raise said child. It was the first time, “the interests of the child were expressly emphasized.”

Although adoption became more formal and gave legal rights to adopted children, families continued to adopt “useful children expecting them to help out with farm chores and household tasks.” This practice did not change until well into the twentieth century.

Thus, by the time Annie appeared in the funny papers American attitudes toward adoption started to shift. Ever perceptive, Harold Gray used his heroine to showcase both


25 Ibid.

26 Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child, 170.
the old and the new thoughts on adoptions and orphans. Indeed, though Gray has been criticized for his conservatism, through his comic strip, he championed a very modern understanding of the orphan and, thus, of children. He used Annie to demonstrate that anything associated with the traditional viewpoint of orphans and adoption was bad. All things associated with the modern understanding of orphans and adoption was good.

First, Annie’s orphanage, “the home” was a horrible place to live. The caretaker, Mrs. Asthma, worked the children hard, the children themselves were bitter and cruel, and the living conditions were abysmal. Gray tapped into the relatively new notion that an orphanage was not the best place to raise an orphan. To be sure, it was not until the early decades of the twentieth century that orphanages fell out of favor. At that time, over 90,000 American children resided in large, dormitory-style institutions that according to reformers, inhibited spontaneity and turned children into ‘‘automatons’… deprived of maternal care [and] privacy.’’ In their case study of adoption in California, legal historians Chris Guthrie and Joanna Grossman demonstrated that “Progressive child-savers came to believe that home placements—whether in adoptive homes, foster homes, or work homes—were better for children than retention in children’s institutions.” Thus, Gray wanted to make Annie’s orphanage appear bleak; he wanted to get her out of there, and he needed his readers to understand why that was a necessary move.


Gray specifically pointed out the pitfalls of the orphanage in the strip that ran on November 12, 1924. He showed the humdrum lives of the orphans by highlighting their dress, the food they ate, and their attitudes that living in the orphanage helped shape. In a single scene from the strip titled “Just Mush,” all of the children are crowded around a large table eating dinner. Both boys and girls are wearing uniform, checkered, shapeless frocks, eating mush (again), and complaining about their plights. Having grown up in the orphanage, Annie is all too aware of their dire predicaments. She checks their orphan dreams of “strawberries an’ cream” and counters pessimistically, “It doesn’t make a bit of difference what we’d like—we’re just orphans and we’ll eat mush!” In just one day’s strip then, Gray deftly demonstrated that, unlike the “new” practice of adoption or foster care, the old orphanage system failed to incorporate the children’s needs or wants.

Gray not only criticized orphanages, but through his illustrations of poor, prospective parents for Annie, he also attacked the traditional reasons Americans generally adopted children. One of the first families to welcome Annie into their home was the Bottles. At first, Mom and Pop Bottle seemed to be the answer to Annie’s prayers. They visit the home and handpick Annie as their newest addition to their family. In “At Last a Real Home for Annie,” Annie accompanies her new mother home. With a smile on her face, Mrs. Bottle shows Annie around her new abode—the store that she and


her husband run. Annie also meets her seven siblings. Instead of elation at her new family, however, Annie recognizes that she will be forced to work at the store and comments, “So far, this joint doesn’t look much to me like any rest cure. Oh well.” In the subsequent days and weeks, readers get to see Annie doing what she always did while at the orphanage—cleaning and working hard. Clearly, the Bottles desired a worker, not a child.

The Bottles’ expectations to use Annie as a laborer echoed the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century traditions of orphans earning their keep by doing hard labor and providing supplementary income to the families that took them in. Essentially, if orphans did not work, they did not eat. Gray showed this aspect as well. For example, on Sundays when the store was closed and Annie could not work, she was forced to return to the orphanage for her meals. Mom Bottle justified her actions by telling Annie, “Now Annie—there’ll be nothing for you to do here tomorrow so you go back to the ‘home’ for Sunday same as last week.” She rationalizes her argument by saying, “Mrs. Asthma can’t expect me to feed you when there’s nothing for you to do.” To the Bottles, Annie was not an orphan; she was a worker. In these ways, Gray used Annie to demonstrate the inadequacies of traditional adoption practices, setting up

31 Ibid.


34 Ibid.
Annie’s rescue by the modern man, Oliver “Daddy” Warbucks. It was through Daddy and Annie’s relationship that viewers were able to see a new interpretation of the value of orphans, which was shaped, of course, by a new understanding of the value of children, i.e. that children were to be protected, cared for, and nurtured, not worked to the bone and deprived of an education, food, shelter and other necessities.

For Warbucks, Annie was more than just an orphan girl; she became essential to Warbucks’ happiness and thus, his well-being and life. In October of 1924, Daddy is lamenting all of the regrets in his life—most notably, that he made money during the war, which has apparently spoiled his wife.35 “I thought money would make the Mrs. Happy—I thought she’d be proud of me, but I guess I was wrong,” he cries. Annie pats him on the back, she assures him, “Don’t you worry—I love you, Daddy.” Warbucks’ mood noticeably changes for the better, he raises his head and grabs the child, “If there were more little girls like you in the world,” he started, “there’d be a lot less tough old birds like me.” Indeed, Warbucks is relating a sentiment about young girls that started blooming in the early nineteenth century. Little girls were prized, not so much for their economic value, but rather, for their sentimental one. And, just like Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Pickford’s take as Gwendolyn in the film Poor Little Rich Girl, Annie’s physical suffering spurs lasting change in those closest to her.

Mrs. Warbucks originally takes Annie home “on loan” to show off her charitable spirit to her society friends. From the onset, Mrs. Warbucks despises Annie. She hates Annie’s rough manners, the truths that Annie always spouts, and more importantly, the

35 Gray, 3 October 1924, 53.
fact that her husband has taken a liking to the child. Her feelings toward Annie practically ruin her marriage and she runs off. Mr. and Mrs. Warbucks come together once again, however, when they both rush to Annie’s bedside after a freak circus accident has left Annie paralyzed. In this heart-wrenching reunion between Mr. and Mrs. Warbucks, Oliver admits, “It was Annie who brought us together.” Mrs. Warbucks chimes in, “We never had children—I said I never wanted any—what an idiot I was—I never knew—Oliver—do you know what she calls me? ‘Mother’—.” Mr. Warbucks puts his arm around his wife and comfortingly adds, “There, there—everything will be all right—she’s our little girl now—see? Our…Our…‘Daughter’.” Thus, Annie has saved Mr. and Mrs. Warbucks’ loveless marriage by completing their family. Like any good girl should do, Annie provides the glue that brings her adoptive parents together, at least for a while.

Once again, Annie demonstrates the value of the new girl. Like the new boy, she is involved in adventures and handles them herself. She is not always waiting to be rescued, and in fact, as the above series of events makes clear, often does the rescuing

---

36 Harold Gray, 12 October 1926, 273.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 After Annie recovers, Mr. and Mrs. Warbucks rekindled their romance and go on the honeymoon they never had. In the strip from 4 October 1927, Warbucks explains, “Then the yacht went down in a storm—as far as I’ve been able to find out I’m the only one who got ashore alive.” Mrs. Warbucks never returns.
herself. Thus, like the new boy, the new girl is valued more for her precociousness, than for her preciousness.

With such wild up and downs, *Little Orphan Annie*’s success was practically guaranteed. Within a year, it was one of the most popular comic strips in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Indeed, *Annie*’s popularity manifested itself with a show of great solidarity amongst her fans one day in November of 1925. On this day the *Tribune* refused to print the strip, as a feud between Patterson and Gray broke out regarding the proper placement of the orphaned Annie. Annie was already dealing with the theme of urban vs. rural by deftly leaping back and forth between the two settings depending on whether or not Daddy Warbucks was off on one of his numerous business trips. At this time in Annie’s life, she left the home of her sweet, yet poor, country caretakers, the Silo’s, and returned to Daddy Warbucks’ urban mansion, where she was rudely greeted by the social climber Mrs. Warbucks (before her change of heart), Mrs. Warbucks’ conniving English friend, Count De Tour and De Tour’s bratty son, Selbert.

Gray wanted to keep Annie with Daddy Warbucks (at least for the time being). The De Tour storyline was not quite played out. Moreover, childless himself and no doubt protective of her and his work, Gray wanted to maintain his role as the sole architect and engineer of Annie’s adventures and misfortunes. Patterson, however, disagreed. According to *Little Orphan Annie* historian Bruce Smith, Patterson, “was disturbed that Annie had left the wholesome life on the Silos’ farm for the Warbucks’
mansion with its “silver place settings, servants, [and] limousine.”\textsuperscript{40} Patterson could not understand what, “this poor little orphan girl [was] doing living in a mansion, surrounded by European nobility?”\textsuperscript{41} He stopped running Annie in the \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}.

The company paid dearly for this error as the staff fielded hundreds of letters and phone calls on behalf of angry \textit{Tribune} readers and subscribers. One dedicated reader commented, “Am glad indeed that “Little Orphan Annie” has again made her appearance…We missed her very much yesterday.”\textsuperscript{42} Another reader echoed a more dramatic response, writing, “Was very much relieved and probably saved from committing crime when Orphan Annie reappeared today.”\textsuperscript{43} Baffled by the dramatic outcry from Annie fans, Patterson simply asked of Annie’s constituents, “Should Annie and her dog, Sandy, be permitted to remain at the home of her latest foster-father, the wealthy and kind-hearted Mr. Warbucks, or should she be returned to the humble but pleasant home of her farmer friends, Mr. and Mrs. Silo?”\textsuperscript{44} There was an equal showing of support for both sides, illuminating a deep fissure that divided the nation as a whole:

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{44} Smith, \textit{Little Orphan Annie}, 17.
city life or country living? By moving between the two landscapes and lifestyles, Annie showed a divided nation that their differences were not quite as marked as they thought.

Always a rural nation, the United States went through a demographic shift during the late nineteenth century when cities such as New York and Chicago exploded in population. Although immigration had a lot to do with these surging numbers, the simple truth is, internal migration had the bigger effect. From 1840 to 1880, for example, Chicago’s population multiplied 126 times over. As hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the city, they encountered congested streets, crowded tenements, and unsanitary living conditions. The ability of the city government to handle the large influx of immigrants and migrants was undermined by both outdated technologies and meager funds. Very quickly the city became a cesspool of dirt and disease. Smoke, dust, noise, and the stockyard stench assaulted the senses of Chicago denizens. Those who could afford to leave the city and flee to the suburbs did so with expediency. Based on these observations, by the turn-of-the-twentieth century, many rural Americans felt like the city was an abysmal place in which to reside.

Conversely, cities swelled for legitimate reasons. Cities provided their residents with amenities that could not be found in the countryside: running water, electricity, better schools, and easy access to popular forms of entertainment are just some of the

---


perks of city life. Moreover, with an increasingly troubled farming economy, industrial jobs provided by the likes of entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford in America’s urban centers seemed to promise good wages and job security. These were two elements missing from the agricultural sector. Thus, by the beginning of the twentieth century, more Americans lived in urban areas rather than rural ones.\textsuperscript{47} This shift from rural to urban living transformed the country’s attitudes as well as its landscape. Once again, living amid this tension, Harold Gray was able to illustrate it perfectly. His Annie, also provided a solution to these simmering tensions.

“Farmers saw themselves as the backbone of America,” and by contrast, saw urban living as “corrupt, soft, and decadent.”\textsuperscript{48} How could innocent, animal-loving Annie grow up in a stifling urban environment? For their part, urbanites, often the sons and daughters of failed farmers (like Gray himself), saw farming and those who continued to pursue it, as outdated and obsolete. How could rural living provide the action-loving Annie with enough adventure to keep her interested in staying there? In the end, Gray (and Patterson) allowed Annie the freedom to explore both landscapes seemingly at will. The American people had spoken: they liked the fact that Annie was able to settle down in both environments.

As a result, Annie continued to jump back and forth between settings. She was just as (un)comfortable in Warbucks’ mansion in the city, as she was on the Silo farm. In

\textsuperscript{47} The 1920 census, for example, has listed 56\% of the American population in urban areas (defined as over 2,500 people); the 1910 census numbers were around 45\%.

\textsuperscript{48} Heer, “Dream Big,” 15.
one scene from March 1925, Annie learns how a piece of farming equipment works.\footnote{Gray, March 13, 1925, 105.} While Mr. Silo positions a seeder, which scatters oats, atop his horse-drawn farming wagon, Annie comments that it looks like a “big ice cream cone…that would hold all the choc’late ice cream in the world.” Once Silo explains how oats are grown, Annie reveals her city roots, commenting, “I thought oats always come in little boxes with a picture on the outside.”\footnote{Ibid.} No doubt some of Little Orphan Annie’s youngest urban dwelling fans might have thought the same. With regard to city living, Annie was, at times, just as awkward and perplexed by it. During her first sophisticated dinner party that Mrs. Warbucks hosted, Annie makes a scene.\footnote{Gray, September 8, 1924, 45.} After her third course disappears before she can finish it, she calmly waits to see who the culprit was who took it “right from under my nose.” When the butler attempts to remove Annie’s fourth course from the table to make way for the fifth, much to the delight and amusement of Warbucks’s guests, Annie stabs his hand with her fork and proclaims, “Just make one more grab for something I’m eating and you’ll be shy one of your fins—see?” Obviously, Annie’s life was just as exciting and just as dangerous in both locales. According to Annie, despite their seeming differences, the lives of urban and rural folk were not all that different from each other after all. Thus, in the 1920s, she helped Americans reconcile their fears of how the other half lives.

\footnote{}
Despite *Little Orphan Annie’s* immediate success, and even the outburst of public support she received in 1925, *Annie’s* popularity actually grew in the following decade, cresting in the early- to mid-1930’s. In fact, during the Great Depression, *Little Orphan Annie* not only graced the pages of many newspapers across the country, she also branched out into the movies and onto the radio. *Annie*, in her many incarnations, reached a wide variety of publics, male and female, black and white, and adult and child. Parents and their children shared their enthusiasm for Annie, her billionaire caretaker Daddy Warbucks, and her trusty dog, Sandy. There was something about Gray’s red-headed heroine that drew a large, diverse audience over an extended period of time. Indeed, some comic scholars believe that Annie’s popularity during this era was due to Gray’s superlative narrative and artistic skills, which he had perfected by this time. In his *History of Little Orphan Annie*, Bruce Smith, for example, claims that Gray’s “dexterity with his characters and backgrounds became classic in the early Thirties.”

He clarified, “the panels were well proportioned, with a studied look about them...[and] the plots became more and more intricate.”

Yet despite her new “smooth and distinctive” make-over, Annie was still the quintessential Annie; she still wore the same dress, she still peered at the world with her same pupil-less eyes, and she still found herself involved in the same sort of shenanigans that plagued her in the early years of the strip. In fact, Americans did not follow *Annie*

52 Bruce Smith, 35.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.
because of its good look on the printed page, but rather, because of Annie’s good and enduring spirit. During the worst financial crisis in the history of this country, Gray put his pencil over the heart of America and tapped into its pulse for inspiration. By examining *Little Orphan Annie* in this period, we learn a great many things about adults, about children in general and girls in particular, and about the nature of the adult-child relationship of Depression-era America.

Historians have duly documented that during the 1920s, there was a youthful, vibrant, and perhaps most important, hopeful spirit alive in many Americans. Schlar Joseph Hawes believed that this general exuberant sentiment was more than just a trivial feeling; it was the creative climax of a culture obsessed with the life and times of its younger generation. According to Hawes, “The 1920s was a period of flaming youth, a period when society worshiped and tried to emulate young people, a time when society’s heroes were young and on the make.” Despite the fact that adults may have admired youthfulness, they did not seem to get along with real-life youngsters.

Mandatory school laws, increasing reliance on scientific child-rearing, as well as changes in the judicial system exacerbated the distance between parents and their children. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, dozens of states across

---


the nation enacted compulsory school attendance laws. This translated into an increase of time children and young people spent away from the home and their parents. In 1910, just 9% of American youths had high school diplomas; by 1940 that number jumped to over 50%.\(^{57}\) Separated by their parents for long periods of time during the school year and sharing the common experience of institutionalized education, “young people began to think of themselves in terms of their ages and grades.”\(^{58}\)

Meanwhile, there was a continued shift in how adults thought of children and youth. By the late 1800s, the centuries-old ideological battle between Calvinists (i.e. those who believed that children were inherently bad and needed to be monitored, controlled, and manipulated in order to become good adults) and Lockeans (those who believed that children were born with a “blank slate” and were, because of this, naturally innocent and pure and needed to be protected) started to sway, once again, toward the Calvinists. Thus, as much as this period saw an increase in services and organizations dedicated to helping and protecting the lives and development of the young, adults also wanted to quarantine youth; adults wanted to separate themselves from young people. As Steven Mintz said, “Many of the reforms that nominally have been designed to protect and assist the young were also instituted to insulate adults from children.”\(^{59}\)


\(^{58}\) Hawes, Children Between the Wars, 3.

One such reform was the push toward juvenile courts and detainment facilities. With the help of child reform professionals such as Mary Bartelme, in 1899 Illinois became the first state to create a juvenile court. By 1925, forty-eight states had followed suit.\(^{60}\) As an extension of progressive “child-saving” efforts, juvenile courts were created to ensure that children, originally defined for judicial purposes as those between the ages of seven and sixteen (with those under seven not seen as cognizant enough to commit a willing crime), received both fair judgments and, perhaps more importantly, fair sentences in the eyes of the law. The court was a symbolic representation of the greater public’s “recognition of childhood as a period of life deserving public protection and care.”\(^{61}\) Moreover, it is yet another example of the growing divide between the worlds of adults and those of their children.

Many social commentators saw such changes with trepidation and as a sign of a growing generation gap the likes of which the country had never seen. In a series of essays titled “Declaration of the Independence of Youth,” written between 1909 and 1911 and reprinted in 1913, Randolph Bourne proclaimed, “No wonder the older generation fears and distrusts the younger: youth is the avenging Nemesis on its trail.”\(^{62}\) Mintz noted that, “Bourne was not alone in thinking about society in terms of generational conflict,” as Europe’s finest social theorists of the time, Karl Mannheim, Antonio


Gramsci, and Jose Ortega y Gasset also “popularized the notion that society was
divided into distinct” and therefore competing generations.63

Though not as distinctive and severe as the ones of the eighteenth and nineteenth
century, society was also divided into gendered spheres. Boys were bred to go out into
the world and earn a living. For the first time, many girls were raised to do the same. In
fact, girls were expected to work until they married. In her book Ladies of Labor, Girls
of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the
Twentieth Century, Nan Enstad argued that working-class women worked to survive, but
also to save enough money to look fashionable.64 By the 1920s, that concept had filtered
into the larger middle class.

Living outside of the house, also meant that girls had more opportunity to explore
political and even sexual freedom. According to William Leuchtenberg, “the new woman
wanted the same freedom of movement that men had and the same economic and
political rights.”65 Middle-class women were also “beginning to assert themselves as
sexual beings, with sexual needs as legitimate as those of men.”66 Whether or not a
majority of women worked outside the home, experienced sexual freedom, and/or
flaunted their new status in their communities at large, there was a general feeling among

63 Mintz, Huck’s Raft, 231.

64 Nan Enstad, Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and
Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press,
1999), 18-19.

65 Leuchtenburg, Perils of Prosperity, 159.

66 Patricia Raub, “A New Woman or an Old-Fashioned Girl?: The Portrayal of the Heroine in
Americans that they did. According to her revisionist examination of the New Woman, Estelle Freedman noted “writers of the 1920s generally hailed the participation of women in American society and the end of discrimination.”

With the help of women’s work, many Americans were poised for financial success. In fact, many lived lives of lavish luxury and confident exuberance, as millions of citizens were better off financially in early September of 1929 than they had been just ten years prior. American realized income grew from 74 billion in 1923 to 89 billion in 1929. As already documented, the country was successfully moving towards a modern, urban, industrial giant, shaking off its archaic habits and values. While the United States was wealthy and well respected, however, it was also, as William Leuchtenburg observed, well on its way to economic catastrophe. The culture of youth, or rather the adult obsession with it, pushed the country into dizzying rituals of consumerism, narcissism, and neglect. Few Americans were concerned with the future, as the here and now seemed far more appealing. Imitating youthful behavior ultimately proved self-destructive, however, as many people failed to notice the impending economic collapse. Adults busied themselves with trivial imaginary concerns, regarding youth, regarding

---


69 In his text *Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*, Leuchtenburg examines American behavior in the Roaring Twenties and argues that this behavior contributed to the makings of the Great Depression.
wealth, and the impossible thought that both could be possessed indefinitely. Sadly, as the oft-quoted cliché goes, all good things must come to an end.

Reflective and forlorn, red-headed and clear-eyed, Little Orphan Annie and her constant canine companion, Sandy, gaze up at a full moon. Annie wistfully states, “Look at that moon, Sandy—it’s been there for years an’ it’ll be there just th’ same after we’re gone.” Although Annie’s creator, Harold Gray, had no premonition of the major financial crisis that would devastate the economy of the United States and transform the lives of its people, Annie’s soliloquy offered Americans some much-needed perspective on that “Black Thursday,” October 24, 1929. As the stock market tumbled striking the loudest warning signs of the impending economic catastrophe yet, Annie quipped, “What’s th’ use o’ worrin’ ‘bout anything?” Indeed, average Americans lost very little money on the stock market crash in late October of 1929. What they did end up losing, however, was of greater value. They lost jobs, economic security, and perhaps most important, their bright outlook on life. In essence, they lost hope. According to Hawes, Americans lost their fascination with youth. He continued, “At a time when resources and morale were declining, the same behavior that had made young people the darlings of society now seemed indulgent and wasteful.” A young, vibrant, hopeful America transformed instantly into an aged, weathered, and pessimistic nation, unwilling and/or unable to reconnect to its younger roots. Perhaps it is more than just mere coincidence

71 Hawes, Children Between the Wars, 30.
that America’s sweetheart, “little” Mary Pickford, for example, retired from the screen at the height of the Great Depression in 1933.

In some ways, the Great Depression also pitted young against old as limited resources were doled out unequally. One male letter writer wrote a disgruntled letter to Eleanor Roosevelt complaining that although he was not an “old broken down illiterate dishonorable man,” even at sixty-nine years of age he was having difficulty regaining his prestige in business as he was “confronted on every side by the young generation taking [his] place.” 72 Despite the apparent growing distance between adults and youth so prevalent in the institutions and laws created and/or enforced during this time, within the various popular culture media the generation gap seemed almost nonexistent. Indeed, it was precisely at this point, when parents and children were further and further separated by societal norms and rules, when they came together more and more in the realm of popular entertainment.

Perhaps it is not surprisingly that the early and mid-1930s saw Harold Gray’s comic strip, Little Orphan Annie, experience its greatest recognition. As Little Orphan Annie authority Bruce Smith has said, the “years when America endured its worst hour would be their finest.” 73 Little Orphan Annie’s popularity reveals an underlying current in American beliefs and values of the time. Society at large may have felt disconnected from the current youthful generation, but its obsession with the young remained


73 Smith, Little Orphan Annie, 21.
comparatively unchanged; it just took a new outlet. Adults found an avenue in *Annie* in which to further examine and articulate their fascination with youth, in general and little girls in particular. Annie intrigued adults with her dual nature, a combination of youthful and mature qualities. As one reader remarked, “Orphan Annie is apparently 9 or 10 years old and yet she goes around mouthing the philosophies of a person of 60 years.”

To many adults, such as this letter writer, Annie was not to be mistaken for a mere child. Instead, Annie was just like them, a seasoned veteran engaged in a world of struggle. The sole difference between Annie and her adult readers was not her childish outlook (she did not have one), but instead, her childlike physical features. This was different from the Bateman sisters who had to dress the part of adults as well.

This phenomenon, where adults related their lives to Annie, speaks to the fact that they not only read the comics, they internalized and utilized the comic content to better understand their own experiences. In his 1949 study of conversations between residents of the Lenox Hill tenement in New York City, Leo Bogart interviewed one twenty-seven year old ice cream distributor who stated, “There’s a lot of things in comics that pertain to real life.” Although many adults read the comics for mere enjoyment, “readers [found] the comics ‘true to life,’” as the anonymous ice cream distributor declared, “mirroring life as they understood it, far more than they themselves [might have]

---


realized." The incorporation of real events and an overall realistic tone into comic strip content increased dramatically in the 1930s. The comics were not so much an escape from reality, as they were vehicles to better understand it. Comic writers, such as Harold Gray, tried to weave real life events into their story lines.

As one of the first comic artists to exercise this type of methodology for his strip, Gray allowed Annie, Daddy Warbucks, and a host of other characters to battle the financial difficulties of the Great Depression. In fact, the wealthy patriarch Daddy Warbucks loses his fortune more than once during the years between 1931 and 1935. In these instances, Annie and Daddy are forced to live like paupers. Undoubtedly, their circumstances mimicked the reality of many of Gray’s readers. In one sequence of events during such a hard time, Annie and Daddy find it absolutely necessary to live in an abandoned shack; they have become squatters. In another case, Daddy and Annie resort to peddling on the streets to acquire funds. No job is beneath the humble, yet confident Daddy Warbucks. He says, “I’ll grab any sort of laboring job to keep up going—I’m strong and willing—I can swing a pick till something better turns up.” Not only is

76 White and Abel, The Funnies, 24.


Warbucks trying to prove to the world that he is something more than a hobo, he tries to prove to Annie that he can and will support her, regardless of their dire circumstances. Many fathers across the country felt similarly. In her study of *The Unemployed Man and His Family*, Mirra Komarovsky found a number of men willing to talk candidly about their circumstances. One man who lost his job as a carpenter when “the building trades went on the rocks,” suggested that he would work any job and that “everything would be well again if he could find something to do.”

Writing financial difficulties into the storyline also provided Harold Gray with another opportunity to excise Daddy Warbucks from the storyline, straying from his usual “business trip” excuse. Daddy leaving Annie echoed a ritual that reverberated time and time again among the destitute: breadwinners often abandoned and/or left their families to find jobs in hopes of one day returning with money. One “heart broken” mother made a written plea to President Roosevelt and asked him to help her feed her children while her husband was “in L.A. trying to find something to do.” Sometimes, help did not come and in those cases, thousands of children were shipped away from home. In 1931, for example, “more than half a million homeless children needed help

---


81 Ibid, 8.

and shelter from welfare agencies” as their parents were “forced to give up children they could not feed and clothe.”

In that same year, Daddy Warbucks deserts Annie again, this time because he comes to the realization that he is actually hindering her, rather than helping her. While Daddy spends his days and often his nights looking for any sort of job he can find, Annie is charged with cooking, cleaning, and general house maintenance, which also includes buying food and supplies. In better times, such chores may have fallen onto the shoulders of mothers, but during the Depression, many mothers were working, overburdened with psychological despair, or simply unwilling to hold up their end of the domestic bargain when their husbands were failing to provide for their families. Thus, children around the United States were “obliged to mature rapidly during the economic crisis.”

As miniature extensions of their mothers, girls were often forced into the role of domestic caretaker.

For example, as historian Robert McElvaine has noted, seeking charity or governmental assistance often fell onto the shoulders of wives and mothers. “A man who asked for help was admitting his failure as a provider,” McElvaine detailed. “A woman who ‘begged,’” on the other hand, “was simply trying to help her family.” When her

---


84 McElvaine, *Down and Out*, 115.

85 Ibid., 9.

86 Ibid.
mother became incapacitated by illness, one ten-year-old girl from Warren, Ohio took it upon herself to secure funds for Christmas presents for her six-member family. “Please buy us a stove,” she requested as she needed it to “do our cooking and to make good bread.” Like the girl from Ohio, Annie is also left to care for her “family,” in this case, her adoptive father.

Annie tries her hardest to stretch Daddy’s measly money to the maximum, but she ultimately decides that if Daddy cannot find a reliable job, she must be the one to do so. She secures a job at a local grocery store for slim wages, but free food. “With my job at Jake’s we get all our eats free and I make plenty to pay the rent,” she says. She sees this as a good time for Daddy to relax and “take his time and pick out a good job.” When Daddy discovers that Annie is working at a grocery store to take care of them both, he leaves Annie without so much as a goodbye, promising her in a letter “that when he has made good he’ll be back, but not before.” With Daddy gone, readers observed Annie in her greatest performance—a child at work. Unlike the Bateman children, who dressed in manly attire and quoted Shakespeare, for example, Annie is not pretending to be an adult; she still looks the part of the child and she certainly still used the rough-and-tumble vocabulary she always did. Only now, Annie is working to take care of herself and of the people (and animals) she loves.

---

87 Ibid., 116.

88 Gray, reprint, 1931, 232.

89 Gray, reprint, 1931, 233.
Annie acted like an adult, but still looked like a child and harbored childlike innocence and youthful optimism. These paradoxical qualities that kept depression-era adult men and women regular readers of the strip. Gray spoke of Annie’s duality in one interview where he stated, “I could never bring myself to draw Annie as an innocent, sheltered, prissy little angel.”  

Nor could he draw her as, “a smart-aleck little snit that everyone would love to skewer on a hot poker.” Rather Gray tried to develop both sides of Annie, often portraying her as a little of each. Annie does appear angelic and innocently sweet in some instances, yet she deftly moves into a different character when necessary. She plays pranks on the headmistress of the orphanage, yet she shelters an abandoned dog. She has no qualms about occasionally antagonizing her elders, yet she listens to every word Daddy Warbucks says. She is at once, and altogether, playfully childish and seriously mature—qualities that Depression-era men and women were particularly attracted to.

As already mentioned, the society of the 1920s was one obsessed with youth; it was manifested in a variety of cultural displays. In his discussion of theater and cabaret chorus girls of the 1920s, for example, historian Lewis Erenberg has argued that, “The ideal body type resembled that of the girl next door…Fresh youth, arrayed in an optimistic light.” He clarified, “When the chorus girls got older or fatter, they were dropped from the ensemble…The chorus girl was just that: a girl.” Erenberg emphasized

---


91 Ibid.

that during the 1920s popular culture compelled women to dress as girls and men to act as boys. The vibrant happy days of the 1920s, however, are often times portrayed as a complete antithesis to the solemn, lean years of the 1930s. In the essay, “The Serious Funnies: Adventure Comics During the Depression,” William H. Young Jr. suggests that the childlike nature of comic strip characters of the 1920s gave way to adult features in fashion, clothes, and comics, as “an escape to childlike simplicity was no longer appealing,” or available.93 Seconding Young’s theory, film scholar Robert Sklar’s text *Movie-Made America* argues that “in the early Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony films, Disney and his animators created…a fantasy world,” which during the Depression was replaced, first by “physical and material violence,” and then by an “idealized world.”94 Obviously cultural tastes had changed.

During the Depression, adults no longer cared to mimic the dress, actions, or the lifestyles of the young. Instead, they directed their attentions to youngsters exhibiting adult qualities. Interestingly enough, young girls became the best (and most visible) examples of this. Society could no longer accept images of women as underdeveloped, rail thin girls with no womanly features; rather, they wanted to see young girls dressed like grown women, acting mature, yet innocent. Gary Cross noted this shift in his analysis of the images of Mary Pickford, the girl-like silent movie star of the 1920s, and Shirley Temple, the eternal child with mature characteristics popularized in the 1930s.

---


According to Cross, “Shirley Temple was a nymphet, an innocent who imitated the sensuous woman,” such as her Marlene Dietrich impression in the “War Babies” Baby Burlesk short.\textsuperscript{95} Mary Pickford, on the other hand, “was the sensuous woman who turned herself into the cute child.”\textsuperscript{96} Significantly, when Annie was first created in 1924, she was drawn to resemble, “a popular movie heroine of the day, Mary Pickford.”\textsuperscript{97} This noteworthy aside further illustrates the point that adults inhabiting the bodies of children apparently captivated the interests of society at that time. During the Jazz Age, adults aspired to look and act like youngsters; a decade later, they gave up this desire and expected their children to do the same.

The popularity of Gray’s \textit{Little Orphan Annie} is a manifestation of this outwardly-directed adult sentiment. Annie is a young girl of approximately 10 years of age, complete with a cute red dress, saddle shoes, and a head-full of unruly hair. From her external appearance, readers observed a child. Her behavior, however, indicated a maturity well beyond her years. Although Annie looked the part of a child, she often acted as an adult. Gray depicted Annie’s mature tendencies repeatedly, but a series of events which unfolded in 1931 contextualized this conduct best.

In this sequence of events that began in mid July of 1931, Daddy Warbucks has left Annie on her own as he seeks his lost fortune. Abandoned, Annie lives in a small


\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.

rented room by herself, worrying about how she will get by without paternal support. She works at the local grocery store for fair wages and free food. One night, after leaving her job, Annie encounters an apparent orphan girl on the steps of her apartment building. She takes the child in, despite the protestations from adults who come to gaze on the orphan girl(s). Annie proclaims, “No orphanage for her—she’ll be no factory product—this kid’ll be handraised, and by me, or I’ll know the reason why.”

Day after day, stretching on for weeks, Annie, Sandy, and her landlady, Maw Green, take turns watching the youngster. This is an all-female society created by the failure of men: though Maw Green’s back story is unknown, she lives by herself and makes do alone, steeling her heart to all her boarders save Annie (and by extension, Annie’s ward, Pat); Pat’s parents are not in the picture (as they were duped by their conniving maid who forced her spineless husband to abduct the child; his manipulation demonstrates his weak character); and finally, shamed to be “practically supported by a little girl,” Daddy Warbucks skulks away.

Since men have clearly—if temporarily—failed them, Annie displays a sense of obligation to protect her dependent, innocent, and naïve adoptive child. She continues in her soliloquy, “but I’ll do all I can to make things easier for her—I’ll always give her a real home, but I can’t shield her from ever’thing—oh, if she could always stay just like

---


she is now and never grow up.”

For a child, Annie demonstrates wise behavior and rationale, echoing the sentiments of many adults. She is at once concerned about Pat and envious of her carefree position. She recognizes Pat as a dependent and she knows that she must be provided for. In a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt’s wife, an expectant mother mimics these feelings and fears, when she writes, “To have this baby come to a home full of worry and despair with no money for things it needs, is not fair.” She continues solemnly, “It needs and deserves a happy start in life.” Though there is no evidence to suggest that Gray knew of this particular expectant mother’s plight, it is safe to say that Gray was well aware of the tragedies that unfolded around him. His insightfulness was key to creating characters with whom average people could identify.

Annie’s mature behavior highlighted in the above incident distanced her from her peers while solidifying her position as a friend to her elders. In fact, by and large, Annie’s classmates and other children despised her. A prime example of this attitude toward Annie comes in a 1935 comic strip sequence in which school children make fun of Annie because her “old man was a tramp, tramp, tramp—a dirty old tramp.” As Stud’s Terkel has demonstrated in his Hard Times, a book of oral histories about the Great Depression, shame wreaked psychological havoc on all of those who suffered from

100 Ibid.

101 McElvaine, Down and Out in the Great Depression, 54.

102 Harold Gray, Little Orphan Annie, Chicago Tribune 6 March 1935.
loss of funds, power, or status. When Chicago relief worker Eileen Barthe peered into the closet of a “proud…, tall, well-built” middle-aged man looking for emergency relief for him and his family, she cried to Terkel, “I sensed this terrible humiliation…He was deeply humiliated.” She then offered, “I was too.” Thus, many Americans such as the unemployed railroad worker Barthe investigated, would have understood the shame Annie felt at having to endure such comments.

After ignoring the sing-song insults for one day, Annie finally decides to take justice into her own hands—or fists in this instance. After punching the lead bully, Annie earns respect from her peers, yet her relationship never goes beyond this level of deference on their part, and mild amusement on hers. Annie exclaims, “Wow—Look at ‘em run—After what happened yesterday I guess I’m cock-o’-th’-walk with th’ kids in this town, from now on.” Days later, Annie is still enjoying the admiration and fear the other kids have toward her. On March 12, she bellows, “Oh Boy! Th’ respectful way they speak to me now—betcha I could get away with anything but I won’t rub it in.” Annie once again echoes this refrain in the final frame the following day when she says to herself, “Wow! I sure have those kids where I want ‘em now.”


105 Harold Gray, Little Orphan Annie, 9 March 1935.

106 Ibid., 12 March 1935.

107 Ibid., 13 March 1935.
the comic strip Annie cultivated with her peers is not one based on mutual friendship. Instead, it generally developed from one of dislike and distrust on both parts, to one of awe and fear from the part of these “kids” while Annie revels in her new found respect and superiority, alone or with her pet, Sandy.

As Warren Susman has so cleverly teased out in his groundbreaking book *Culture as History*, “The 1930s was the decade of participation and belonging.” If Annie could not fit in with others her age, society of the time demanded she fit in somewhere. Thus, in the comic strip at least, Annie saves her friendship for the adults around her. In fact, Daddy is more like Annie’s friend than father in that they share a need and desire for occasional encouragement and mutual respect. When Annie needed support, Daddy was there to give it, but more times than not, Annie provided Daddy with the guidance and encouragement that he required to help him through his times of despair.

During one of Daddy’s ritual financial busts, for instance, Daddy acts very melancholy, lamenting the events that led to his financial ruin and the reasons why he cannot find a job. Slumped over, with his face twisted in a grimace, Daddy tells Annie, “We’re down and out.” The audience then sees Annie standing next to the dejected Daddy; with Daddy holding his head in his hands, he and Annie are literally on the same level, encouraging a comparison between two like-minded adults, not an interaction between adult and child. Annie begins her speech with words of encouragement, “Nix-

Nix! We’re down right now, maybe but we’re not OUT!”¹⁰⁹ She declares, “Why, “Daddy”—You CAN’T fold up like that—you’ll land something soon.” After this pick-me-up Annie changes gears from motivational speaker to concerned friend, telling Daddy, “I’ll stick to you…We’ll lick this thing together.” With no wife to help him through his own hard times, Daddy relies on his orphan girl.

Suddenly, readers see Annie and Daddy working as a team. She has become indispensable to Daddy Warbucks, not as his dependent ward, but as his equal—as his friend. Unlike boys, who though still physically immature represent a threat to adult male dominance and authority and therefore could never be seen as a friend, girls—with their gendered upbringing which emphasized emotional expressiveness and being supportive to others—as well as with their smaller physical stature, could fulfill the role of friend in a safe way. Unlike boys their own age, neither now nor in their future can young girls be construed as intimidating. Thus, Daddy latches onto Annie as his equal.

After Annie’s speech, Daddy is ready to re-conquer the world. He exclaims, “You’re right! I’m not out…I’ll be back in the big time—I’ll show ‘em—You’ll see.” Though Daddy uses the personal pronoun “I” in this exchange, e.g. “I’m not out,” he realizes that he cannot manage by himself. He needs Annie; he shows this need when he says, “Listen—if I’m to be a bush leaguer, we’re going to the bushes.” He finishes up the scene, standing tall and erect, with a smile planted firmly on his face, “We’re down

¹⁰⁹ In the following exchange, Gray double underlined certain words to place special emphasis on them. Unable to replicate his particular methodology, the words have been capitalized and then underlined to indicate the same sense of urgency that Gray tried with his double underlining strategy.
today—tomorrow we start up and on our way to a Happy New Year." By giving Daddy advice and spurring him into guided action Annie has solidified her position as Daddy’s friend, rather than his helpless obligation. Indeed, adult readers found it particularly soothing that a seeming small girl could comfort the millionaire mogul, Oliver Warbucks.

The Depression was not an easy time for most Americans. For many, the depression transformed the reality of living the life of a grown up into one of watching the lives of the prematurely aged. The shift from action to voyeurism was not a coincidence, but a direct response to economic catastrophe. The Depression literally left many grown men and women inactive. As Americans lost their jobs, their fragile social positions, and in many cases, their self-worth, they did not take solace in Annie as much as they identified with her. Annie represented them and their daily struggles, their fears as much as their hopes. In many ways, they were not reading the paper; they were gazing into a funhouse mirror, watching a distorted image of their own becoming.

While adults made valiant efforts to discover themselves, children faced with the same circumstances did likewise. Adults no longer lived in the land of make-believe, and it appeared that such a wondrous world was closed to children as well. If parents felt economic hardship, then children felt it also. They understood what it was to ration their portions, to wear tattered clothing to school, and to bring home all of their earnings to help support their families. In yet another letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, a thirteen-year-old

---
farm girl simply stated, “as the years go by our circumstances get worse and worse.” Like many young people of that era, she asked for direct financial assistance from the President and his wife. In this particular instance, she wanted to use the money to buy a radio to better hear the Roosevelts’ numerous speeches delivered during these anxious times. There is no doubt that this youngster would listen to a great many broadcasts on the radio if given the opportunity. Perhaps at 5:45 p.m., Monday through Friday, she would even turn her dial to the popular children’s radio program *Little Orphan Annie*.112

In fact, millions of children tuned into *Little Orphan Annie* each weekday. Annie entranced “an audience of children estimated at six million...five evenings a week.”113 A 1936 *Chicago Daily Tribune* poll found that the *Little Orphan Annie* radio program was the top ranked show among children between the ages of five and eight, and the second favorite of those between the ages of nine and fourteen.114 These impressionable youngsters heard the same familiar voices illustrate wild tales of adventure and suspense. Annie Warbucks and her school-aged friend, Joe Corntassel, went on many adventures during their long run on the radio waves. From turning the local failing grocery store into a money-making enterprise, to being crowned king and queen of a remote desert island,


112 The radio program is noted as both *Little Orphan Annie* and its abbreviated title, *Orphan Annie*.


114 “What Children Want on Radio, it Seems, is Action: Request Less Noise and No Teaching,” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 April 1936.
Annie and Joe acted out fantasies that few adults lived, let alone children. Gray’s
Annie opened the eyes and minds of adult and child alike to the world of one another. By
reading Little Orphan Annie on a regular basis, adults allowed themselves the chance to
integrate their fascination with youth (a remnant of the carefree days of a bygone decade)
with the reality of their dire depression-era circumstances. The radio program, on the
other hand, helped children imagine a vaguely familiar fantasy world in which they have
the power and capabilities to foil the bad guy, make money, and even have a little fun
along the way. Little Orphan Annie brought youth and adult together for different
reasons, but united nonetheless.

Little Orphan Annie’s first leap onto the airwaves occurred in Chicago on
December of 1930, a WGN radio broadcast. As the most senior continuity writer (i.e.
a writer who specializes in continuing the script or schedule that a radio program
follows), Frank Dahm was chosen to be the head writer. Dahm began working at
WGN in 1925 at the age of twenty-two; five years later, he was responsible for creating
the first ever radio children’s drama. As a father of seven children, four sons and three
daughters, no doubt Dahm had a lot of practice in trying to get into the heads of
youngsters. His show was so successful, he wrote every episode until he moved to New

115 Harmon, Radio Mystery, 100.
York in 1938. By and large, Dahm tried to follow the popular comic strip, but there were some significant changes to his version of Orphan Annie’s world.

First and foremost, radio Annie is not a loner who shies away from children her age. In fact, her best friend, Joe Corntassel, accompanies her on nearly every adventure. When they are not off saving the world or meeting up with Daddy Warbucks, Annie and Joe live in Simmons Corners with the elderly farm couple brought to life from the comic pages, Mr. and Mrs. Silo. The talented young voice actress Shirley Bell signed on as Annie, and Joe Barruck began playing her friend and neighbor, Joe Corntassel. Perhaps the most significant difference between radio Annie and the comic strip one was its intended audience. From the outset, the program was touted as one strictly for children. In a personal message from Annie to her “good friends everywhere” printed the day before the first broadcast in the Chicago Daily Tribune, Annie spoke to her young fan base. She said, “I want every kid in the whole wide world to tune us in at 5:45 o’clock tomorrow evening.” She concluded her message with the words, “[Sandy and I] won’t be satisfied unless we know that everybody that knows us is listenin’ in.”

Though Gray’s comic strip attracted a mature audience, the writing staff at WGN (as

117 Larry Wolters, “Little Orphan Annie to Mark Seven Years On Air,” Chicago Tribune, 1 April 1938.

118 “Little Orphan Annie Taking to Air Tomorrow,” Chicago Tribune, 7 December 1930.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.
well as their sponsors at Ovaltine) recognized the broad appeal of Annie, and manipulated her adventures to target younger consumers.

Like the comic strip, the radio program balanced a combination of realism and fantasy to entice potential fans. Children could recognize a semblance of their own lives in the Orphan Annie radio program. On the radio, Annie “was really a kid, maybe eight or ten years old that young listeners could identify with.” She and Joe, like most children of the 1930s, regularly attended school, played with their peers, and most importantly, understood the circumstances in which they lived, despite the often-

erroneous beliefs of the adults around them who continued to think that their children were not aware of the truth. For example, regardless of the intrigue and mysteriousness of events that Annie witnesses, she often can see through the smoke and mirrors. In fact, despite her adamant statements that she knows what is going on, the adult protagonists in the radio program do not acknowledge Annie’s knowledge. 1936’s episode, “Bill Corwin has Disappeared” provides a case in point. In this installment, a friend’s father is blamed for a failed attempt at sabotaging the construction of a bridge in Simmons’ Corners. Annie knows that it is a “frame-up” but the town Marshal will not listen to her. Instead, he absent-mindedly and continuously mutters his mantra, “I’ve got my duty to do, and I’m going to do it!” The father is jailed and, at least temporarily, we see another example of the failed male. In this instance his failure is due to the fact that the Marshal

121 Harmon, Radio Mystery, 99.

122 “Bill Corwin Has Disappeared,” Little Orphan Annie (Radio Program), NBC Blue Network Chicago, IL: 1936.
cannot believe Annie on account of her tender years. Annie and her opinions go unnoticed.

This interaction between Annie and the Marshal, with the adults closing his/her eyes and ears to the child, played out in the lives of many Depression-era youngsters. At this time, “society tended to ignore the voice and interests of children and young people.”123 Parents wanted to believe that their children were unaware of their economic problems, but such was rarely the case. Although one girl’s father, “like Mr. Roosevelt, carry his worries with a smile,” she knew that her “papa was worried about his seed oats.”124 In another letter addressed to President Roosevelt and the First Lady, a twelve-year-old boy goes into great personal detail, involving his family’s living circumstances. As if diligently marking the days on his calendar, he wrote, “My father hasn’t worked for 5 months…We haven’t paid 4 months rent…We haven’t paid the gas bill, and the electric bill, haven’t paid [the] grocery bill for 3 months…”125 These youngsters often knew more than their parents thought they did. Not only did they recognize the fact that they and their families suffered, they understood the worry behind this suffering. They comprehended their own abysmal conditions as well as the emotional and mental toll that it enacted upon their families. In these letters, childlike innocence was replaced with great clarity. Children could not afford to live in infantile frivolity, as they, “were among the most economically, educationally, and psychologically vulnerable to the ravages of

123 Hawes, *Children Between the Wars*, 30.


125 Ibid., 119.
the Depression.” Depression-era youths did not have the time, the money, or maybe even the desire to live the supposed carefree lives of children.

Of course, being stripped of childhood innocence certainly affected the everyday lives of children. Once again, radio in general and *Little Orphan Annie* in particular help to illustrate this point. Though detailed in Chapter 4, it is important to note here that parents were afraid of the effects radio listening had on their children. Harold Gray’s comic strip was a violent one. Concerned adults frequently wrote to Gray concerning the matter. “As a mother of children who avidly devour your strips,” one mother wrote to Gray in 1938 after a particularly disturbing scenario had one truck run another truck off of the road (presumably to the driver’s death), “I beg of you to soft pedal these revenge pictures.” Since Dahm, the head writer for radio *Orphan Annie* liked to follow the formula of success of Gray’s strips, he too added violence to his show. In a summer-long story line in 1932, for example, Annie, Joe, and Mr. and Mrs. Silo are besieged by the villain Orloff and his “ferocious bloodhound Flix.” Sandy, in particular, seems to be in imminent danger as he gets into a “dog-fight” with Flix. Anxiety-inducing storylines such as this could and often did stretch on for weeks and even months at a time. WGN received so many complaints that soon Dahm was forced to “tone it down.”

---


Yet danger was a real life concern to many of Annie’s listeners. Dahm simply transformed children’s real fears into fantastical plotlines. Though most boys and girls may not have had to deal with a villain and his dog extorting their caretakers while on vacation, kidnapping was, unfortunately, an all too-real possibility. Ever since “children acquired greater sentimental value, they became, for the first time, prey for kidnappers.”\(^{129}\) Moreover, with the high-profile abduction and murder of Bobby Franks in 1924, children started to hear on the radio and from their parents that they really did have something to fear. Moreover, it was, perhaps, more than just a coincidence that this particular plotline followed only a few short months after the very public kidnapping and murder of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh’s son, Charles Jr.

Dahm also worked the effects of the Depression into his stories, focusing, once again, on childhood anxieties. In March of 1932, Annie and Joe return to Simmons Corners to discover that their town, not immune to the Depression, had been hit by economic catastrophe. Indeed, their school “may be forced to close owing to lack of funds.”\(^{130}\) The threat is real as their teacher, Miss Clayton, has not been paid in months. By this time, “one-quarter of all school children lived in rural counties,” which were ‘later identified as ‘serious relief problem areas.’”\(^{131}\) Like Annie and Joe, they too had to worry about school closings. By 1933, hundreds of public schools closed their doors.

---


\(^{130}\) “Orphan Annie, Joe Seek Way to Save School,” *Chicago Tribune* 20 March 1932.

leaving nearly three million children scrambling for an alternative, at best, or stripped of their education altogether, at worst.132 Writing to her friend, one fourteen-year-old girl agonized, “I feel like crying every time I see [the school] with the doors and windows boarded up.”133 She worried, “With the school closed, I’ll be too old before I’m ready to go to high school.” As if worrying about school closings was not enough, girls had the additional concern of being held back from attending school because of their domestic value and assistance. Young girls were expected to take on the role of mothers if and when their true mothers were ill, pregnant, working, or otherwise unable to live up to their household duties. One mother from Troy, MI told the First Lady that she had to keep her seven-year-old daughter out of school to help care for the younger children in the house. The daughter was “a good willing worker,” who would help her pregnant mother in the final weeks leading up to her delivery.134

With schooling becoming increasingly optional, hundreds of thousands of children sought employment. At a time when adult men were vying for low-wage jobs that even youngsters could do, children took on new labors. Many kids got part-time jobs as “news-paper carriers, baby-sitters, [and] store clerks.”135 Orphan Annie also worked periodically throughout her tenure on the radio. In a 1935 episode she and Joe tend to

---

132 Kerry A. Graves, Going to School During the Great Depression (Mankato, Minn: Blue Earth Books, 2002), 12.

133 Ibid.

134 McElvaine, Down and Out, 63.

135 Russell Freedman, Children of the Great Depression (New York: Clarion, 2005), 44.
their (adult) friend’s grocery store while he recuperates from a particularly nasty, though unnamed illness—a storyline literally taken from the pages of Gray’s comic strip. “We’re going to be clerks,” Joe explains to Annie’s sceptical caretakers, the Silos. Maw and Paw Silo dislike the idea of the children having an after-school job because Annie and Joe, “ought to have some time to play,” however, they yield to the persistent children. For Annie, “it will be grand tending store,” as it “is not something every boy and girl get to do.” In actuality, however, more boys and girls may have worked at stores if only they could have been hired. In addition to helping out the family with their wages, however meager, sometimes parents sent their children out to supplement the family’s food supply. Stealing, in fact, became, “a family affair in which children were assigned by parents to shoplift the necessary food for the entire family.”

In some ways then, Radio’s Adventure Time with Little Orphan Annie was realistic; at times when, for example, Annie goes to work, children heard Annie’s life mimic their own. In fact, this realism was one of the factors that lured them into listening to Annie’s adventures day after day. With regard to attracting an audience, however, Little Orphan Annie’s fantastic elements cannot be overstated. In Annie’s world, Annie and Joe, succeeded in effecting a great number of objectives and in triumphing over the seedy adults around them. In this way, radio’s Orphan Annie portrayed a world turned

---

136 Radio’s Best Kid’s Shows—Vol. II: Little Orphan Annie (Chicago, IL), 22 October 1935, transferred to audio cassette (Glenview, IL), 1990-1995.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 McElvaine, Down and Out, 19.
upside-down, where children were the detective heroines and heroes; adults were generally well-intentioned, yet ignorant; and man’s best friend could help the children in their eternal efforts to do right, uncover the truth, and defeat the villains. In this world, children had the ultimate authority, manipulating the bumbling adults to do their bidding, whether it was building a radio transmitter or encouraging an adult to decline an invitation to buy stock from a crooked salesman. In all of these instances, the radio Annie was very similar to her comic strip self, in that she acted the part of the adult. Despite her mature behavior, radio Annie still had enough child-like qualities to attract children.

To a certain extent, Depression-era children recognized themselves in Annie. They were active, playful, and wise beyond their years. Economic hardship prematurely aged them in that they were painfully aware of their often dire circumstances. Yet like Annie, their childish naiveté had not completely disappeared; their optimism lived on. Ultimately these children wrote their letters because they believed that someone (in these instances, the President and/or his wife) could and would help them and their family; and that they themselves could successfully solicit the help they needed. They readily believed Annie when she said, “We’re all just kids, but leapin’ lizards there’s no reason why kids can’t do just a good job like grown-ups if they know what they’re doing.”

Meanwhile, these children responded to the fantastic elements of *Orphan Annie*, where

---

140 Episodes “Building a Radio Transmitter” and “Mr. Flint Tries to Sell Stock to Jake Levy,” *Little Orphan Annie* (Radio Program), NBC’s Blue Network, Chicago, IL: 1936, respectively.

children reigned supreme. In this world, children played the part of heroine and hero, earning the respect and adulation of the accompanying adults. For kids, Annie simultaneously represented who they were and who they wished they could become.

For girls, radio’s Annie was a particularly relevant and important role model. She was one of the few young heroines on the radio at the time. Having story lines centered around an eight-year-old girl had to be empowering for others girls around the same age. Indeed, the Depression seemed to breed strong, female heroines. During this time, for example, Hollywood began making films depicting various strong types of the female heroine or even anti-hero (as in film noir). According to Elizabeth Kendall, the movie public “wanted to watch the woman, who was supposed to be weak, become strong, and the man, who was traditionally strong, become vulnerable.”¹⁴² No doubt small girls also liked to see, or in the case of radio’s Little Orphan Annie, to hear the main female protagonist buck tradition and take care of herself. It was yet another way that girls and their mothers utilized Little Orphan Annie to better understand one another.

Using Gray’s comic strip adults were able to reconnect to their childhood, while simultaneously, if not purposefully, connecting to society’s youth and its emerging culture. The Little Orphan Annie radio program, on the other hand, allowed children to experience both the world of adults through Annie’s adventures, as well as glimpse the world as they knew it, through Annie’s relationships and trivial daily experiences. On the one hand, Annie reflected the adult world and experience, in that she was often called-upon (usually by herself) to right a wrong, expose the truth, and eventually actively

participate in the elimination her adversaries. In these ways, Annie was delivered to her young audience as a parental figure. She always seemed to know what was right, who was wrong, and how to fix everyone’s problems. At the same time, Annie participated in her childhood, partaking in many of the same activities that her listeners did. She was curious and nosy; she ran foot-races against her friends; she came home late for dinner.¹⁴³ In these ways, she played the part of the average child listener.

Circumstances created by the Great Depression were particularly successful in bringing together the child and adult spheres. Adults were ready to see their children as more than just cute and innocent dependents. They saw them as potential and/or actual workers, able to earn their keep. Similarly, the Depression forced children out of their sheltered lives and into the oft-cruel world of the adult. More often than not, misunderstanding between the two parties occurred. Some circumstances, however, lessened the culture shock that children and adults experienced when trying to delve into the foreign lands of each other. All forms of popular entertainment exemplified this theme, but _Little Orphan Annie_, in particular, made it its central focus. _Annie_ became a vehicle that brought adults and children together and helped them better understand one another. Adults and children alike loved to watch and listen to her experiences. In this way then, _Little Orphan Annie_ helped bring the worlds of adult and child ever closer; she helped ease the tensions associated with the muddling of adult and child roles that occurred due to economic and psychological difficulties associated with the Great Depression.

¹⁴³ In all episodes examined, Annie displays her curiosity. It is often the catalyst of her adventures. The foot race and the dinner adventures are chronicled in “Wright Bros. 33rd Anniversary,” and “To Work” _Little Orphan Annie_ (Radio Program), NBC’s Blue Network, Chicago, IL: June 16, 1936 and October 22, 1935 episodes, respectively.
Depression. One particularly insightful Annie enthusiast said it best in her letter to the *Tribune*, writing that Annie “is the eternal child that lives in the hearts of men and women.” She continues, “Children love her—adults sigh for their own lost spontaneity and initiative of youth, seeing them in her.”

Unlike the “small” girls of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, who rarely were able to depict themselves in popular culture, Little Orphan Annie demonstrates that there was a marked shift by the mid-1920s. Annie’s value lay in the fact that she could be both childlike (in appearance and demeanor) and wise, hardworking, and skeptical like an adult. By examining the world of *Little Orphan Annie*, we can bridge the apparent chasms between two different and sometimes opposing worlds inhabited by adult and child and reconcile adult anxieties regarding modern vs. traditional women and rural vs. urban living. As the next chapter examines, the small girl’s value lay not just in what has been outlined above. Indeed, by the end of the Depression, she has become an answer to the gender crisis which economic hardship had exacerbated.

---


145 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

DADDY’S GIRL AND MOMMY’S RIVAL:

SHIRLEY TEMPLE AND THE ANSWER TO THE 1930S GENDER CRISIS

Removed from her fancy boarding school because of financial hardship, Penny Hale (played by Shirley Temple) returns home to one of New York City’s most prestigious apartment buildings, the Riverview. Upon her arrival, Penny is told that the giant penthouse she and her father previously occupied, is no longer theirs. In fact, her new home is a simple, small, garden apartment where both she and her father can look up into the grate in the ceiling and watch the soles of the wealthy as they tread overhead; these rich people are oblivious to the occupants who are literally beneath them. The move from the top floor to the basement indicates that Penny and her father have fallen in status. This, however, does not seem to startle the optimistic Penny. After a joyous reunion, young, curly-haired, doe-eyed, Penny sits on an unmade bed with her father, Jeff (played by Charles Farrell). Hesitantly, she brings up their change in station. When Jeff tells her that he has lost his job and that, as a consequence, they had to move to the basement, Penny makes the best of it. She talks up the benefits of the new apartment, telling her father the penthouse was too big and walking around it tired her out. Moreover, being on the top floor sometimes caused her to get dizzy. Even after Hale confesses, dejectedly, that he has had to sell their car, Penny remains optimistic. She grabs his hand and exclaims, “Well then, you and I are going to have a lotta nice walks
together then, aren’t we?” Her good spirits are infectious and in no time, even Hale (initially so worried to admit his economic failure to his daughter) ventures that his job loss and her subsequent return from boarding school will mean that the duo get to spend extra time together. Penny adds, “It’s about time somebody looked after you.” She hugs him, rests her head on his arm, looks off into the distance with starry eyes and continues, “A man without a woman around the house is quite a problem.”

Of course, a man living without a woman around to fulfill domestic duties has, historically, been a problem for both the man and for society. As family scholars Stuart Queen and Robert Habenstein have discovered, colonial Americans, for example, remarried quickly. In late seventeenth century Plymouth, “Edward Winslow, a widower for seven weeks, and Susanna White, a widow for twelve weeks,” were married and in at least one instance, a man proposed to a young woman the same day he buried his dead wife. As evidenced by such extreme cases, historically, there has been a high rate of widowed men remarrying within the first year of losing their wives. But the Depression caused other problems to arise, not just from the absence of a woman in the house (as in previous years) but rather, as this chapter demonstrates, from her presence.

Reeling from insecurity brought on by economic woes, men felt chastised by the new status their wives, sisters, and mothers had. Women, it appeared, were not to blame

---

1. *Just Around the Corner*, streaming from Netflix, directed by Irving Cummings, 1938; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2011.


3. Ibid., 275.
for financial failure; that dubious title belonged solely to men. Scholars love to debate the various gender crises that have happened throughout the ages. In the first fifty years of the twentieth century alone, historians have determined that such crises were spurred by changes in the workforce, women’s enfranchisement and subsequent sexual freedom, the establishment of heterosexuality as the norm, depression, war, and the challenge to racial inequality, to name just a few.\textsuperscript{4} Despite all the different reasons linked to these so-called crises in masculinity, the one thing they have in common is that they expect to see an ebb and flow to these events; not surprisingly, they do. The usual story goes as thus: men begin to lose their grip on patriarchal authority as women start to gain authority of their own. The see-saw quickly swings in the other direction, however. Therefore, a crisis of masculinity is usually followed, at least in many scholars’ minds, by a redoubling of efforts to get women back in the house and obeying traditional gender norms.

Yet the one-two punch of Depression and War seems to have altered or delayed this vacillation. Indeed, through these years we see a prolonged battle between the sexes and one in which the fallout was felt for years to come. Thus, the crisis of masculinity

that was waged during the Great Depression is particularly important to understand. Whereas the many incarnations of *Little Orphan Annie* helped to reconcile American anxieties about rural and urban living, about traditional and modern views of children and orphans, and helped to bridge the chasm that had grown between adult and child, Shirley Temple, and other representations of small girls in the films of the mid to late 1930s, provided the answer to the Depression’s gender crisis. In her films and public persona, Temple gave men a purpose, and also deflated the burgeoning power women enjoyed in the earlier years of the financial crisis. That being said, Temple’s films and persona cannot be read solely as anti-woman. Instead, by promoting the image of the small girl, they champion a surprisingly feminist understanding of her and her future in America—a model that young girls growing up during the Second World War would emulate.

Temple, with her motherly instincts, covert sexuality, and doting daughter personas eased male suffering in a particular way: she made the female sex, at least in miniature form, appear safe once more. Additionally, Temple was typically cast beside a “wife figure” who was cruel, bossy, and loveless. By putting these two characters side-by-side—Temple’s charming little girl and the mean-spirited older woman—audiences were to understand that the small girl was the true heroine and that the other woman, usually the wife, was in the wrong. Girls were to provide consolation to men, when wives would or could not.

Despite the fact that she was an international superstar by the age of six, Temple’s stardom was not exactly preordained. It took work, on her part, and on the part of her ambitious mother, Gertrude. “One summer day in 1927” Gertrude Temple, wife to
banker George and mother of two adolescent boys already, “announced her intention to produce a baby girl.”

Many who knew Gertrude knew her as a particularly cunning woman who usually got what she wanted. After seeing two friends give birth to baby girls “with naturally curly blond hair,” Gertrude wanted one of her own. In fact, less than one year later, on April 23, 1928 in Santa Monica, California, Gertrude Temple’s intention became reality as she gave birth to Shirley Jane Temple. With her golden curls, Shirley was more than just “the girl her mother had prayed for;” she was also “singularly pretty and gifted as well.”

She had picture-perfect dimples and, “her tiny feet would keep time to radio music,” even before she could walk alone.

Perhaps because Shirley showed an early aptitude for singing and dancing to radio tunes, or because Gertrude “felt an irresistible urge to realize her own girlhood dreams of a theatrical career through” her daughter, in 1931 Gertrude Temple took Shirley, then

---


6 In her own autobiography, Temple herself talks about her mother and how she worked diligently to secure Shirley’s status as an eminent child-star, sometimes without the knowledge or consent of George Temple, her husband. In fact, in her history *Hollywood’s Children: An Inside Account of the Child Star Era*, Diana Serra Cary explains that Gertrude Temple took Shirley to her first screen test without George’s knowledge but that he “hit the ceiling” when he found out; undaunted by his reaction, Gertrude Temple accepted the job offered to Shirley and George “hit the ceiling again” though this time, it was “with joy.” (p. 203).


three-and-a-half years-old, to the famous Meglin’s Dance Studio in Hollywood, CA.\textsuperscript{10} There, the young Temple would remain for two and a half years practicing dances “until every motion of each dance became as reflexive and natural as walking or standing.”\textsuperscript{11} As an adult, Temple, with tongue-in-cheek, remembered, “It took me that long to learn how to dance naturally.”\textsuperscript{12} And learn she did. Her ability to mimic whatever she saw performed made her one of Meglin’s top students. Like many of Meglin’s other protégés, such as Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, Shirley Temple also found her way into show business.

In those days, Hollywood was reeling. At first, it appeared as if it would stave off economic hardship as audiences continued to line up for picture shows. As the economic catastrophe worsened, however, some scholars have estimated that movie industry revenues dropped dramatically. Though Lary May has painstakingly documented that during between 1930 and 1945 movie “attendance underwent an unprecedented expansion of about 100 percent,” in the beginning of the Great Depression, audiences stayed away.\textsuperscript{13} Whereas theater admission was at 80 million in 1930, by 1932 it had dropped to 55 million. In fact, these numbers were so small that “by mid-1932, as ticket


\textsuperscript{11} Black, \textit{Child Star}, 7.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

sales sagged, sixty-five hundred of twenty thousand theaters closed their doors.”

Hollywood was in need of a lifeline; it got it in miniature form, as child actors such as Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Jane Withers, Baby LeRoy, and Freddie Bartholomew descended upon movie studios and buoyed the box office. With the help of these young stars, by the mid-1930s, movie ticket sales started to rebound.\(^{15}\) Shirley Temple cannot be praised enough for her part in that equation. According to cultural historian John Kasson, Shirley Temple was the “little girl who saved Fox” studios.\(^{16}\)

Like many other film studios of the era, Fox had heavily invested in technology upgrades in the shift from silent film to talkies. Building sound-equipped stages and technology within their own studios was incredibly expensive, however. Warner Bros., the studio that pioneered the talkie film, spent a reported $260,000 building one of four sound stages.\(^{17}\) That number, however, paled in comparison to the “several million dollars” that the six leading film studios spent constructing “sound stages, recording buildings, and other paraphernalia incidental” to creating talking pictures.\(^{18}\)

---


\(^{17}\) Rosalind Shaffer, “Filmdom Spends Fortune on Sound,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune* 29 July 1928.

stay cutting-edge, Fox Studios followed along. Between 1927 when the Jazz Singer was first released, and 1929 when Fox declared that it had made its last silent film, sound-equipped theaters increased dramatically from 20 in number to 800. In 1930, the number of theaters with sound equipment jumped to nearly 9,000. By 1931, and for the first time ever, there were more sound-equipped theaters (13,128) than not (8,865). With all the studios weighed down by debt caused by building up these sound-equipped theaters (and consequently the businesses and people dependent upon them as well), by the spring of 1932, M.A. Lightman, head of the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America declared that “the motion picture industry from production through to exhibition [was] facing its greatest crisis.” Fortunately for many, Shirley Temple’s talents and charms brought people back into the seats.

Indeed, Temple’s films “kept [Fox] studio afloat earning an estimated twenty million dollars” between 1935 and 1937. Young actors and actresses, such as Shirley Temple, beguiled large audiences of mixed ages. In fact, child stars were some of the biggest box office draws of the time. In 1939, for example, the child star, Mickey Rooney was the film industry’s principal male ticket seller. But Shirley Temple was

---

19 The aforementioned statistics on sound theater vs. silent theaters were taken from Table 1: Movie Theaters and Admission” in Richard Butsch’s “American Movie Audiences of the 1930s,” in International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 59 (Spring 2001), 108.


22 West, Growing Up, 112.
the bigger star. Indeed, Temple was the biggest box-office draw between the years 1935 and 1938.23

Shirley Temple got her first chance at the movies when she was cast as the female lead in Educational Pictures’ series of shorts, *The Baby Burlesks* (1932-1933). Though these films cast children in all the roles, their satiric content was entirely adult. For example, the first in the series, *Runt Page* was a spoof of the 1931 Howard Hughes directed-film, *The Front Page*.24 The ten-minute short is set-up as a Temple dream sequence in which she wakes up in the part of Lulu Parsnips (a play on movie journalist Louella Parsons), the love interest to Georgie Smith’s Raymond Bunion (i.e. famed, hard-nosed reporter Damon Runyon). Like all of the other *Baby Burlesks*, Temple et. al. wore diapers with over-sized baby pins to fasten them together. Unlike some of the other films, however, Temple, as well as all of the other children, are topless; they also have adult voice-overs. Other than this being Temple’s first screen appearance, the film itself was unmemorable.

Though in a letter to her mother, Gertrude Temple expressed hopes that the film would be a “big success,” its “sale was abandoned, but not before the producers sensed [Shirley Temple’s] potential.”25 Temple was signed to a contract, and she became the


female lead in the *Burlesks* to follow. Within two years, Temple would film eight *Baby Burlesks* and be contracted out to star in bit parts for a variety of other studios such as Columbia (*Red Haired Alibi*, 1932), Universal (*Out All Night*, 1933), and Paramount (*New Deal Rhythm*, 1933). At this point, it seemed as if Temple was destined to live out her movie career playing small, walk-on roles in mediocre films. Fortunately for her, however, her talent was noted and admired by many around her. So much so, in fact, that composer Jay Gorney (of “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime,” fame), convinced Fox executives to bring Temple in for a part that was already cast. The film was *Stand Up and Cheer!* and it proved to be Shirley’s big break. It was also the first movie to promote Temple’s ability to heal the wounded man. As such, it was the beginning of creating in her, and in little girls across the country, an answer to the gender crisis that was exacerbated by the Great Depression.

Released in 1934, *Stand Up and Cheer!* was Fox Studio’s attempt to make people feel good about spending money at the movies when their wallets were pinched. The movie chronicles the attempts made by Broadway producer Lawrence Cromwell (Warner Baxter), the country’s very first Secretary of Amusement, to allay American economic anxieties. Appointed by the president of the United States, a Franklin D. Roosevelt look-a-like, Cromwell is charged with boosting the country’s morale and ending the Great Depression through entertainment. He forms his division and hires Mary Adams (played

---

26 Ibid., 33.

27 *Stand Up and Cheer!* DVD, directed by Hamilton MacFadden, 1934, Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006.
by the perennial “All-American” woman, Madge Evans) as the head of the Children’s Division. Sparks fly between Cromwell and Adams, but the two manage to keep their romantic inclinations to themselves, at least in the beginning. With strong support from Adams’ Children’s division, Cromwell’s Amusement department is so effective that crooked politicians take note. These politicians have been benefitting from depressed wages and from desperate deals some Americans have had to make in order to survive such harsh circumstances. The politicians want the Depression to continue, and they see Cromwell and his Department of Amusement as a thorn in their side. They attempt to bribe Cromwell, lobby against him, and in fact, almost force him to quit. In the end, with his fortitude strengthened by his growing love for Adams, Cromwell endures, and the Depression ends for good.28

For some audience members, the film worked. In her letter to the editor of Photoplay magazine, Mrs. T.J. Angell of Springfield, IL remarked that she would certainly Stand Up and Cheer! as the “grand production” gave her a new life and “so much encouragement that [she felt] that [she] could conquer the world.”29 Despite this type of positive feedback from the laymen crowd, however, most professional accounts were not so kind. Some claimed that the film was simple, “pretty synthetic,” and had “no story worth telling.”30

28 Ibid.

29 Mrs. T.J. Angell, “Letter to the Editor: Another Order of “Cheer” Photoplay 41, no. 3 (1934): 10
Yet its lackluster reception among movie critics could not dim the rising star of the film’s youngest talent, Shirley Temple. Temple was cast as Jimmy Dunn’s (Jimmy Dugan in the film) daughter/dancing partner whose smile and insistence persuaded Cromwell to flout the labor laws and allow her to perform musical numbers with her father in the evenings. Not only does Temple’s song and dance routine help end the depression, but most notably, her presence allows her father to keep his job, and even helps him, presumably, to re-enter the dating game.\(^{31}\)

Although she had only a few scenes, Temple’s performance was memorable. In fact, according to one *Variety* reviewer, she was the “unofficial star” of the film.\(^{32}\) Another commentator, this one from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, claimed that Temple’s musical number, “Baby Take a Bow,” “impressed a roomful of unsentimental Hollywood reporters (all male and all “cold” to the usual run of precocious child actors).”\(^{33}\) Shirley Temple had charmed her way into the hearts of many Americans. As such, she became the “sweetest bunch of happiness” some of them had ever seen.\(^{34}\) One thing that made

\(^{30}\) Mae Tinee, “Slump Yields to Treatment in this Movie,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 3 May 1934; and Philip K. Scheuer, “‘Depression’ Laughed Off,” *Los Angeles Times* 4 May 1934, respectively.

\(^{31}\) *Stand Up and Cheer!*


\(^{34}\) Angell, “Letter to the Editor,” 10.
Temple’s character so appealing, was its tragic element, something Depression-weary audiences may have known something about.

In the film, Temple plays Shirley, a half-orphan, whose father depends on her to continue his act, which always, “knocks em’ dead.” To comply with various states’ labor laws, however, Cromwell has instituted an age limit—no child under seven may work for the Department of Amusement. This new law prompts Temple’s father, Jimmy Dugan, to beg Cromwell for an exemption for his daughter, who after all, “doesn’t really work in the act. She just sorta comes on at the finish.” Moreover, he exclaims excitingly, “she loves it!” Dugan explains that Shirley was raised on the stage. Since his wife’s death, however, Shirley and Dugan have been doing the show alone. Temple, we find out, has become the sole woman in Dugan’s life and in his act; she has literally taken over the role of Dugan’s wife—at least in the show. Dugan insists, “She helps me over the rough spots, helps me build to the finish, like the Mrs. did.”

Though many depression-era wives may have still been living in their homes with their husbands, in some cases the hardships they endured forced them to become so emotionally, physically, and mentally distant from the members of their households, that like Jimmy Dugan, husbands may have felt as if they were widowed. As one daughter complained of her mother, since her father lost her job, her mother had become, “irritable, nagging, [and] constantly ‘singing the blues.’” In fact, the relationship

---

35 *Stand Up and Cheer!*

between her parents had deteriorated so much, that her mother and father no longer “exchange more than a sentence or two in an evening.”37 In some cases, loveless couples such as these stayed together, not out of love or a sense of duty, but simply because filing for divorce required money they did not have. According to sociologists Samuel Stouffer and Paul Lazarsfeld there was a decrease in divorce during the height of the depression between 1930 and 1935. During this time, “there was a net loss in American divorces of 170,000 from the number which would have been expected if the trend prevailing in years previous had continued.”38 Once the worst of the economic crisis was over, however, they noted that divorce numbers climbed back to pre-Depression numbers, again signifying that financial matters kept couples together, not love.

Unlike these real life couples, presumably Dugan’s relationship with his wife was good. Now that she is gone, however, his daughter Shirley must take her place. Despite Dugan’s sad story and plight, he gets nowhere with Cromwell; his daughter, Shirley, on the other hand, has better luck. Though Cromwell repeatedly tells Dugan he is out of luck, once he sees Shirley (and, notably picks her up), he changes his mind. Shirley’s smile melts Cromwell’s resolve and he assents. The Dugan’s are allowed to continue with their show. Their number, “Baby, Take a Bow,” appears later in the film.39

With the camera at ankle level, small, felt-dolls sewed onto the pants of adult female dancers, shake and shimmy and make way for Dunn, dressed to the nines in a

37 Ibid.


39 Stand Up and Cheer!
tuxedo. Right behind him, Temple emerges from between his legs, curtsies and rests her pinky finger lightly against her mouth. A ribbon holds her curls back, and layers and layers of tulle hold up her short dress. Amid this pose, Dunn sings a song about how he is “presenting” his daughter, Shirley. The stage, the attire, the dancing, the words, all seem to suggest that Dugan is presenting his daughter to high society, i.e. Shirley is making her debut. Typically, this process did not occur until well after a girl’s sexual maturation, but as we will see later in the chapter, Temple (and her sexual energy) were anything but typical of girls her age.\textsuperscript{40}

Of her, the chorus sings, “She’s cute, she’s sweet, she’s swell, she’s grand.” After each line of prose, Temple assumes a different position: bent over with puckered lips, standing tall with her hands under her chin, swaying back and forth to the rhythm of the music, opening her skirts and curtsying deeply. At one point, again, implying a blurred familial line between father and daughter, the chorus asks, “Who’s that future Mrs. Hemingway?” “Just a minute,” Dugan responds, “I’m presenting her right now, baby, take a bow.” At that moment, Temple takes the reins and begins to “present” her father, i.e. make him appear like an attractive, winning, and available male to any of the ladies on stage or in the audience.\textsuperscript{41}

She sings, “Everybody’s asking me, ‘Who’s that bunch of personality?’” and again, “Everybody wants to know, ‘Who’s that great, big handsome Romeo?’” She answers their questions, “I’m presenting you right now, Daddy take a bow!” Although

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
the song seems to be a cute and unique way to get Dugan back onto the dating market, his success is not evident, nor is it apparently wanted. Toward the end of the number, he picks his daughter up, as the chorus sings, “Hasn’t he got everything?” Indeed, who needs a wife when you have a daughter such as Shirley Temple to fulfill the role? In fact, in her public persona and in her films, Temple was not only cast as the perfect daughter, she was inevitably depicted as the perfect mate, for she could redeem the fallen man, provide him with psychological support, and through flirtations and physical touch, even provide a measure of sexual excitement and escape.\footnote{Ibid.}

Economic instability and/or job loss made many American men feel like failures. They worried that their loss of status outside the home, meant that they lost their status within the home as well. One father worried, “I am afraid the children don’t think as much of me now that I am unemployed.”\footnote{Mirra Komarovsky and Michael Kimmel, The Unemployed Man and His Family: The Effects of Unemployment on the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families, reprint (Langham, MD: Altamira Press, 2004), 14.} Another unemployed father anxiously confided that “before the depression [he] wore the pants in this family.”\footnote{Ibid., 41.} Now, however, he’s “lost something.” “Maybe you call it self-respect,” he added, “but in losing it I also lost the respect of my children.” Dejectedly, he continued, “I am afraid I am losing my wife.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Perhaps the most honest example of a tragic male sense of failure, comes in the form of a letter from an underemployed painter, Bill Gray. In December of 1933, forty-seven year old Bill “Gray the Painter” was down on his luck. Responding to an advertisement in the local Canton, Ohio newspaper, Gray wrote a letter to an unknown benefactor who wanted to donate money to the “white collar” men of Canton, who like Gray, “were confronted with an economic situation where the bread of tomorrow is the problem of today.”

The anonymous advertiser urged potential letter-writers to tell him of their “true circumstances,” and only then would “financial aid…be promptly sent.” Gray confessed that it was a “blessing” for him “just to tell someone of my painful experiences.” In the six hand-written pages that followed, Bill Gray detailed his meteoric rise and cataclysmic fall.

Once one of the most prominent and successful businessmen in all of Starke County, Ohio who counted in upwards of sixty employees on his payroll, by 1933 Gray owned only “that which was mortgaged”—a truck and some household furniture. While he attempted to mask the physical problems and discomfort he and his family endured because of their economic woes (for example, he said that he had warm clothing and that he and his family were still in good health), he curiously spent a page lamenting the decline of his social status. Though once he was “recognized as [the] largest Painting


47 Ibid., 16.

48 Bill Gray’s letter to B. Vignot in Ted Gup’s A Secret Gift, 50.
Contractor in Stark Co. with payrolls running $1600 to $2200 per week for my men and office help & truck drivers,” now he was reduced to “beg[ging] for painting to do at 40 cents per hour.” Even at that price, he had to negotiate, including the cost of labor, drop cloths and brushes in his price and receiving part of his payment in tobacco and gasoline.

Like many men during these historic “hard times” Bill Gray found himself and his family close to ruin. As the sole breadwinner in his family (at least prior to his business’s bust), Gray was able to live comfortably and even earn respect from his community while running his blue-collar company. When his business folded, he lost more than his livelihood, for he also battled “the embarrassment, the sudden unseemly slide from prominence to subsistence, and all of it so terribly public.” For men like Gray, their economic losses paled in comparison to the blows their egos took. Not only was it embarrassing for them to be “on the dole” but being unable to provide for their families was humiliating and some saw it as affronts to their manhood. In their sociological study of The Unemployed Man, Mirra Komarovsky and Michael Kimmel found a former truck driver who made this case simply: “It is the mother’s place to bring up the children” he said, and it is “the father’s place to provide for them.” The psyche of many men suffered when they were no longer able to provide their part of the family equation, i.e. financial sustenance. As the Great Depression worsened, Shirley Temple and her films comforted men such as these.

49 Ibid., 53.

50 Mirra Komarovsky, The Unemployed Man, 84.
As already mentioned in the film *Just Around the Corner*, Temple’s comforting spirit and kindness helped her father open up about his job loss to her. Though at first it is hard for him to tell his daughter what has transpired, with her hand in his, he finally comes clean. As his daughter, Penny, Temple’s optimistic attitude brightens her father’s mood. In another of her films, *The Little Princess*, Temple plays a half-orphan whose father must leave her at a boarding school because he is off to war; he finds, however, that leaving her may be impossible.\(^51\) As he is about ready to leave, he asks Temple to face the window (so she does not see him go) and to recite the poem “as we used to.” He then starts, “My daddy has to go away, but he will return most any day.” Temple continues where he left off, “At any moment I may see, my daddy coming back to me.” She turns to him crying, “I can’t do it. You’re crying too!” At this point, both Temple and her father are visibly shaking and shedding tears. Her father admits that they are not as brave as they thought. At this suggestion, however, Temple bucks up, and bellows, “Oh yes we are! I can do it now!” She recites the poem again and by the time she finishes, her father has left the room. Temple’s strength has helped her father do what is necessary to provide for his daughter.\(^52\)

In addition to providing men with psychological support to continue to soldier on through tough times, in her films Temple frequently helped those who had already given up hope and, as a result, had become harmful to themselves and to others. In fact, in

\(^51\) *The Little Princess*, directed by Walter Lang and William A. Seiter, Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1939.

\(^52\) Ibid.
many of her films, Temple’s beauty, talent, level-headed temperament, and physical
touch transformed curmudgeonly old men and morally bankrupt young ones into
respectable members of society—and in many cases, into good fathers and husbands as
well. In the film Little Miss Marker, for example, Temple plays Markie, a girl whose
degenerate gambler father meets a tragic demise after he agrees to use his daughter as a
twenty dollar “mark” or “guarantee” of payment.\textsuperscript{53} Though he initially refuses and
claims, “I ain’t taking no dolls for security,” bookie Sorrowful Jones (Adolph Menjou)
changes his mind because, “a little doll like that is worth twenty bucks any way you look
at it.” After Temple’s father fails to return, Jones decides to use Temple to cover up a
scam he is planning. He informally adopts the girl…at least until his ruse is complete.
Then, he will turn the girl into authorities and have her taken to a home.

Temple’s character and countenance, however, convince Sorrowful, Bangles, a
gold-digging lounge singer, and their friends to change their attitudes and their way of
life. In one scene of the film, Temple’s physical body seems to inspire men to be better;
this act was repeated in the majority of Temple’s films. In this scene, Temple is at a club,
waiting for Sorrowful to finish his work. When one of Sorrowful’s friends picks her up
and remarks that she is a “chunky, little filly,” all the men around the table decide to
guess Temple’s weight. One-by-one they lift the child, some cradling her in their arms,
others holding her as far away as possible, and begin their scrutiny. “I like it,” Temple
coos. Not only is Temple’s weight on display (which speaks to the fact that all women’s
bodies, apparently even the smallest ones, are available for public examination and

\textsuperscript{53} Little Miss Marker, directed by Alexander Hall, Hollywood, CA: Paramount Studios, 1934.
potential shame), but her physical presence seems to tame the wildness present in the hearts of these men who smile down at her and whose loyalty to her will be tested and on display later in the film. Markie, however, is more interested in Sorrowful. Though he rebukes the child and refuses to pick her up, Markie cannot understand his motive. “Why don’t you lift me?” she asks Sorrowful. Again, he refuses. In her frustration, Markie demands, “Lift me!” Even then, however, Sorrowful stays firm. At that point, however, Markie decides that if Sorrowful won’t touch her, she will touch him. She rests his head on his shoulder and then, with this simplest of physical touches, Sorrowful caves and picks the girl up.54

Obviously many factors are at play here, but two are particularly relevant to this dissertation. The first, is the incestual longing both father and daughter (or, in this case, father- and daughter-figures) exhibit for each other. This is detailed later in the chapter. The second observation is the fact that the child’s body, or rather, the girl’s body, has great power. Typically, as presented in chapter 1, women’s bodies were, in the past, sites of contention and caused anxiety in men. Thus, as Kitsch has argued, to negate their fears, men such as Charles Dana Gibson re-imagined women as laughable giant, she-men.55 Sure, they were big and strong, but they were so de-feminized they could hardly be seen as a threat any longer. By the 1930s, however, and as Shirley Temple’s films make clear, the bodies of young girls have redemptive power. In her autobiography,

54 Ibid.

Temple makes the case clearer remembering an incident when her mother pulled down her pants and spanked her.\textsuperscript{56} Upon the second slap, however, Temple’s mother dissolved into tears. Temple recalled, “slowly I eased off [mother’s] lap and pulled up my panties. She had started crying silently, so I put my arms around her and nestled one cheek close against her chin.”\textsuperscript{57} Moments later, mother and child were in each other’s arms, sharing an embrace that symbolized the “love and sense of partnership” they felt for each other.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, in her filmic portrayals and well as in her real life, Temple made clear that her physical touch, and by extension, the physical touch of any girl, could help mend the sad hearts of men and women.

In the end of Little Miss Marker, Temple not only brings Sorrowful and Bangles together, but her presence also saves them both from a life of sin. Though Sorrowful’s transformation began with Temple’s touch, because he was a particularly dispirited and wounded soul, it took Markie longer to affect real change in him. She continues molding him into a redeemed individual, however, when she asks him to show her how to pray. She tells him that after her mother died, her father said there was no such thing as god, so she has never prayed to him. Now, however, she wants to ask god for something, but not knowing how to pray, she asks Sorrowful to show her how. He does, and we begin to see a change in him. As he teaches Markie to kneel in front of the bed, and to recite the prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” his demeanor (his forward-hunched position, his

\textsuperscript{56} Black, Child Star, 58.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
distant, regretful gaze, and his soft, yet unwavering voice) indicates that he too, is praying to god, perhaps for the first time in quite a while. His makeover is complete by the end of the film. As Temple lay dying from the nasty spill she took, Sorrowful, a man whose ruthless business drove Temple’s father to suicide, prays to God for her recovery, and even plans to give up his scheming ways if only she could live. An MPAA reviewer of *Little Miss Marker* noted that “the complete regeneration of Sorrowful and Bangles,” can only happen “through the medium of the child.”

Temple’s good spirit did not just redeem younger men who had lost their ways. In fact, by and large, she worked her charms on older, curmudgeonly men in films such as *The Little Colonel* (1935), *Heidi* (1937), *Just Around the Corner* (1938), and *The Little Princess* (1939). Perhaps as her greatest commercial success among them, *Bright Eyes* (1934) provides the best example of Temple’s ability to change the hearts of old men.60 In this film, Temple plays Shirley Blake, an orphan girl who is at the center of a custody battle between a rich, old man and her god father, a young, poor aviator. Charles Sellon plays Ned Smith, a crotchety old man who lives with his son, his daughter-in-law, and their bratty offspring, Joy (played by Jane Withers). The Smyth’s (as they call themselves, because, according to them, it has a better sound to it than the plebian

---

59 *MPAA*, letter from Joseph I. Breer to A.M. Botsford, 1 March 1934, *Little Miss Marker*, Margaret Herrick Library, Hollywood, California (hereafter referred to as MHL).

60 *Bright Eyes!* DVD, directed by David Butler, 1934, Los Angeles, CA: Fox Film, Corp. 2002.
“Smith”) are caught up in material wealth and appearance. The only reason they allow Ned to stay with them is because they expect that he will remember them in his will.\footnote{Ibid.}

Despite the fact that Ned dislikes his entire family, he has fallen in love with little Shirley, who is the daughter of the maid. When the maid dies in a tragic car accident, Ned persuades his family to take the girl in, or else he will cut off their inheritance. The Smyths do so reluctantly, and they are obvious about their disdain for Shirley. So much so, in fact, that Shirley runs off to her bachelor, aviator god-father, Luke (played by James Dunn), thus setting up the showdown between the poor, young man and the rich, old one. In the end, Temple helps the men reconcile their differences by taming her perennial bachelor “uncle” Luke through marriage, thus making him a more suitable father and by having her new family take in the much changed “Uncle” Ned. Through Shirley’s help, she has domesticated the wild man, softened the hardened one, and even formed a functioning and loving (if make-shift) family unit.\footnote{Ibid.}

At a time when families were threatened, her ability to bring couples together (at least in films) resonated with depression-era audiences. Indeed, marriage was a predicament for many people who reached marriageable age during the 1930s. “Hundreds of thousands of young people who wanted to get married,” historian Frederick

\cite{Ibid.}
Lewis Allen told us, “could not afford to” do so.\textsuperscript{63} Marriage rates plummeted from “10.14 in 1929 to 7.87 in 1932.”\textsuperscript{64} Temple’s films sometimes reflected this social reality. The 1939 film \textit{The Little Princess} is a perfect example.\textsuperscript{65} In this period piece film, Shirley Temple plays Sara Crewe, a young girl whose father, a wealthy captain in the British Army, leaves her at a boarding school so that he can fight the Second Boar War in Africa. Ms. Minchin, a spinster captivated by money, power, and the prestige they both bring, runs the boarding school. As Sara’s father is a wealthy, well-respected man, Minchin initially takes a liking to the girl. Her good will toward Sara disappears, however, when Captain Crewe goes missing and is presumed dead. Wanting to avoid a scandal, Minchin agrees to keep Sara at the school, but not as a student—instead, she makes Sara a lowly, over-worked maid. Despite her new, hard life, with her many friends, Sara perseveres. One of the friends who provides Sara with emotional support is Ms. Rose, Sara’s former school teacher.\textsuperscript{66}

In a story completely fabricated and outside the original source material written by Frances Hodge Burnett, Ms. Rose is one of Minchen’s “most capable teachers.”\textsuperscript{67} She is also desperately in love with Goeffrey Hammond, Sara’s well-bred but destitute riding instructor. Goeffrey is so poor, he cannot marry Rose without first earning enough


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{The Little Princess}, Lang and Seiter, 1939.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
money to do so. Thus, he enlists in the war and, like Captain Crewe, marches off to Africa. As the movie came out in 1939, certainly war was very much an imminent possibility for many young men in America. But a looming war alone cannot account for screenwriters deviating so entirely from Burnett’s beloved story and adding in characters and a subplot into the movie script. Indeed, perhaps one of the reasons scriptwriters Ethel Hill and Walter Ferris, wrote in this romantic subplot was because it echoed what many young people had to endure. Indeed, the love story between Rose and Geoffrey mimics the long-delay many young couples had to tolerate because of the financial constraints the Depression created.

Sometimes Temple worked to bring couples together. Other times, however, she simply replaced the wife. In her films, Temple took over wifely duties and responsibilities in a variety of ways. In *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), she literally takes over the dead wife’s role in her father’s act. In *Just Around the Corner* (1938), Penny takes on all the domestic responsibilities, wearing an apron as she cleans, vacuums, and does the dishes. When her rich lady-friend, Ms. Lola comes over for a visit, Penny exclaims hurriedly, “I may not have much time. I have a man to take care of, and you know how much trouble they can be.” In fact, many depression-era wives found their lives much more busy when penny-pinching became the norm. Newspaper and magazine articles told women about how they could save money by baking their own bread (no longer as common in modernized America as it was in the past). Women also learned to mend clothes (rather than purchase new items), and in some cases, wives supplemented their husband’s income by doing other people’s laundry or by taking in boarders. When
her husband’s job was cut, Mrs. Pike took up “washing, ironing, house-cleaning and taking care of the children” of others to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{68} And the mother in the Burton household “prove[d] herself the family heroine,” by remaining “healthy, ambitious, [and] vivacious while doing all the housework for her own family and looking after the rooms for eight students, as well as doing their washing and ironing.”\textsuperscript{69}

With so much time dedicated to additional domestic duties, it is no wonder that some wives started to pull away from family life and/or to crack under the pressure. Mrs. Burton’s daughter, for example, noted that sometimes her mother “gets tired out and a little cross with the family.” Despite her occasional bouts of crankiness, however, Burton’s children “understand the load under which she is laboring and do not resent it.”\textsuperscript{70} When Mr. Rogers was laid off, his wife took in three foster children to boost their family income. Being “busier than ever with the three orphans to care for as well as her family [husband, college-aged daughter, and two sons, 13 and 1, respectively],” Mrs. Rogers’ extracurricular activities were neglected. Consequently, Mrs. Rogers was “often very depressed, but hides it from the rest of the family.”\textsuperscript{71}

With mothers so busy, and/or with fathers feeling so bad about themselves, scholars have noted that in some cases, intimate relations between husbands and wives were reduced. In their interviews with families who were hit hard by the depression,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{68} Agnell, \textit{Family Encounters}, 143.
\item\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 167.
\item\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 67.
\end{itemize}
Mirra Komarovsky and Michael Kimmel found one man who intimated that his wife, “gets mad at me when I tell her that I want more love.”\textsuperscript{72} The wife of another man complained, that although she still loved her husband, “he doesn’t seem as ‘big’ a man.”\textsuperscript{73} With egos bruised and lacking physical affection at home, some men turned outside the house for attention. Once again, Shirley Temple and her films helped fill a hole in the lives of men such as these. Temple performed in an erotic capacity that gave men an opportunity to fantasize about the sex they were not getting from their wives.

Other scholars have already apologized for their attempts to explain Temple’s not so-subtle sexuality on display in a number of her films. Indeed, a pre-emptive apology for suggesting Temple exuded sex appeal seems a prerequisite before demonstrating it. Scholars, it seems, are afraid of bringing their own cultural baggage into an examination of Temple. For example, in her analysis of the photo still from \textit{Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm} which shows Temple “riding” her adult male co-star, Jack Haley, who is on all fours and being whipped by Temple with her leather riding crop, Kristin Hatch explains that “Just as it is very difficult for us to see anything other than pedophilia,” in the photograph, “it would have been equally difficult for early twentieth-century audiences to see the same image as anything but benign.”\textsuperscript{74} Yet, despite the fact that we as scholars want to avoid presentist language and slant, we cannot deny the not-so-subtle sexual

\textsuperscript{72} Komarovsky and Kimmel, \textit{The Unemployed Man}, 14.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 23.

innuendo, scenarios, and outfits that Shirley Temple found herself in. In “Lolita Syndrome,” Bret Wood examines Temple’s earliest movies, the *Baby Burlesks* and found that “before she became the embodiment of homespun American values—a perfect, sweet, obedient child-woman—[Temple’s] image in the marketplace was less than wholesome.”

This is not surprising, however. At a time when the adult woman’s sexuality was taken for granted and de rigueur, preadolescent girls became the new vehicle to sexualize on the silver screen and provide stimulation to audiences. *The Baby Burlesks* demonstrate this phenomenon. In 1932’s “War Babies,” perhaps Temple’s most sexualized *Baby Burlesk* role, Temple played Charmaine, a Dolores Del Rio caricature who entertains doughboys (or rather, dough babies) by dancing in her diaper and an off-the-shoulder lacy top in Buttermilk Pete’s Café. Although she is attached to the blond captain, who calls her over to give her a “present,” i.e. a lollipop—the preferred currency of the Café, Temple flirts with another officer who gives her an even larger lollipop. Eventually, Temple leaves her captain on the dance floor and makes her way upstairs with the other officer. When she walks out of the backroom she was in, she meets up with her captain who informs her that he has to leave once more. “You be good until I come back?” he inquires. Although Temple is hugging him, she is kissing the other soldier who sneaks out of the room Temple emerged from moments before. Eventually,

---


76 “War Babies,” streaming, directed by Charles Lamont, Educational Film Exchanges, 1932.
both Temple’s real beau, the captain, and her apparently new lover, the other soldier, meet up back downstairs at the café. At that moment, the soldier pulls a safety pin, that heretofore, had been used to fasten Temple’s diaper together, out of his back pocket and picks his teeth with it, suggesting he has consumed something (or perhaps someone?).

The soldiers leave and Temple waves them goodbye. Clearly, in her earlier Baby Burlesk films, Temple did not play the innocent child she would be remembered for. Yet, as Ilana Nash has discovered, even after her transformation and her move away from the bawdy Burlesks, “the supposedly unthinkable thought that Temple aroused a non-paternal yearning in men was actually integral to many moments in her films.”

Indeed, two cinematic moments stand out.

The first comes from the 1934 film Bright Eyes. Temple plays a girl whose airplane-flying father died long ago. Her father’s friends, however, have informally looked after the girl since his passing. On her eighth birthday, her god-father Luke, played by James Dunn, organizes a party for Shirley on one of the planes. They taxi around the airfield while Temple sings her hit “The Good Ship Lollipop.” Indicating that she is older and more mature than her young years, Temple explains that she has “thrown away my toys” in anticipation of becoming a pilot. She asks the men on the plane, “How would you like to be my crew?” Fitted with a very short, paisley dress with ruffled underwear showing through on occasion, Temple walks down the aisle of the plane, stopping at each row to make cute faces and gestures at the men who gaze at her.

---


78 Bright Eyes, Butler, 1934.
longingly. Most of her “crew” sit way back in their seats with their hands in their laps. A few, however, lean forward and otherwise fidget with excitement as Temple passes them by. One “officer” even looks Temple up and down with a smile on his face. Moments later, with her back turned toward him, the same man glances furtively at, presumably, Temple’s backside. As the song comes to a grand finale, the men pass Temple around, giving her lollipops, a box of chocolate, an ice cream soda, and literally sticking her face into a sugar-coated confection, a chocolate bar, and finally a cake topped with whipped cream. Temple finishes the song held up by the hands of the men around her, snuggling up to Dunn as her father-figure, and with white cream on her lips and mouth.79

In another of her films, 1936’s Poor Little Rich Girl (which bears no resemblance save its title to the 1917 Pickford vehicle of the same name), Temple plays Barbara, the privileged daughter of a wealthy soap manufacturer.80 With her widowed father often away for business, Barbara laments that she has no one to play with. Father and daughter sit together on the couch and listen to the radio. After wooing his daughter by lip-synching the popular song, “When I’m With You,” Barbara tells her father she has her own version of the song. While sitting in his lap and dressed in virginal white pajamas, Barbara coos, “In every dream I caress you.” A moment later, she grabs her father’s cheek and sings, “Marry me and let me be your wife.” The camera then moves to a close-up of Temple from on top, effectively creating an image of Temple, in her pajamas,

79 Ibid.

lying on her back, with her father on top of her. She raises her eyebrows and then sweetly kisses her father’s hand. Freud’s Electra impulse was present in many of Temple’s films. When it became too powerful (as it seems to in both of these instances), the result is “the separation of the child from her father or father surrogate,” as “the incest wish is too frightening.”

Thus, in Poor Little Rich Girl, Bright Eyes, and many of Temple’s other films, “father and daughter do not appear together again until a mother figure is positioned in place.”

Sex was so present in some of Temple’s films that even contemporary audiences sometimes saw, in Temple, a vixen. In an August 1934 Photoplay shoot, the photographer asked Temple “to be a good little girl, so she looked angelic.” But, as the reporter noted, “[Shirley] can, just as delightfully, pout or play at the art of the coquette.” “They’re never too young!” she added. In the accompanying photograph, Temple’s curls are gathered at the front of her head, creating a hairstyle reminiscent of screen siren Mae West. Temple is also wearing a very short, polka-dotted frock. She has her hands on her hips and bends her leg. She looks directly into the camera with her eyes slightly closed, her chin up, and a look on her face that clearly exudes sex.

The most noteworthy contemporary critique, however, came from playwright and literary critic Graham Greene. In his review of the film Wee Willie Winkie (1937), for

---


82 Ibid.

83 Barbara Shawn, “Shirley Take a Bow,” Photoplay 41, no. 3 (1934), 69.
example, Greene famously opined that “Infancy with [Shirley Temple] is a disguise, her appeal is more secret and more adult.”\(^84\) He continued, “Already two years ago she was a fancy little piece,” who could “wear trousers with the mature suggestiveness of a Dietrich: her neat and well-developed rump twisted in the tap dance.”\(^85\) For Greene, Temple was a “complete totsy” who captivated “middle aged men and clergymen” with her “dubious coquetry” and “the sight of her well-shaped and desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality.”\(^86\) Temple’s charm, good-naturedness, and no doubt her abundant cuteness and beauty, encouraged men of all ages to want to take care of her, to desire to be with her at all times, to love her in all ways.

According to scholar James R. Kincaid, this reaction is natural. In his controversial analysis of Victorian perceptions of children titled *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, Kincaid suggests that by holding onto the image of children as innocent and pure, society inadvertently created an figure so good and so pure, that loving it and its goodness (thus, child-loving or pedophilia) is the only reasonable response.\(^87\) Indeed, he furthers his argument by demonstrating that all of the stories we as a society circulate about “monster” pedophiles “which we love to repeat, serve not

---


\(^85\) Ibid.

\(^86\) Ibid.

simply to flatter us but to bring before us once again the same story of desire that is itself desirable.”

This, he continues, allows “us to construct, watch, enjoy the erotic child without taking any responsibility for our actions.” To put it another way (and to bring this back to Shirley Temple), Graham Greene believed that Temple’s formula was successful because “the safety curtain of story and dialogue drops between [her male audience’s] intelligence and their desire.”

Naturally, this type of incestual innuendo also speaks to those who are charged with protecting young girls—their mothers. Because “the fantasy of incest is too overwhelming without the safety of a mother’s presence,” in most of Temple’s films, her father (or father-figure) usually finds a suitable wife so that together, they may raise Temple in a respectable family unit. Thus, though her adoptive father in Curly Top has romantic daydreams involving Temple, ultimately, through Temple, he finds love in the arms of her elder sister, who becomes his wife. Temple did not approve of all the love interests her father/father-figure courts, however. Indeed, in many of her films, as well as in her publicity, Temple is transformed from a child/daughter to a direct rival to mom/wife. If the great deal of the publicity that circulated around Temple is any indication, the women of Hollywood (and elsewhere!) “better watch out,” because Temple is “competition for you!”

The fan magazine Photoplay warned, the “pert little

88 Ibid., 375.

89 Greene, “Wee Willie Winkie, review.”


blonde with a come-hither look in her eye is being talked about in Hollywood.”\textsuperscript{92} Men adore her, and “the little blonde is getting away with it—in fact, she is receiving a great deal of encouragement.”\textsuperscript{93} Temple, it would seem, was able to surpass the women of America and win over the hearts of their husbands. In addition to the print materials which circulated about her, many of Temple’s films brought Temple into direct confrontation with the adult woman.

In 1934’s \textit{Now and Forever}, Temple plays Penny, a half-orphan who is at the center of a custody battle between her hustler-father and her prim and proper grandparents.\textsuperscript{94} Penny ends up with her father who she takes to immediately. Things become more complicated, however, when she meets Toni, her father’s girlfriend. Penny initially brims with indignity upon their first encounter. She sizes Toni up and then attempts to make her feel like an outsider, referring to a mutual acquaintance as “a good friend of ours [i.e. father and daughter, NOT father and Toni and daughter].” When Toni tries to help Penny take a bath, Penny replies coldly, “I can manage alone.”

And, as the orphan raised by an inspector in the Canadian Mounted Police in \textit{Susannah of the Mounties} (1939), Temple once again, yearns for the romantic affections


\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Now and Forever}, VHS, 1934, directed by Henry Hathaway, Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1996.
of her father-figure.\textsuperscript{95} When her mountie-father gets invited to a dance, Temple asks to join him so that she may teach him how to waltz/ensure that he does not dance with other women. Despite her misgivings, she eventually gives into her “father’s” commands and teaches him how to waltz at home so that he may go to the dance unaccompanied. 

When Sue (Temple) sneaks out of bed and spies on her guardian, she sees him dancing with another woman and she races home, saddened. When another mountie, Pat O’Hannegan—their third roommate, asks Temple why she is so sad, she tells him that Mr. Monty is in love with another. “I wish she’d go back where she came from!” she yells, and then buries her face into her pillow. Though Sue denies the jealousy label that O’Hannegan throws at her, she asserts, “She couldn’t take care of him the way we do!” Sue musters, “And I taught him how to dance with her.” O’Hannegan consoles her, telling her, “It’s a terrible thing to be a woman in love.”\textsuperscript{96}

Despite the fact that Temple was held up to be a wife’s worst enemy (her rival in the romantic and emotional realms), one cannot simplify these portrayals and conclude that Temple and/or her films are entirely anti-feminist. In fact, by placing the young girl in both a position of power and at the center of attention, Temple’s real and reel personas actually promoted a decidedly contemporary feminist agenda. She may have undermined the adult female’s role within the family, but she helped empower their daughters. Through the roles she took on, as well as through the interviews she gave, Temple demonstrated the tangible and genuine power that the small girl could wield. Temple

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Susannah of the Mounties}, DVD, 1939, directed by Walter Land and William A. Seiter, Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
gave them the impression that they could and should be strong physically, mentally, and emotionally. Moreover, in time after time, Temple’s films demonstrate that the young girl played a central role within family and, by extension, within society.

In her real life, Temple was often lauded for her physicality (typically a boyish trait). Many interviewers often remarked that Temple was “astonishingly vivacious” and a “little bundle of energy.”97 In addition to the fact that she was a talented dancer, publicity photographs often captured Temple in various states of sport or in tomboy attire. In one photograph she is playing on see-saw and in another, she is skiing down a snowy hill.98 Temple was held up as a physical model for others and as such, she promoted a healthy image for other young girls.

Press releases and other print material also praised Temple’s book knowledge. Temple was held up as a “child prodigy” who had such a remarkable “memory for lines” that she “wouldn’t forget any of them.”99 Moreover, though she was a precocious student, she enjoyed the unique lessons that her tutor prepared for her. Though Temple was an adroit student, in her films she was perhaps even more studious. In Stowaway (1936), for example, Temple plays Chin-Chin an orphan growing up in China.100 Not only does she speak Chinese fluently (which she demonstrates through her various

97 Shirley Temple, “Press Releases: Shirley Temple Bio,” p. 3 MHL.


interactions with villagers), but she has also internalized many lessons from the Chinese culture. She is constantly astounding adults around her by reciting various parables and words of wisdom. At one point, her father-figure, Tommy Randall (played by Robert Young) inquires, “You know, you look so young, but you talk so old. How come?” Temple’s wits are more than just gimmick, however, they also help her and her Randall out in times of need. Her first encounter with Randall involves him stumbling through an interaction with a local vendor. Randall wants to purchase a dragonhead souvenir, but a language barrier prevents him from doing so. Chin-Chin steps in and not only helps him procure the dragon, she negotiates a better deal with the vendor and even saves Randall a few dollars.¹⁰¹ Thus, through her cultural intelligence and charm, Shirley Temple shows what smart girls are really capable of.

Where Temple really shines, however, is in her portrayal of tough emotional characters. With her steely resolve, Temple educates other young girls about how to get what you want and gives them a lesson in persistence. Her own story, for example, demonstrates both of these qualities. Though they may have stressed that Temple did not “work” when she acting (usually claiming it came naturally, or that she felt like she was playing), the same interviewers often remarked about Temple’s busy life. One journalist noted that Temple “follows a rigorous schedule” which had her rise by seven in the morning, do chores around the house, go to work on the Hollywood movie lot, complete intensive school lessons during breaks, take dancing lessons in the afternoon, and finally

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
go home for dinner and family time long after most everyone’s workday was over.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, it was obvious that Temple was no slouch; her fame was contingent upon her ability and willingness to perform well, and at all hours of the day.

In her movies, Temple always also played up her strength. She was often cast as a character who, despite tremendous odds, overcomes hardship after hardship. Hers is a lesson in resilience. Perhaps the best cinematic example comes from 1939’s \textit{Little Princess}.\textsuperscript{103} As Sara Crewe, a motherless child left in the care of a cruel schoolmistress, Temple works from morning until night, is often punished by having her meals taken away from her, and lives in squalor in a cold, ill-furnished attic. Despite all of these problems that have plagued the girl, she does not give up her hope and optimism. After she completes her various chores with herculean strength each day, tired and hungry, Sara makes her way to the hospital to visit patients and to look for her father, who she is certain has not died. In a dramatic final scene, Sara discovers her father in a ward of the hospital; suffering from a raging fever, he is in a stupor and cannot recognize his daughter. After a few moments of her tears and exclamations, “What’s a matter daddy? Why won’t you talk to me?” Sara shakes her father out of his trance. Through her persistence and absolute refusal to give up, Sara has saved her father and thus, what remains of her family.\textsuperscript{104}


\textsuperscript{103} \textit{The Little Princess}, Land and Seiter, 1939.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
As Sara’s reunion with her ailing father was a major departure from the Frances Hodgson Burnett’s book of the same title, clearly screenwriter’s wanted to emphasize a dynamic that they thought audiences would like to see. In the Burnett original, Sara Crewe’s father does, indeed, die. Sara’s happy ending, though much delayed, does eventually come, however, when her father’s business partner adopts her and takes her away from the clutches of Ms. Minchen and the life of drudgery she created for Sara. But for filmmakers of the 1930s, this was not an appropriate ending. For them, clearly the small girl must be rewarded for her patience, kindness, and most importantly, for her perseverance by being reunited with her real father. Obviously this message was particularly timely to audiences suffering through depression, but also fearful of impending war and the changes it would inevitably bring to father-daughter relationships.

Through her films and through the publicity that followed her, Shirley Temple was able to alleviate a gender crisis in America resultant from economic hardship. She championed the male cause by giving them an opportunity to once again demonstrate their masculinity. She also negated adult women’s growing power, by situating her back in the home. A real woman was one who knew how to take care of her children, in particular, her “small girl.” As Temple’s turn in The Little Princess makes clear, however, war can turn the world upside down.

Indeed, World War II would bring many changes. It would, in effect, bring an end to Temple’s child acting career as well. The Little Princess was one of the final movies that Temple made prior to her two-year hiatus in filming. When she re-emerged in 1942, taller, with budding breasts and wider hips, Temple could definitely no longer be
construed as a “child” star; *Kathleen* director Harry Bucquet promised that audiences would find in Temple, “less the little girl, and more the conscious actress.”\(^{105}\)

Unfortunately for Temple, however, her comeback was short-lived, at least in the cinematic realm. Her expressive voice, however, was still promising. Thus, during the 1940s, Temple, for the most part, moved on to radio work. She joined a legion of young, female talent bringing an authenticity to various programs on the air. Indeed, by the time the United States entered the war in December of 1941, radio had become one of the most significant cultural artifacts in the home. Like Shirley Temple, young girls would come to play an integral part on the airwaves.

\(^{105}\) “Review of *Kathleen*,” *Variety* 11 November 1941, folder 26, Harold S. Bucquet Collection, MHL.
CHAPTER 4

SUPPORTER, SOLDIER, SHOPPER, AND SIDEKICK:

AMERICAN GIRLS ON THE HOME FRONT

On October 13, 1940, airwaves across the world filled with the voices of the young princesses of Great Britain, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. It was their first radio broadcast and it was meant to raise the morale of those suffering hardship as result of the war raging in Europe. In particular, Princess Elizabeth, who delivered most of the address, tailored her remarks to British children displaced by the ongoing hostilities. Reassuringly and with a clear and confident voice, Princess Elizabeth reported, “We children at home are full of cheerfulness and courage. We are trying to do all we can to help our gallant sailors, soldiers and airmen.” She continued solemnly, “We are trying, too, to bear our own share of the danger and sadness of war.” ¹ Though her radio address was directed expressly to Britain’s child evacuees who took up residence outside the reach of German bombs, her messages, both stated and implied, also resonated with children in America.

Indeed, it was no coincidence that the princesses used radio to communicate to the masses. As J. Fred MacDonald noted in his history of radio Don’t Touch that Dial!,

¹ James MacDonald, “Princess Elizabeth, 14, Makes Radio Debut; Speaks with Poise to Child Evacuees Abroad,” Special Cable to the New York Times, 14 October 1940, 1.
“World War II was a radio war.”\(^2\) Historian Susan Douglas agreed, writing that World War II was “first and foremost, a radio war that millions [of Americans] listened to and imagined.”\(^3\) Thus, radio represents the best medium to explore the experiences of young girls’ during the war, as well as their unique contributions to victory.

Reflected in their diminishing presence in popular media of all types, girls’ roles in wartime America were vastly different than those in the preceding decades when their presence in popular culture was ubiquitous. Children’s radio programs, for example, rarely catered to the preadolescent girl; young girls were hardly present as characters and rarely drove the plots of the programs. That being said, girls did not shrink back into total obscurity. No longer in the spotlight, young girls utilized radio in such a way as to gain a degree of autonomy from their parents, forge diverse peer groups on a national (or, as the princesses’ address makes clear, even on an international scale), and experiment with gender norms and roles. In fact, an analysis of children’s radio programs of the era unearths the lengths that girls went to in order to transform themselves into wartime America’s supporters, soldiers, shoppers, and sidekicks.

By the end of the 1930s, radio had become a national craze. The 1940 census, for example, indicated that nearly 83% of households owned a radio. Indeed, in rural communities, people owned radios more often than they owned telephones, cars or had


electricity in their homes. Radio was no longer left to tinkering schoolboys and tech-savvy scientists. People across America had embraced this important technological marvel. Though radio started out as a local venture, by 1935, “88 percent of American listeners preferred network to local programming.” With the rise of national networks, diverse peoples from across America could listen to the same music, dramas, comedies and sports broadcasts. As Susan Douglas has discussed, “America was a nation of subgroups,” yet radio brought a sense of unity to this disparate nation by “determin[ing] how people divided up their time at home and matched their schedules to the schedules of the broadcast day,” as well as through other means. Thus, national broadcasts were well-received. Though many listeners continued to revel in local radio programming (catering to local interests and which may have included local celebrity talent), after a while, more and more people tuned in to the same types of shows that their east coast brethren heard. Nationwide networking blossomed at around the same time as children’s radio programming. Networks saw children as a key demographic not yet tapped. They wanted to cater to child tastes outside of general “family” entertainment. According to Marilyn Boemer’s text *The Children’s Hour: Radio Programs for Children, 1929-1956*,

---


5 McDonald, *Don’t Touch that Dial*, 26.

6 Douglas, *Listening In*, 123 and 104, respectively.
children’s programming typically fell into six different genres.\textsuperscript{7} By providing a variety of genres ranging from adventurous school kids to westerns, as well as by dedicating specific blocks of time to children’s programming (for example after school hours and Saturday mornings), networks were practically guaranteed to attract a large and diverse audience.\textsuperscript{8} Even small radio stations jumped on the children’s radio programming bandwagon. The National Survey of Children’s Programming conducted in 1945 by Dorothy Lewis, the Vice-Chairman of the Radio Council on Children’s Programs, discovered that most radio stations (92\% of those surveyed) carried at least one radio program specifically designed with children in mind.\textsuperscript{9} If stations wanted more children to listen more frequently, they certainly got what they wished. In 1939, children spent between one and three hours a day listening to the radio; by 1945 the number increased

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{8} For purposes of this dissertation, I listened to no less than five episodes of at least two different programs from each of the genres (note although I tried to follow Boemer’s criteria, some of these shows, such as \textit{Sky King}, for example, could rightfully fit into numerous categorizations, in this instance, both within the Western genre as well as the Aviator one). The programs were: Adventurous Schoolboys/Girls: \textit{Little Orphan Annie}, 1930-1942 and \textit{The Adventures of Jack Armstrong}, 1933; 1936-1951; Aviators and Adventurers: \textit{Magic Island}, 1936; \textit{Terry and the Pirates}, 1937-39; 1943-48; and \textit{Captain Midnight}, 1939-1949; Superheroes and Crime fighters: \textit{The Green Hornet}, 1936; 1938-1952; and \textit{Superman}, 1938-1951; Westerns: \textit{Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters}, 1933-1950; and \textit{The Sky King}, 1946-1954; Space Adventurers: \textit{Buck Rogers in the 25\textsuperscript{th} Century}, 1932-36; 1939-1947; and \textit{Flash Gordon}, 1935-36; Educational/Storytellers: \textit{The Cinnamon Bear}, a seasonal series which originally aired between Thanksgiving and Christmas in 1936 but was rebroadcasted annually until at least 1950, and \textit{Let’s Pretend}, 1930-1943 (note: in its first years, it was called \textit{The Adventures of Helen and Mary}). I also listened to two popular family programs which featured young girls, \textit{Cavalcade of America}, 1935-1953 and \textit{The Aldrich Family}, 1939-1953.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
so that, “children aged six to twelve frequently spent from four to six o’clock and from after dinner until bedtime listening.”\(^{10}\) This translated into approximately six hours a day!\(^{11}\)

Age and gender played a role in what people listened to. Save for a few informal surveys conducted by women’s magazines and newspapers, however, there is little contemporary information that attempts to discern between boy and girl tastes. The lack of resources has led some scholars, such as historian William Tuttle, to conclude, “girls’ programming preferences were similar to the boys.”\(^{12}\) Yet these informal surveys do suggest that boys and girls liked different programs. One survey quoted by journalist John Hutchens of the *New York Times*, for example, demonstrates the differing opinions of the sexes.\(^ {13}\) Although boys aged eight through ten, ranked *The Lone Ranger* at the top of their list of favorite radio programs, girls of the same age bracket placed it eighth. More tellingly, *The Lone Ranger* was the only children’s program in which boys and girls felt similarly.\(^ {14}\) Though boys and girls may have listened to different programs most of

---


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
the time, when they did listen to the same program, they received different messages.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, though younger children shared interest in Little Orphan Annie, boys may have focused on “the detective or the ‘superman’ as a hero” (i.e. Captain Sparks, Punjab, or Daddy Warbucks), whereas girls would have associated with Annie’s tomboyish charm and girlish physicality.\textsuperscript{16}

A child’s tastes also changed with his or her age and maturity. With regards to children’s radio shows, small children seemed to gravitate toward fantasy and educational shows (perhaps a reflection of their mothers’ impression upon them) whereas older children zeroed in on thrillers and dramas.\textsuperscript{17} In the 1930s and 1940s, Nila Mack’s classic fairy tale reenactments, such as Rapunzal and Thumbelina, enthralled younger children (and their parents too). On the other hand, heroics, danger and adventure offered by the likes of the \textit{Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters, The Lone Ranger,} and \textit{Captain Midnight} titillated the minds of their older siblings. Regardless of what children listened to, there was no doubt that they listened intently. Indeed, in drastic attempts to listen to the next “installment of the super-adventure of their favorite hero or heroine,” one radio producer commented, children “gobbled their food; they neglected outdoor recreation; [and] they threw off all responsibilities.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Tuttle, “Homefront Children,” 149.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Hutchens, “Tracy, Superman, et. al.”

\textsuperscript{18} Kirk, \textit{Earning Their Stripes}, 47.
Of course, radio programs did more for children than give them a schedule around which to organize their lives. In 1942, for example, The Federal Radio Education Committee suggested “children’s radio programs should enrich childhood experience.” In that regard, some experts believed that listening to the radio provided children with “opportunities for relaxation, entertainment, and pure enjoyment.” Others believed that when utilized in the classroom, radio could help educate children on topics as diverse as art history to farming. The Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission Wayne Coy believed so readily in the power of the radio to educate, that in the late 1940s he argued “Every schoolroom in America should be equipped with its own radio set.” Despite the fact that using radio as a means to educate in the classroom never reached the potential Coy wanted, radio most certainly did help educate boys and girls outside of the classroom. Indeed, boys and girls used radio as a vehicle to help them become autonomous from their parents, forge a diverse peer group on a national scale, and even experiment with gender roles.

Children’s entertainment has often depended upon separating the young boy and girl characters from their mothers and fathers. One reason this happened was because it provided an excuse to have the story centered on the child, rather than his or her mother

---


20 Ibid., 10.

21 Between the late 1920s and the early 1970s, for example, numerous local, state, and national “Schools of the Air” programs were developed.

or father. Another reason was to afford a way for the characters in these stories to have adventures of their own. Certainly Wendy’s mother and father never would have let her travel to Neverland if they had been in the bedroom when Peter Pan came calling. From books to comics to movies to radio, child protagonists often found themselves, at least for a significant period of time, without mother, father or both. Children’s radio program writers kept this separation trope going in two distinct ways. First, they featured fatherless and/or motherless children, i.e. one- or even two-parent orphans. Second, they simply, and usually without explanation, wrote parents out of the script. These radio programs were, after all, directed solely at young boys and girls, not their mothers and fathers.

The orphan girl has been a popular literary character for centuries. From Frances Hodgson Burnetts’ famous orphans, Sara Crew of The Little Princess and Mary Lennox of The Secret Garden, for example, to Eleanor Porters’ optimistic do-gooder, Pollyanna, in the book of the same name, to the international sensation about a young girl raised by her grandfather in the Swiss Alps, Heidi, orphan girls often captured adult and child readers’ imaginations. As already outlined in chapter 2, orphan girls have also had a lasting impression in American popular culture. This long-established theme of one- or two-parent orphan girls is also evident in children’s radio programs. During the Great Depression, orphan characters such as those played by Shirley Temple, for example provided an opportunity for men, perhaps emasculated by their un- or under-employment, to have purpose; in this case, they were to protect the helpless, orphan girl. During the war years, men could feel secure knowing that their roles as protectors had extended
beyond their own homes and country, and into the world abroad. Moreover, unemployment was no longer a problem for most American men as the United States geared up for military

Indeed, a commitment to total war increased not only jobs in this country, but also working hours. Though Les Gregat, a Milwaukee factory worker, lost his job in 1932, for example, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he not only went back to work at the same factory, but he worked ten-hour days, seven days a week. Stories like Gregat’s were repeated around the country. All these people working everyday for long hours translated into lots of money spent on wartime production. In fact, war funneled billions of dollars into the economy. In his 1946 study of wartime economies, Raymond Goldsmith discovered that America’s annual expenditure for munitions production jumped from an abysmal $300,000 a year during the leans years of 1935 to 1939, to a whopping $42 billion dollars in 1944. Thus, men did not cling to the orphan girl for the same reasons as they may once have during their own hard, financial times. Instead, the orphan girl present on the radio waves was solely created for children themselves, and in particular, for little girls.

Perhaps the most famous orphan on the airwaves was Little Orphan Annie, a spin-off of the Harold Gray comic strip of the same name. Other children’s radio programs also featured orphaned girls. The radio serial Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters, for


example, often focused on a young orphan named Jane who lived on Tom’s ranch. In one story line, Jane learns that she may not be an orphan after all. In this episode, Jane quarrels with William, an animal-abusing, nasty know-it-all who suspects Jane is jealous of him because he has a father. “I guess you just wish you had a father like mine,” William taunts her. “Well,” Jane pauses, then finishes weakly, “I’ve got Tom.” Though Jane clearly states that she sees Tom as a father figure, she does so rather unenthusiastically. She does not want a father in Tom Mix, or in any man, for that matter. When William divulges that Jane’s father survived the car crash that supposedly took his life, he pesters Jane, “I know who your father is.” Continuing to needle her, he asks, “You wanna know who it [is], Jane?” Jane vehemently responds, “No!” Indeed, Jane does not want to hear news that she may not be an orphan after all. Rather than exhibiting emotions of joy and jubilation, for example, Jane denies William’s assertion. “No, you’re just joking!” she objects. “It’s not so!” she stammers, and again, “It can’t be so!” She bursts into tears and runs off. Though in the end Jane had nothing to worry about (as the man who claimed to be her father was an imposter), she certainly had no desire to leave her orphan status and, as such, her freedom and ability to travel around the world with Tom on his many adventures. Orphan girls’ existence on the radio such as the characters of Jane in Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters and Little Orphan Annie helped young girls imagine a world independent of mom and dad and their rules and constraints.

In some cases, however, girls were not orphaned, but their parents were not present in the story. In these examples, the girls themselves typically instigated their

---

25 “Jane’s Father,” Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters, NBC, March 10, 1939.
separation from mom and/or dad. Let’s Pretend’s 1942 radio version of “The Little Mermaid,” is a prime example. In this version of the fairy tale, Nayida, one of the princesses of the sea, longs to grow old enough to travel to the surface of the water. When she finally does turn fifteen, the requisite age for that adventure, she swims to the surface and falls in love with a human prince. Forsaking her sisters and the rest of her family, Nayida willingly gives up her life under the sea for the chance to be closer to the prince and perhaps persuade him to fall in love with her. She leaves the ocean and never sees her parents and most of her family again. This independent girl heroine consumed through the airwaves reflected, a new reality in America. Though many girls had grown accustomed to seeing their unemployed fathers around the house during the Great Depression, with the country geared up for war, their fathers (and their mothers as well), were out of the house for long periods of time.

Thus, through these tales of absentee and/or dead parents, many little girls heard about lives that mimicked their own; others were able to imagine their own lives without mom and dad. In some of these cases like those of Jane in Tom Mix, having mother and father out of the picture was an opportunity for adventure. In other cases such as that highlighted in “The Little Mermaid,” it meant a chance at love. In both instances, however, radio trained young girls for a future away from their own parents. This trope spoke to the anxieties that girls were dealing with on a day-to-day basis. They wanted to move away from the clutches of their parents and claim independence for themselves, but society was constantly reminding them that they belonged, perhaps now more than ever.

in the home. Though, “men vanished to foreign shores to ward off the enemy, leaving women to fend for themselves,” Elaine Tyler May has noted, “the experiences of wartime ultimately reaffirmed a domestic ideal of breadwinner, homemaker, and children.”

Ultimately, children’s radio programs pushed girls into the home, but also, through their adventures, gave them a chance to imagine more freedom.

Indeed, radio provided girls with more than a chance to imagine freedom, it provided them an excuse to claim some for their own. As Susan Douglas has described in *Listening In*, the act of listening to the radio could be very solitary. Indeed, it transformed itself from a public spectacle in its early days to a lone activity, with young people holing up in their living rooms or even bedrooms, listening to the after school children’s hour or the late night comedies.

In her examination of the effects comics, radio, and the movies had on children, Josette Frank implored parents “to listen with the children to the programs they most enjoy[ed].” Of course, this was easier said than done, particularly during the war years when both parents spent significant time outside the home by serving in the military, working, and/or participating in other wartime endeavors and volunteer opportunities.

---


29 Italics are mine. Frank, “Comics, Radio, Movies,” 18.
Over sixteen million American men served in the armed forces between 1940 and 1945. Of those, 73% served overseas with an average of sixteen months abroad. This translated into “18 percent of America’s families contributing fathers, sons, and brothers to the armed services during World War II.” Naturally, such separations took tolls on familial relationships. Mothers, perhaps already burdened by increased hours on the job, were now solely responsible for family care as well. Aware of the toll his long absence was taking on his family, in particular on his wife, army physician Reuben Berman wrote to his children and told them, “I would like to suggest to all of you, especially David, Betsy, and Sammy [the three oldest children, ages ten, seven, and six respectively], that you try to help Mommy as much as possible.” He clarified, “help by not doing things that make extra work.”

Already burdened by having to raise their children in the absence of their husbands, wives could ill afford to take on additional work and trouble around the home. Moreover, although Reuben’s wife, Isabel, did not work outside of the home during her husband’s long time away, many wives did.

In fact, a rapid increase in size of the armed forces created a labor shortage on the home front. Thus, women were called in to fill the holes in production created when men

---


32 Ibid., 242.

33 Ibid.
left to fight. To speed up the process, the US government worked hand-in-hand with local and national press to create a propaganda campaign encouraging women to leave their homes and work in the war industry. A succession of posters put out by a range of war offices such as the Women’s Bureau, the Office of War Information, and the War Manpower Commission, depicted real and fictionalized versions of women working in factories. One 1942 poster put out by the Women’s Bureau shows a series of pictures of women in the process of working. The captions inform its audience that women can work a variety of jobs. “Radio transmitters respond to a woman’s touch” one caption reads. Another photo shows a female factory “soldier” explaining her task on the production line. In yet another, dozens of women are sewing “underwear for yanks” which will surely “warm [them] up for victory.” Apparently such propaganda was effective. As Elaine Tyler May has noted, “between 1940 and 1945, the female labor force grew by over 50 percent.” Moreover, she continued, “three-fourths of these new female employees were married.”

Women living outside the reach of industry were also encouraged to work for the war effort. For them, joining the Women’s Land Army was a more convenient opportunity than factory work. Despite the literal lack of manpower, rural women were expected to continue to cultivate crops. In fact, although “wartime food production had increased by an astounding 32 percent,” over two million men had abandoned their green

---


35 May, “Rosie the Riveter,” 130.
pastures for more lucrative positions in the war industry or in the armed forces.\textsuperscript{36}

Thus, “Without [women’s] contributions,” historians Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith assert, “food would have been even scarcer, both at home and on the fighting fronts.”\textsuperscript{37}

In addition to working outside of the home either in factories or on the farm, many women also juggled their family responsibilities with volunteer obligations.\textsuperscript{38} Women helped organize a variety of wartime activities. They participated in civil defense exercises; they planted victory gardens; they attended patriotic exhibitions; and they watched others’ children during their off hours. In his article “No Time for Privacy: World War II and Chicago’s Families,” Perry R. Duis details the long day of one busy

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\end{flushright}
urban mom, Mrs. Frances Jankowski. Mrs. Jankowski woke up at 4:45 a.m. nearly every day of the week. During the workweek, “after feeding her family and riding a streetcar” to work where she “spent the next eight hours trimming pork scraps for sausage,” she would then take the streetcar to complete her errands, such as shopping for her family. In the evening, Jankowski cleaned house, “cooked dinner, and still found time to cultivate a victory garden of two thousand square feet, collect scrap and participate in neighborhood civil defense exercises.” Though Jankowski may have been a wife and mother of superhuman abilities, her packed schedule demonstrates the types of activities many wives and mothers had to balance. Thus, perhaps it comes as no surprise that with father on the front and mother out of the house, some people feared that parents let the radio babysit their children. According to a representative of the California Congress of Parents and Teachers, parents used “the radio to keep the[ier] child[ren] amused and out of the way.” With a schedule as busy as Jankowski’s, however, it is no wonder that boys and girls alike took charge of their own entertainment.

With children left to their own devices, adults agonized over the effects so-called “children’s programming” had on their offspring. In his poem entitled, “The Children’s Hour,” Berton Braley claimed that “the eyes of kids are popping” as they “hear music of


sawed-off shotguns, accompanied by a bomb. In fact, the children’s radio hour was often filled with violent, graphic content. Parents routinely complained about its disturbing subject matter. One concerned father objected to radio’s villains announcing, “I am full of disgusts! They shoot. They stab. They kill.” Another father lamented that although his “son has never known fear,” the boy now, “imagines footsteps in the dark, kidnappers lurking in every corner and ghosts appearing and disappearing everywhere.” Lest readers think parents were exaggerating the effects of radio thrillers on their audiences, in her 1941 report in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, Mary Preston got one child listener to confess, “I get scared at the radio.” The child continued, “I bite my nails when there is shooting, I shiver and shiver and jump on the chair and fight with my hands and run to the window to see if anything is coming.” Parents of children in Scarsboro, New York claimed that bedtime stories caused their children to develop nightmares and they had “seen youngsters break down and weep in the middle of a radio story.”

Parents were also concerned about what many perceived to be a growing problem of juvenile delinquency. Many blamed entertainment, in particular, the all-ubiquitous

---

41 Boemer, *Children’s Hour*, 32.

42 Dennis, “Chills and Thrills,” 37


44 Dennis, “Chills and Thrills,” 40.


radio. If radio could cause nightmares, could it also persuade young minds to commit devious acts? In 1946, Mutual Broadcasting held a radio forum and asked five child “experts” to weigh in. According to one New York City Children’s judge, Judge Jacob Panken, the answer was, “Yes.” Panken claimed that radio programs “depicting anti-social conduct, crime, [and] murder influence[d] children to anti-social attitudes and led to aggression.” When a fifteen-year-old boy landed in his court for the third time, Judge Panken demanded to know what programs the boy had listened. Panken felt confirmed in his suspicions when the delinquent rattled off a slew of thrillers including *Gangbusters, The Shadow,* and *The Lone Ranger.* Other panel experts pooh-poohed the thought that radio caused children to commit crimes. William Soskin, a psychologist from Boston, disagreed with “those who claim these programs are the cause of delinquency and severe emotional disturbance.” And although Dr. S. Harcourt Peppard, the acting director of New York City’s Bureau of Child Guidance, admitted that some children who misbehaved claimed they “heard it on the radio,” Peppard dismissed such excuses as “protective device(s),” which, he believed, hid their underlying neuroses.

---


48 Ibid.
Some parents believed that the loosening of sexual mores that occurred in decades past, coupled with increased freedom from parental guidance caused by the war, spelled trouble for their female offspring. While serving overseas, Reuben Berman tried to educate his seven-year old daughter about “good” and “bad” girls. Since he was stationed in Britain at the time, he used British young women for reference. In one letter to his daughter Isabel “Betsy” Berman, he wrote, “When you see a well dressed person, you assume a). It’s [sic] an American b). She got it before the war,” or he continued, “c). She’s not a nice person who gets gifts from not so nice Americans.” The recollections of George, a British youth during the war years, confirms Berman’s speculations. “The number of girls who lost their virtue for a pair of nylons was nobody’s business!” George remembered.

Concerns about wayward girls spilled over into the airwaves as well. One distressed mother, whose daughter had run away, wrote to Nila Mack’s fantasy show Let’s Pretend. In her letter, she praised the show saying that her daughter, “always listened to [the] program.” She then pleaded to Mack directly, telling her to “please tell [my daughter], wherever she is, to come home to her heartbroken mother.”

49 Litoff, Dear Poppa, 136.


52 Ibid.
through their depictions of orphans and parentless children, radio programs encouraged children to claim a level of independence from their mothers and fathers, it was always tempered by the presence of heroic male authority figures.

No one wanted to give young girls the impression that actually running away from home and that not paying attention to all adult authority were good ideas. The children’s Christmas special, The Cinnamon Bear provides us with a good examination of these themes.53

In this twenty-six day program special (which originally aired on the West Coast in 1937, but which was re-broadcast nationally through at least 1952), young children Jimmy and Judy find themselves separated from their mother and father when they are shrunk by a four-inch teddy bear, Paddy O’Cinnamon, and shuttled off to Maybe Land to look for their Christmas star ornament. During their adventure, they encounter a “crazy” quilt dragon, paper dolls sporting ink pens as spears, scissor soldiers, and an irritable, eccentric, and ambiguous stork. Jimmy and Judy prove to be quite the capable adventurers and generally greet their seemingly life-threatening journey with courage. Despite her independence, however, Judy wonders what mother, “would think if she could see us now.”54 Moreover, though Paddy O’Cinnamon appears to be a rather bumbling guide, Judy tries to pay him heed. When she disobeys him, catastrophe follows. For example, though Paddy O’Cinnamon warns Judy not to talk with the stork, Willie, Judy does so. Their tense interaction results in Willie sabotaging the plane the


Cinnamon Bear is flying. The trio, Judy, Jimmy, and Paddy O’Cinnamon, crash land into Looking Glass Valley which begins their epic journey throughout Maybe Land. Finally, the ultimate father-figure, in the form of Santa Claus, eventually saves the day by the end of the series. He helps Judy and Jimmy reclaim their Christmas star, brings them back home, and unshrinks them. Thus, though Judy and Jimmy are parentless throughout most of the storyline, along the way, they encounter male authority figures who help them through their trials.

The scriptwriters responsible for children’s programs wanted to create a world where children felt as if they were kings and queens, but where, ultimately, they obeyed a higher power, particularly the patriarchy. A 1945 episode of the family drama *Cavalcade of America* entitled, “Children, This is Your Father,” plainly depicts this scenario. In this episode, a father has returned home after four years of serving abroad. At first, he struggles with his new life as a father and husband. He and his wife constantly bicker about how the children are being raised, and the children themselves, vocally prefer their mother over their father. After the husband physically punishes his son, a heated argument ensues between him and his wife, with the husband saying that if his wife wants to continue being the head of the house, he will oblige her and leave her and his children. In the end, and notably after the corporal punishment and the verbal altercation with his wife, the father has reaffirmed his authority in the house, with all of his family (wife, daughter, and son) granting him respect and full status as the head of the house. As scholar J. Fred MacDonald observed, any other type of scenario, “would have been

---

55 “Children, This is Your Father,” *Cavalcade of America*, October 15, 1945.
incompatible with the nature of popular culture in American society.” Popular culture in general, and radio in particular, he continued, “functions to improve and stabilize life, not to undermine its operative value system.” Nila Mack, the creative driving force behind the oft-praised Let’s Pretend, concurred when she discussed the formula her scripts followed to Time magazine. Mack admitted, "the good are very good and the bad get just what they deserve.”

Such programming guidelines helped allay parental fears of being dispensable, particularly at a time when their children were required to spend many hours without them. In a letter to his wife, Reuben Berman worried that his youngest son, Sammy (not yet three when he went to war) would no longer remember him. He imagined that for “dear little Sammy,” he had become, “a benign shadow” who was “blurred by time and distance.” In another letter, this one to his daughter, he looked into the future imagining a smitten boy helping his daughter across the street. He wrote to her, “Nowadays when people take your hand as you have to walk across the street,” he confided “it’s a sign that they like you.” He added protectively, “Sometimes it’s a sign that they like you too.


58 Litoff, Dear Poppa, 208.

59 Ibid., 106-07.
much. We’ll discuss that later.” He finished his advice, “At present time remember that a girl’s best friend is her Father.”

Though a father might like to believe that he was his daughter’s best friend, in truth she was probably much friendlier with peers her own age. The peer formation process which began in age-segregated classrooms in the 1920s, was further strengthened by weakening familial ties caused by Depression and War, and was finally completed through popular media in the 1940s. Radio was perhaps the most effective medium at forging a strong, diverse peer group among children. In addition to providing a common listening experience that helped unify children around the nation, it also encouraged boys and girls alike to think of themselves as separate from the adults around them.

National networks made it possible for children around the country to listen to the same actors deliver the same script at the same time each day. Thus, when Little Orphan Annie, for example, went from two separate airings on either coast, to one, nationwide broadcast in 1933, the west coast cast and crew were let go and the Chicago team became the voices of the program. This process streamlined the messages children received each day, ensuring that everyone who listened to the program heard exactly what network executives intended. In 1934, children across the country heard Annie’s message loud and clear: Little Orphan Annie announced her Secret Society. By writing to the station and sending in an Ovaltine seal, Little Orphan Annie herself sent you a decoder pin. At the end of each episode, Annie’s announcer, Pierre Andre, would deliver a coded message and members used their decoder pins to reveal it. Usually the message was a clue about

\[60\] Ibid.
the following day’s episode. Many other children’s radio programs had their own version of Annie’s Secret Society; *Captain Midnight* had the Secret Squadron, *Tom Mix* had his Ralston Straight Shooters Club of America, and *Buck Rogers* had the fan-created Buck Rogers Club for Boys and the Wilma Deering Club for Girls. The single sex make-up of the latter two clubs once again confirms William Tuttle’s belief that even though they listened to the same program, boys and girls heard what they wanted to hear, and as reflected in these clubs, had different understandings of the true hero (or heroine!) on the show.  

Some of these clubs, like *Annie’s Secret Society* and *Captain Midnight’s Secret Squadron* relayed coded messages to their listeners who would use their decoder pins and badges to reveal clues about the next day’s episodes. Other shows had different ways of interacting with their club members. While Tom Mix of the *Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters* program did not have a coded message at the end of every episode, for example, he did periodically have his “loyal followers” renew their pledge of allegiance to his Ralston Straight Shooters Club of America, a club that sent a secret manual to its members. The oath made boys and girls promise to obey certain rules:

1). I promise to shoot straight with my parents by obeying my father and mother and by eating the food they want me to eat
2). I promise to shoot straight with my friends by telling the truth always, by being fair and square in work or play, by trying always to win, and by being a good loser if I lose.
3). I promise to shoot straight with myself by striving always to be at my best, by keeping my mind alert and my body strong and healthy.

---

61 Tuttle, “Homefront Children,” 149.
4. I promise to shoot straight with Tom Mix by regularly eating Ralston, official straight shooters cereal, because I know Ralston is just the kind of cereal that will help build a stronger America.  

Jack Armstrong also encouraged listeners to make pledges to better their health and wellness. His “personal training rules to get healthy” were read over the air on occasion and listeners were encouraged to follow such rules to ensure they get off the “sidelines” and into the action of everyday living. Secret messages, pledges, and oaths such as these helped make boys and girls feel as if they were an integral part of not only the show, but of an entire society of like-minded boys and girls headed up by their favorite heroes and heroines. Moreover, through their memberships, secret societies and clubs helped children connect to one another.

Not all radio programs enticed children to enter secret societies and make pledges of allegiance to their sponsors, however. That being said, many programs did encourage children to interact with the show nonetheless. Some programs, such as Let’s Pretend, made weekly requests for children to “‘Write to Let’s Pretend in care of your local station, and ask for your favorite story.’” In addition for it being “good for the children to get used to writing letters,” as director Nila Mack said, it also allowed children the

---


64 Anderson, Let’s Pretend, 102.
opportunity to literally get their voices heard. Every week, cast members read at least one letter aloud.\textsuperscript{65}

Though networks and programs, such as NBC’s \textit{Little Orphan Annie}, Mutual’s \textit{Captain Midnight} or CBS’s \textit{Let’s Pretend} fostered interaction between the children on the air and those listening in, they really could not control how children at home might interpret their messages. Mack wanted to use the same stories that “filled [her] with wonder when [she] was very young,” to speak to her audience as well.\textsuperscript{66} She offered, “I figured that if these lively pieces with a message at their hearts had meant so much to me, other children would like them, too.” Regardless of what message the \textit{Let’s Pretend} audiences received, they certainly liked the stories. By 1940, \textit{Let’s Pretend} was receiving a thousand letters a week which usually broke down into three categories: requests for specific stories, for an audition to join the cast, and for autographs of the cast and/or Mack, herself.\textsuperscript{67} Boys, and especially girls, wrote in to their local radio stations to praise and to critique the stories. One group of young girls even took the time to write, “We like all the stories except the stories we don’t like, but you make them so good that we like them.”\textsuperscript{68}

Creators also could not determine whether or not children might discuss the programs amongst themselves. Yet children did talk with each other about what they

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 102-103.


\textsuperscript{67} Anderson, \textit{Let’s Pretend}, 103.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
heard on the radio. In one threatening letter to the creators of *Let’s Pretend*, a boy demanded to hear “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.”\(^{69}\) “If you do not play,” the story, he claimed, “I will never tune in again.” Of course, according to this boy, not only would *Let’s Pretend* lose one fan, but because of his influence, they would lose even more. “I have a lot of friends,” he alleged, “and they do everything I tell them.” Another letter writer tried to influence the creators to ignore a friend’s request. “Dear Actors,” it began, “If you get a letter from James please don’t play that story because I think you played it.”\(^{70}\) Thus, it is evident that children did more than passively listen to radio programs; they tried to influence program content. They also tried to influence each other by talking about what they heard on the radio.

In fact, radio executives not only banked on children caving into peer pressure, they also actively encouraged it. On Mutual’s *Captain Midnight*, announcer Pierre Andre frequently told children to “Be sure to tell your friends to listen in everyday.”\(^{71}\) And the announcer for *Terry and the Pirates*, shamed children into sending in labels of Libby’s tomato and pineapple juices to get a terryscope, a telescope that Terry often used in his adventures at sea. “You’re sure going to feel left out in the cold,” he told them, “if the other kids are playing games with their terryscope and you haven’t got one.”\(^{72}\) Sometimes the premium was so special and perhaps useful that the heroes and heroines of

\(^{69}\) Ibid.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) “First Mutual Broadcast,” *Captain Midnight*, Mutual Broadcasting Company, September 30, 1940.

\(^{72}\) “Radio Turned Over,” *Terry and the Pirates*, WGN, November 28, 1941.
the programs themselves came out to talk about them. Tom Mix’s ward Jane, for example, was so excited about the flashlight give-away, she told children, “If I were you I’d order one right now.”

Peer pressure was also effective in getting children to join the war effort, usually not as individuals, but as a collective group, once again creating a common experience for children and bringing them together in peer groups. As scholar Robert William Kirk has outlined in his text *Earning Their Stripes: The Mobilization of American Children in the Second World War*, “Radio was an instrument through which American children were mobilized to work for victory.” Executives knew that children were ready for mobilization; they had gotten children to literally buy into their secret societies and clubs. Now, they just needed to include an added purpose and a greater sense of urgency. They did this in a variety of ways. Some, like *Little Orphan Annie*, converted their already-formed secret societies into war-focused clubs dedicated to action. Others programs like *Let’s Pretend* used people in authority to encourage youngsters to enroll themselves in the war effort any way they could. In fact, children played a major role in America’s stateside mobilization.

Perhaps as a way to combat allegations that he used his strip to, as one letter writer charged, “propagandize in such a fashion that you undermine the unity, necessary to our winning of the war, by distorted insinuations,” *Little Orphan Annie*’s creator

---

73 “Jane’s Father,” *Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters*, NBC, March 10, 1939.

74 Kirk, *Earning Their Stripes*, 50.
Harold Gray conceived of Annie’s Junior Commandos, or JC, in the summer of 1942.⁷⁵ Throughout those hot summer days, the Annie in print geared up for war with her friend Loretta. By the end of June, Gray had given their clique a name, the Junior Commandos. Annie outlined their agenda in one strip, “Scrap collection—carin' for war workers' kids—savin' fats--anti-noise patrols—sellin' war stamps an' bonds—runnin' errands—doin' odd jobs--all to raise money to buy more bonds...”⁷⁶ Encouraged by the outpouring of enthusiasm fans doled upon Gray, the Little Orphan Annie radio program soon followed suit with their own version of the JC.⁷⁷ And, “to the delight of parents, press, and war-production officials,” children inspired by Annie’s heroism and sacrifice in the comic strip and on the radio, founded chapters of Junior Commandos all around the United States.⁷⁸

The records housed in the Howard Gottleib Special Collections at Boston University offer a detailed glimpse of different chapters of the Junior Commandos. One of the most extensive and therefore informative profiles of a single Junior Commandos chapter is a result of fastidious note-keeping by Mrs. Dean Gaghagen. On July 13 1942, Mrs. Gaghagen created her own version of the Junior Commandos that she called The Orphan Annie Club. With pride, but also with nervousness, she forwarded Harold Gray

---

⁷⁵ Dixie Louise Fisk to Harold Gray, 14 August 1944, Box 1, Folder 3 Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gottleib Research Center, Boston University.


⁷⁷ Letter from Fiske to Gray.

pages of correspondence including newsletters she sent out to members of her club.

In these notes, Gaghagen revealed much about her club and its members. The twenty to twenty-five member club was comprised of both boys and girls (with girls being a slight majority). They held both weekly and monthly meetings. The weekly meetings were dedicated to socializing and learning to play games such as bunko and rummy; the monthly “parties” involved playing more games, listening to guest speakers (usually town heroes/soldiers) who talked about the good the children were doing, collecting scrap, creating care packages to send to the town’s soldiers serving abroad, and entertaining families of “the boys” who recently enlisted and/or were sent to war. All of this was funded through the five cent weekly dues each member paid, as well as the money collected during the card games. One week, Gaghagen divulged, the children’s “Bunco and Card Party…proceeds amounted to $30.00.”

Although the children who participated in Gaghagen’s Orphan Annie Club probably had plenty of opportunity to work toward the war effort (as schools, in particular, mobilized children) it is significant to note, that these boys and girls felt as if they could contribute more. Unable to enlist, yet raised to be nurturing, girls especially felt the desire to contribute more and more to the war effort. One fourteen-year-old girl interviewed for Calling All Girls magazine discussed both her wartime activities and the accompanying guilt she felt for supposedly not doing as much as the boys and men.

---

79 Letters from Mrs. Dean Gaghagen, Box 1, Folder 31, Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gottleib Special Collection at Boston University (Boston, MA).

80 Ibid.
around her. “I have four cousins and two uncles in the services of our nation,” she explained. Though she admitted that she “buy[s] war stamps regularly,” and would be “helping harvest the crops (such as berries, beans, etc)” this year, a nightmare she had whereby all her cousins and uncles were killed in action affected her greatly. She sulked, “It got me thinking that I wasn’t doing very much for the war effort.” “I think that many girls think the same as I do,” she finished.\footnote{Ossian, “Fragilities and Failures,” 169.} The sacrifices of wives and mothers were often praised, but girls, on the other hand, could not share in that limelight. They were obviously not working in factories and, although they certainly helped around the house, those types of activities are all-too-often underappreciated. Thus, many girls, such as the girl above, battled with feelings of helplessness.

Gaghagen’s Orphan Annie Club, as well as the other clubs inspired by radio’s heroes and heroines, however, helped both boys and girls feel like they were contributing to victory. Moreover, the organization of Gaghagen’s club (devised around neighborhood blocks) as well as the activities they were involved with, brought more meaning to children’s efforts. Though Gaghagen, for example, was proud of the work her club did as a whole, she was most proud of the fact that her Orphan Annie Club helped to procure items for, assemble, and send “325 Boxes [i.e. care packages] to the Boys of our block who are in Service.”\footnote{Letters from Mrs. Dean Gaghagen, Box 1, Folder 31, Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gottleib Special Collection at Boston University (Boston, MA).} No doubt Gaghagen’s home-grown efforts really spoke to the children who joined her club. Since the items in the care packages
were usually found during salvage runs, children had a tangible product to send abroad to local heroes; moreover, they had a real-life connection to those they collected from, as well as to those who received their aid.

In each of her newsletters, Gaghagen was sure to divulge the latest gossip concerning the young soldiers (and their wives and sweethearts) that the club helped out. Children were told that it was “grand” that “Lt. A.E. Hunter has been made 1st Lt;” they learned that “Shirley McAndrews of Harvard Avenue will visit her husband at camp;” and that “Corporal Hugh McCann had the honor of being only ten feet away from President Roosevelt.” Most importantly, however, Gaghagen made sure to demonstrate to her club members how much the soldiers appreciated their care packages. Nearly every week she reported receiving a thank you from someone they had sent care packages and letters to. “All the boys think the kids and the club are grand,” she told them. Gaghagen gushed, “They say they surely enjoy the boxes and papers.”

Gaghagen’s Club also provided an opportunity for boys and girls to build upon friendships they may have formed at school or even to create new ones. Thus, sisters Patsy and Shirley Hewitt, for example, could converse freely with brothers James & Arthur Gustavson while putting together care packages or attending one of Gaghagen’s numerous parties or meeting. Through these sometimes radio-inspired war clubs, relationships between individuals who may never have been friendly to each other, developed around the nation. Perhaps it was easier to form a diverse group of peers

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.
during this particular time as pluralism was certainly present throughout popular media. Although scholar William Kirk offers that “Youngsters,” who grew up during the war era, “increased their level of racist and ethnic prejudices by seeing and hearing portrayals of the perfidious Orientals, heinous Germans, and risible Italians,” the truth is, popular culture also provided boys and girls with sympathetic and even heroic ethnic and racial characters as well.\(^\text{85}\) Historian Lary May’s research on films of the era reveals that the “ethnic platoon,” i.e. the platoon comprised of all different ethnicities, was a necessary ingredient to defeat Europe’s fascists.\(^\text{86}\) In fact, the Office of War Information encouraged Hollywood to focus on a victory that would erase “forms of racial discrimination or religious intolerance.”\(^\text{87}\)

Children’s radio programs also celebrated American pluralism. With many different minorities playing roles in toppling the bad guys, children saw the positive effects of befriending people from around the world. For example, ethnic and racial minorities often aided the hero in deposing villains. For example, Britt Reid, aka The Green Hornet, relied on his Filipino butler, Cato, not only to maintain his household and his secret identity, but also to help him carry out his plots to dispatch the bad guys. In one episode titled, “Poor Substitutes” which aired in July of 1940, Reid wondered why desperately destitute family men were suddenly bending over backwards to confess to

\(^\text{85}\) Kirk, *Earning Their Stripes*, 36.


\(^\text{87}\) Ibid., 142.
crimes of burglary and robbery.\textsuperscript{88} With the help of Cato, who followed the bodyguard of Reid’s suspect as he visited the families of the jailed criminals, Reid discovered that in exchange for their confessions, the real gangster culprit offered these men weekly allowances that he (or, as Cato uncovers, his bodyguard) would deliver to their wives and children while the fake criminals were in jail. And in one December 1940 episode of \textit{Jack Armstrong: The All-American Boy}, Jack befriended Michelle, a young Filipino man who informed Jack that he and his companions were in imminent danger.\textsuperscript{89} After faking friendship with a sailor who worked for the villainous Black Shark, Michelle discovered the Black Shark’s nefarious plans: to let Jack, et. al., go through the danger and trouble of uncovering the sunken treasure and then killing them. Though Jack, his uncle Jim, and Betty and Billy were always on the lookout for the Shark, Michelle helped them understand that at least in this episode, danger was lurking closer than they expected.

One final element, perhaps, in helping to ready young boys and girls for such multicultural friendships that were promoted on the radio, was the British child evacuation program known as Operation Pied Piper. Through this program, more than one million children left large British cities and towns, such as London, which were targets for German bombs, for the British countryside and even for North America. In fact, over 5,000 British children settled in North America, with approximately 3,000

\textsuperscript{88} “Poor Substitutes,” \textit{The Green Hornet}, NBC Blue, July 17, 1940.

staying with American foster parents during the duration of the war. In December of 1940, *Life* magazine ran a photo essay about British child evacuees in America.⁹⁰ According to the author, British children have “had no trouble making friends and learning new games” with their American counterparts.⁹¹ Indeed, one photo of five girls and boys, including recent refugee Colin Cramp, showed them building a structure out of cement blocks. The caption noted “English accents and American slang were no obstacle to easy comradeship of boys and girls.”⁹² Moreover, American boys and girls helped British refugees acclimate to a new world away from their parents. When ten-year-old Vina Wales left her family in Britain and relocated to North Canton, Ohio, she befriended eight-year-old Marjorie Boger and her sister, her host parents’ daughters. Marjorie and her sister “introduced Vina to eating hot dogs and ice cream cones, and to other American customs.”⁹³ By helping Vina adjust to life in North Canton, Marjorie and her sister demonstrate perhaps one of the most important roles young girls played during the war years: that of supporter.

In addition to populating children’s radio programs with various racial and ethnic minorities, women and girls also had important roles as supporters in this new pluralistic America promoted through radio. In the same episode where Cato spied on a bodyguard,

---

⁹⁰ “Refugees: Children of Europe are America’s Wards,” *Life* 16 December 1940, 88-95.

⁹¹ Ibid., 88.

⁹² Ibid., 92.

Reid initially sent his secretary, Ms. Case to inquire at the homes of the criminals. Case was the first one to make the connection that curiously, the families who were most desperate last year and in need of The Sentinel’s Christmas charity, were the ones who this year refused the charity and suffered the loss of the head of the household as he was sent to jail for criminal behavior. Case was not a lone example of a woman or young girl helping the male heroine save the day. Children’s radio programs are filled with the likes of women like Case such as Jack Armstrong’s companion, Betty; Terry’s helpmate, April in Terry and the Pirates; Captain Midnight’s ward, Patsy; Sky King’s niece, Penny; Buck Roger’s love interest, Wilma Deering; and Tom Mix’s charge, Jane. In addition, there were a few “bad girls” who also had meaningful parts within some children’s radio programs. Examples of this type are Singapore from Terry and the Pirates and Kane’s feminine sidekick, Ardelia from Buck Rogers. Though these female characters ally themselves with the bad guys on these radio programs, in the end, each of them exhibits a change of heart and wind up on the “good guys” side, again confirming MacDonald’s theory that radio did not work to undermine the status quo in America. Whether a “good girl” like Jane or a “bad girl” like Ardelia, these women and girls were key characters in many of the story lines in children’s radio programs.

Via popular culture media such as radio, film, and print sources, as well as through school and through general socialization, girls were encouraged in supporting their mothers in the home and their fathers, brothers, and uncles abroad. As Lisa Ossian argues in her work “Fragilities and Failures, Promises and Patriotism: Elements of

94 “Poor Substitutes,” The Green Hornet, NBC Blue, July 17, 1940.
Second World War English and American Girlhood, 1939-1945,” for girls, “war work also meant an increase in domestic responsibilities.”95 This was not much different than what was required of girls during the Depression when they took over household duties when their mothers were unwilling or unable to do so. What differs here, however, is the added urgency, as well as its link to patriotism. Keeping house and helping mother to raise the younger children were always admirable tasks, but now, girls were told they were patriotic too. According to Elaine Tyler May, women’s “tasks within the home gained new patriotic purpose.”96 These women and girls, “saw their work as contributing to the success of the war emergency.” Their domestic endeavors were so praised, that often times, organizations would recognize their achievement through competitions and prizes. New York’s Children’s Aid Society hosted cooking competitions for young girls throughout the war years. Competitors were asked to make “price-cutting supper(s) based on healthful substitutes for meat and other scarce foods.”97 The organization also awarded girls who “displayed most helpfulness at home and at play.”98 1944’s winner, Frances Brady, aged 12, was selected because she “spends most of her time helping take care of her sister and four brothers” while her widowed mother worked. The article

---


96 May, “Rosie the Riveter,” 136.


98 “Girl, 12, is picked among 7,000 as Most Helpful at Home and Play,” New York Times 23 June 1944, 21.
praised Brady for preparing “supper for the entire family every night.” Franches was not alone. Tens of thousands of girls were asked to step up their chores. From the time she was ten-years old, Mara Hart was responsible for ironing her family’s clothes, a task that took over four hours a week to finish.

Moreover, although Army Surgeon Reuben Berman asked all his children to pitch in and help their mother while he was away, he asked more from his six-year-old daughter, Betsy. Encouraging Betsy to continue writing him and divulging important information, he confided to her, “You tell me things that Momma doesn’t and they are things I want to hear,” such as learning more about how his wife is raising their infant daughter, Ruth Amelia. Indeed, Betsy took Berman’s request to heart and frequently updated him on Ruth Amelia’s progress. In one letter written in May of 1943, after pleading with her father to send her a present, “I don’t care what it is,” she tells him and then offers, perhaps as a bribe, “Ruth Amelia can get in the position to crawl.” In another letter, Betsy tattles on Ruth Amelia, and therefore her mother (continuing the rivalry between mothers and daughters that was established during the Depression) saying that the two-year old still sucks her thumb. Berman acknowledged Betsy’s

99 Ibid.


102 Ibid., 14.

103 Ibid., 67.
comment saying, “I don’t want my children to be sucking their thumbs.” 104 No doubt he expected Betsy to help his wife ensure that Ruth Amelia kept her fingers out of her mouth.

Writing letters, as Betsy did to her father, was an important contribution to the war effort. It was considered essential to keeping soldier morale on the up and up. The manual for Jack Armstrong’s Write-a-Fighter Corps, or WAFC, included a “performance pledge” which required letter-writers to promise to “keep our letters cheerful.” 105 Creators of WAFC drove the point home when they recommended not to write about “sickness and trouble,” for “your fighter can’t do his best if he is worried about how things are going at home.” 106 Though war reduced the face-to-face time between adult men and young girls, girls were still supposed to fulfill their psychic obligations by listening and nurturing the men in their lives. Posters promoting victory mail, or v-mail, i.e. letters that had been censored, transferred to microfilm, shipped, and then re-printed on location overseas, instructed those who wrote them to “make it cheerful.” 107 Writing

104 Ibid.


106 WAFC Manual, 8.

letters was both a way that those on the home front could stay connected to those abroad (and vice versa), as well as a way to contribute to victory.

With many men abroad, letter writing often fell on the shoulders of those who remained behind, i.e. usually the young, in particular young girls. Frequently cheered on by teachers, parents, and society as a whole to embrace their natural talents in creative arts and English, like their mothers, little girls flocked to letter writing. Indeed, most v-mail posters were directed solely at the fairer sex. Many of these posters displayed the simple message, “Reach your boy over seas,” at the top. Other posters relied on imagery to get the message across. One poster, for example, featured a young woman writing a letter. Behind her is a bevy of soldiers awaiting their own letters. The poster reminded one to “Be with him at every mail call.”

Children were often targeted for letter-writing campaigns and radio seemed a natural way to enlist boys and girls for such a duty. Jack Armstrong—The All American Boy did a particularly good job of recruiting children to write letters. Reportedly, they enlisted over a million boys and girls in their Write-A-Fighter Corps in 1943 alone!

---


Children sent away for their free booklet on how to establish their own “squadron” of letter writers, or as they called them, fighter pilots. Led by a squadron leader, boys and girls pledged to write a fighter of their choice, once a month. Though it is impossible to guess at the boy to girl ratio within the WAFC, given the fact that girls typically wrote more letters than boys, it is not improbable to imagine they comprised, at the very least, a slight majority of members. Indeed, perhaps it is only fitting that one of the few copies of the manual still in circulation lists all girls on the registry page.112

Letter writing was not the only way in which girls could fulfill their wartime duties and raise morale among enlisted men. In fact, Uncle Sam and community organizations often encouraged interaction between soldiers headed overseas and girls on the home front. In her essay on girls in World War II, historian Lisa Ossian details how Liberty Belles, i.e. young women aged 17 to 25, were bussed into camps to boost morale and to “be sympathetic to [soldiers] troubles.”113 Some young girls did not have to travel far to find their sailors, soldiers, and airmen. The North Chicago Civic Service Association had a “guest list” comprised of 146 local young ladies who signed up to “assure sailors of partners for the Saturday evening dancing parties.”114

---


southside (and the African American community that lived there) also had their very own service center. The Auxillary Service Men’s Center, which provided “a recreational house for hundreds of soldiers, particularly Negro servicemen,” had over 300 applications from “young women who wish[ed] to entertain the soldiers at the center.”115 Although the Liberty Belles as well as those who entertained soldiers at Chicago’s service centers restricted volunteers to teenage girls and young women, younger girls often figured out ways to entertain themselves and “the boys” as well. Twelve-year old Doris Dotson and her friends “jitterbugged to the jukebox, encouraging soldiers to have fun during their brief stop for the trains to refuel,” in North Platte, Nebraska.116 Dotson reminisced, “The boys would pass up the food tables to come down and dance with my friends and me.” She continued, “As far as I was concerned, I was being very patriotic.”117

Of course, patriotism could not be contained in a party atmosphere. It spilled out into the everyday lives of girls at home. Indeed, patriotism was the reason many young girls began to work for the war effort in every way possible, i.e. to mobilize. "I became fiercely patriotic," a farm girl from Nebraska divulged. "[I] participated in every war effort that I could," she concluded.118 Thus, by the time America sent its first soldiers to the warfront, its girls were in the process of transforming themselves into soldiers on the

115 “Negro Service Center Open on Southside,” Chicago Daily Tribune 15 December 1941, 15.
117 Ibid.
118 Harper, et. al., World War II and the American Home Front, 71.
home front. Their wartime duties and responsibilities included collecting scrap, buying and selling war savings stamps and bonds, and learning the correct way of doing things while informing those who did not, to follow their lead and learn as well. These activities were not that different from what boys were doing. In fact, in some ways, war mitigated the gender-specific upbringing that boys and girls generally learned.

*Little Orphan Annie* was perhaps the first character to inspire children to collect scrap. In just two weeks, the fifteen boys and girls who comprised the Junior Commandos of the 2300 block of Devon Avenue in Chicago, IL “collected more than 1,000 pounds scrap,” including things such as “thirty-four tires, three barrels of scrap rubber…keys, bird cages…bed springs, linen, woolens, seven barrels of tin cans,” and basically “anything else they can find.”119 “Lieutenant” Richard Russo, aged twelve, and his commandos of the 5000 block of Barry Avenue also in Chicago, showed great perseverance and creativity when they were given “pieces of junk that [were] too big to put in our wagons.”120 When one woman gave them a large lamp to cart away, Russo detailed how he and his club had to take it apart to carry it to the collection center. All in all the Junior Commandos had, as *Annie* historian Bruce Smith denotes, “thousands of youngsters scrambling through junkpiles and knocking on doors to round up newspapers,


scrap metal, old tires, kitchen grease, all the raw materials needed to feed the factories that were manufacturing war products.”

They were not the only ones. One August day in 1943, Jack Armstrong’s announcer Norman Croft told boys and girls how they might approach neighbors for scrap collecting by citing the work that Alden, a six-year-old boy, and his (not surprisingly unnamed) eight-year-old sister did in their community. According to Craft, who announced it to all of Armstrong’s listeners, Alden and his sister went door to door with the message, “Please lady, I am a soldier’s helper. Would you have some paper for us on our collection day?” Apparently, they were successful enough to warrant a mention on national radio.

Schools worked in conjunction with the War Production Board to get children to collect scrap and salvage materials. When their school hosted a paper drive, Betsy and David Berman, aged seven and nine, respectively, worked diligently both “for the school and for the war,” to collect enough paper. Though David was frightened to ask his cantankerous neighbor, his sister stepped up to the plate and did it for them. Happily, they discovered that the old woman had so many materials for the children, they had to return with a wagon. Throughout the war years, an estimated 30 million American

121 Smith, Little Orphan Annie, 50-55.


123 Litoff, Dear Poppa, 39.

124 Ibid.
children collected over 1.5 million tons of scrap, or to put it in more practical and timely terms, “enough [scrap materials] to build 425 liberty ships.”

Collecting scrap was not the sole activity occupying the time and energy of America’s children during World War II. They were also deeply committed to buying and to selling savings bonds and stamps. Once again, their heroes and heroines on radio often coaxed them into shilling out their dimes for another bond or stamp. For example, in addition to pledging to write one letter a month to a soldier abroad, fighter pilots and squadron leaders of *Jack Armstrong’s* Write-a-Fighter Corps also promised to “make it a rule and think twice,” before spending money on “luxuries you really don’t need.” Instead, they were instructed to “put that dime into war savings stamps.” Tom Mix frequently kept children up-to-date with war news and often tried to persuade children to do their part in helping the Allies win the war. On V-E Day, for example, after talking about victory in Europe, Tom Mix (played by Curley Bradley) reminded his listeners “The war isn’t over yet and it isn’t won yet.” “Keep right on doing your best,” he told children. In order to continue being a “good home front soldier,” boys and girls had to “keep right on buying and saving those war stamps.”

With regards to selling bonds and stamps and purchasing their own, children did more than listen to what their favorite radio characters, such as Jack Armstrong and Tom Mix, told them to do; they actually went out and did it. Mrs. Dean Gaghagen was “proud


126 WAFC, 1942, 17.

to announce” that in the month of September 1943, her Orphan Annie Club sold a
“$150.00 cash bond and two $25.00 bonds, as well as $80.00 in stamps.” Scholar
Judith Pinkerton Josephson discussed sixth graders in one Kansas school and determined
that the children there raised enough money through their war bond campaign to
purchase, “one submachine gun, four field telephones, one tent, five steel helmets, and
nine tools for digging trenches.” And the two oldest Berman children, David and
Betsy, constantly harangued their mother into allowing them to buy more stamps and
bonds. In one letter, Isabel told her husband that David had saved over $18.00 for a bond
and that Betsy was fast on his heels. “It won’t be long before Betsy can have a bond,”
she confided. And then, perhaps a bit run down, she added, “And then will come Sammy
[their third youngest child].”

Like many children their age, David and Betsy Berman did more than persuade
their mother to buy stamps and bonds; they tried to help those around them do the best
they could do to win the war as well. When his mother purchased brand new dinner
plates, David scolded, “Now, Momma, we didn’t really need these plates.” He
reminded her, “You know, you are supposed to wear it out or make it do.” No doubt
David saw the Office of War Information’s poster, “Use it Up, Wear it Out, Make it Do,”

130 Litoff, Dear Poppa, 70.
131 Ibid., xv.
132 Ibid.
and he may have heard the motto on his favorite radio programs. In fact, at times special guests appeared on children’s radio shows to deliver particularly pertinent information or directions.

In the March 20, 1943 episode of *Let’s Pretend* titled “Princess Moonbeam,” Dorothy Gordon, the National Director of Children’s Radio Programs, came on air to remind children of this message. After extolling the hard work that children had been doing throughout the war, she repeated that there was more they could be doing. To win the war, she told them “we have to work together and help our government in every way.”

She was more explicit when she said, “We’ll have to give up lots of things that we would like to have,” such as “your Charlotte Russe’s and heavy cream desserts,” as well as “other things as time goes on.” Then, she told listeners that another element to their war work was “explaining things” to adults who did not understand that rationing, for example, was a wartime necessity. To those who scoff that there was enough gas to go around, explain to them that “The reason gas is being rationed all over the country is because no gas means no driving, and no driving means saving rubber” which is essential for victory.

Children’s radio programs often offered premiums that could facilitate their war work, or at the very least, help them create an imaginary world where they might be able to do so. In 1942, ten cents and a label from Libby’s Juice could get one a “Victory

---


134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.
Airplane Spotter” courtesy of the folks from Libby’s and Terry and the Pirates. Kits included detailed information on how to categorize planes by wing and tail shapes, as well as pictures of sixteen different kinds of aircrafts with identifying descriptors. This was the “same aircraft recognition information that the armed forces and Civilian Defense observers had.” In late November of 1940, Little Orphan Annie and her sponsor Ovaltine promoted an ID chain and tag “just like soldiers and aviators wear.”

If wearing an ID tag and chain while trying to spot US aircraft in the sky was not “hands-on” enough for some war hawk children, they could always spy on their neighbors and try to find out where their allegiances really did lie. Captain Midnight’s spyscope was the perfect tool for helping in this endeavor. Although Suzie used it to prevent jewel thieves from robbing a neighbor, imaginative boys and girls could utilize the same device to spy on their neighbors, friends, and family.

Radio programs and their sponsors also used war as one reason children should, not only invest in the premiums they offered, but also buy their products. In the days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Tom Mix’s sidekick Pecos came on before the show began to notify boys and girls that “These days it’s up to you and me and all of us to keep

---


138 “Follow Mystery Woman,” Little Orphan Annie, NBC Blue November 20, 1940.

139 Miller, Radio Premiums, np.
in the top of condition.” Naturally, he added “the best way I know to do this is to saddle up every morning with a hot dish of good ol’ Ralston.” Ralston was not the only breakfast food to shamelessly use war to sell to children. Perhaps one of the more memorable sponsors was Ovaltine. *Little Orphan Annie* was synonymous with the product and she, and her long-time announcer Pierre Andre, peddled Ovaltine profusely. When Ovaltine switched allegiance from *Little Orphan Annie* to *Captain Midnight* in 1942, Captain Midnight relayed the message about Ovaltine being “one of the richest sources of vitamins and minerals in the world” and broadcast it to children for the duration of the war.

Children were encouraged to buy products that were supposed to help them with their duties of war (be it spying on neighbors or staying fit and healthy). As future mothers and wives in charge of the household economy (or at least, the shopping list and budget), girls had a special message. Children’s radio programs urged girls to begin to make smart decisions now, before they grew into their adult lives and assumed posts as wives and mothers, and to get as much “free” stuff as they could. Throughout all of April in 1939, Popsicle Pete, the winner of a *Buck Rogers* contest came on the air to tell boys and girls about all the “wonderful gifts” they could be earning if only they saved their

---


141 Ibid.

popsicle, fudsicle, and creamsicle wrappers.143 “A flashlight, a beautiful doll, [and] swell jewelry” were just some of the items one could earn by sending in wrappers.144

No doubt the April 9, 1943 message Captain Midnight’s announcer had for “wives and mothers” was particularly pertinent to young girls, knowing that they too, were expected to grow up and be wives and mothers as well. The announcer sympathized with the difficult task women had in “planning wartime meals,” when “some of our favorite highly nourishing foods [were] scarce or rationed.” He lamented how “it’s harder than ever to be sure your family is getting all the food value and especially all the vitamins and minerals they need.” Happily, however, the announcer told these women “there [was] no reason to be concerned about vitamin and mineral shortages.” As long as she “rel[jed] on Ovaltine” she would be able to keep all the members of her family in “tip-top health.”145

Indeed, children’s radio programs prepped young girls to take over the roles of their own mothers in more ways than one. In addition to readying girls for making smart economical and nutritional choices for their future families, most radio programs of the era also depicted a world where women (and by extension, girls) were relegated to the sidelines. This message would continue to reverberate in popular media long after the war was over. Long gone were the days of Little Orphan Annie helping Daddy Warbucks out of jams within the comics. On the radio during the war, Annie was

145 “The Silver Dagger Strikes,” Captain Midnight Mutual, April 9, 1943.
usurped by the very manly Captain Sparks. Despite the fact that *Adventure Time with Orphan Annie* mostly revolved around Sparks, at least the program was still named after a young girl; very few programs that originated during the war could claim the same. Instead, most children’s radio programs of the day (including Annie), featured girls in the role of sidekick. As William Tuttle wrote, “Whatever their mission, most of radio’s ‘superheroes’ and ‘super-sleuths’ showed one characteristic: They were male.”

In addition to their diminished airtime, often times when girls (or even adult women) were on the air, they were often told to stay behind and out of trouble, or the men around them questioned their authority. In one episode of *Jack—The All American Boy* reveals, Betty asks to accompany Jack, Billy and Uncle Jim’s investigation of the noises they hear on their boat, for example. As Uncle Jim patronizingly tells her, however, “You better stay below.” And, in the adventure program *Magic Island*, two men in one episode rebuke the wealthy survivor Mrs. Gregory. First, it was the ultra-manly man, Tex, whom she hired to help find her daughter. When they are in a jam, Mrs. Gregory asks Tex, “Can’t I help you?” Though she has already proven herself to be quite resilient (supposedly the lone survivor from a shipwreck), Tex only manages to muster, “No, run along.” Later in the episode, Mrs. Gregory asks the teenager Jerry if she can

---

146 Tuttle, “Homefront Children,” 145.

help him. He answers, “Keep quiet.” When she asks again, he replies testily, “I said keep quiet and let me use this radio!”  

One of the more blatant examples of the decline of the girl heroine is found in the Tom Mix Ralston’s Straight Shooters program. During the early years of the radio program, Jane seemed to have, not only a larger presence on the show, but also a more important one. For example, as Jim Harmon details, a series of episodes during the Great Depression saw Tom, much like many other Americans, down on his luck. In fact, Tom was so far down on his luck that the bank was foreclosing on his dear TM-Bar Ranch. On auction day, a stranger “made a blanket bid” and bought the ranch and all of its contents. As it turned out, the stranger worked for Tom’s young ward, Jane, who recently came into wealth upon her discovery of a lucrative gold mine. With her windfall of cash, Jane saved Tom from his own negligence and bought back his TM-Bar Ranch.  

By the war years, however, Jane seemed to fall in status and instead of saving Tom, she was often saved by him or another man. In the episode “The Mystery of the Vanishing Herd, pt. 1,” Jane and the simple-minded Finneas Tweedle are being held captive by Nazi saboteurs determined to take out the nation’s food-supply as well as firebomb a hanger with a top-secret new airplane which has the ability to win the war for the Allies. Initially, Jane seems in charge. “We’ve got to warn Tom,” she says, “and we’ve got to save those cattle too!” But then she quickly loses her cool, demanding that Tweedle “do something!” “Don’t just sit there,” she balks. As Jane grows more and


more agitated, Tweedle reveals his true self. He is not a British dimwit named Finneas Tweedle after all, but rather an American FBI agent named Joe Beggley who is investigating the cattle disappearance in the area. Naturally, “there is no time to explain all this” to Jane, a simple girl, so instead, he goes about concocting a plan for escape.

As it turns out, Jane is an integral part of the breakout: she must capitalize on her innate feminine weakness and convince soldiers that she is sick. When the Nazi guard comes in to check on her, a certainty as Jane is a small girl, Joe will knock him out and they will run for their lives. A timid girl, Jane vacillates on whether or not the plan is a good idea, thinking that perhaps she is not a good enough actress to convince the Nazi’s. Joe lays it all out for her, “Jane, the food supply of this nation is at stake; a powerful new secret fighting plane at the air base is in danger of being destroyed. You’ve got to fool that guard.” Realizing the immensity of their job and the situation they are in, Jane redoubles her efforts, “I will. You bet I will, if it’s the last thing I do!” she answers.

“Good girl,” Beggley barks. The plan goes off without a hitch, until they run to the horses. Beggley runs behind Jane to protect her, telling her, “If they start to shoot, they’ll hit me and not you.” Shortly thereafter, with his body shielding Jane’s, he is shot. With what seems like his last words, he convinces Jane to go ahead without him. She runs to the horses and escapes from danger.150

Ironically, although wartime radio usually featured girls and women in subordinate roles (especially when compared to examples from popular media of earlier eras), the simple truth is, young girl characters still usually trumped those of their male

---

counterparts. For example, Jane was not Tom Mix’s only ward. He was also caretaker to a young boy, Jimmy. Unfortunately for Jimmy, however, his storyline never really developed as Jane’s did, and he was rarely mentioned in the program. The same could also be said of Sky King’s niece and nephew, Penny and Clipper King. “While there was an attempt to give the youngsters equal time,” Jim Harmon contends, “Penny seemed to become more important in the story.” Thus, although their role was diminished, girls still seemed to be integral to entertainment after all.

Lisa Ossian argues that the girls of World War II occupied “liminal spaces” where their contributions to the war effort “remained marginalized.” Though ultimately this may have rung true, it is also accurate to say girls made the most out of it. There was a dynamic balance between young girls’ desires, proclivities, and abilities and those they assumed/took on because parents, society, or radio told them to do so. With the help of radio, girls managed to carve out a privileged place for themselves and become “a needed faction” to win the war. During the war years, girls gained a measure of autonomy from their parents, they forged diverse peer groups on a national scale, and experimented with gender roles and norms undergoing a metamorphosis in which they grew into wartime America’s supporters, soldiers, shoppers, and sidekicks.

On an October day in 1940, Princess Elizabeth took to the airwaves to fulfill part of her “girly” duty, i.e. to boost morale and to comfort others. Optimistically, she said into the radio microphone, “we know, everyone of us, that in the end, all will be well.”


152 Ibid., 162.
With girls doing their all to win the war, it certainly seemed as if their efforts would not be in vain. “And when peace comes,” the Princess continued, “remember, it will be for us the children of today to make the world of tomorrow a better place.” No doubt, around the world, young boys and their sisters, who perhaps listened with a little more pride to hear a young girl like themselves addressing them, nodded their heads in agreement.\footnote{MacDonald, “Princess Elizabeth,” 1.}
CONCLUSION

Citing contemporary examples such as Shirley Temple and Princess Elizabeth, in her 1936 letter to *Photoplay* fan magazine, movie devotee Mary Crary opined, “The world’s most interesting and famous children at present are all girls.”\(^1\) She thanked motion pictures for their role in bringing these young girls into focus. As already laid out in the introduction to this dissertation, Crary was a keen observer of her times; her assessment, that popular culture was filled with the images of what she called “small girls” (i.e. girls under the age of twelve), was accurate. In addition to her ability to plainly expose that trend, however, Crary was also able to read into the future. She finished her letter pleading with studio executives to “give us many opportunities to watch the development of these adorable infants,” because, she continued, “I know that all their millions of admirers will be anxious to know how they all ‘turn out.’” Indeed, Crary’s statement could not have been more prescient. By and large, the small girls who peopled the popular media of the time (the comics, the film and the radio waves), grew up, and by the end of World War II, were full-fledged teenagers. The media gaze shifted, basically following the aging process of these growing girls. In fact, the small girls of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s were all but usurped by images of the teen girl by the early 1950s. At that time, teenage girls stepped into the spotlight. Their emergence within

popular media, and their subsequent saturation of it, would change Americans’ understanding of young girls (now expanded to include the teenager).

Although my dissertation has always been concerned with one primary question, mainly, why was there an influx of young girl imagery between the years of 1925 and 1945, in order to get at that question, I had to historicize it; I needed to understand what images of the young girl were out there prior to the time period in question. I also needed to address the following questions: where did this image come from and how and why did it emerge when it did? Thus, in chapter one, “Sex and Stature are No Impediments to Talents so Overwhelming’: Young Actresses of the Stage and Early Screen,” I examine some of the earliest representations of the young girl found around the nation in both film and “legitimate” theaters. Though some could argue that neither the Bateman sisters (who worked around the middle of the nineteenth century), nor Lotta Crabtree (who was popular near the end of it) were part of a “popular culture” (as defined as “mass-produced” culture) I disagree. Though their representations were not mass distributed, both the Bateman’s and Crabtree managed to disseminate their caricatures far and wide, even going so far as to tour Canada and Britain. Moreover, as Lawrence Levine has demonstrated through his analysis of the popularity of William Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America, “The theater, in the first half of the nineteenth century played the role that movies played in the first half of the twentieth.”2 Thus, the representations of girls that the Bateman sisters and Lotta Crabtree circulated, fit in with the rest of my methodology.

---

Moreover, in my analysis of these images, I discovered that my initial assumption, that there was an increase in popular representations of young girls in the 1920s, was not entirely accurate. The popularity of the Bateman’s, Crabtree, and [Mary] Pickford after them shows that interest in small girls has been present in America’s popular media, first on the stage and then eventually on the screen, as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. What separated these representations of the young girl from those that, for example, Mary Crary noticed in 1936, were not their frequency of appearance, but rather their content and message. Thus, it was not necessarily that there was an influx of girl characters between 1924 and 1945, it was that their representations became more meaningful and central to the plot of the product(s) they were in. The small girl was lauded for being just that, a genuine young girl. On the contrary, the popularity of the Bateman sisters, of Lotta Crabtree, and of Mary Pickford was contingent upon their ability to pretend to be anyone else but who they really were. Thus, the Bateman girls dressed and acted the parts of adult men; and both Lotta Crabtree and Mary Pickford transformed their womanly selves into caricatures of young girls, one silly and even obscene (i.e. Crabtree) and the other hoydenish and angelic (i.e. Pickford).

At the same time that thirty-year-old Mary Pickford was parading around like an eleven-year-old girl, another small girl, Little Orphan Annie, came into the limelight. Like Pickford, some construed that Annie was really just an adult in the body of a child (and indeed, reportedly Mary Pickford was the image that creator Harold Gray had in mind when he first put his pen to the paper to create his waif). This, however, is not the entire truth. Pickford was popular in an entirely different medium, one that depended on
a so-called “accurate” visualization of a young girl. Pickford was only popular because her manners and her childlike body read “child” to the average audience member. Little Orphan Annie, however, populated the comic pages of the newspaper. As such, her image was never dependent upon realism and whether or not she looked like a “real” girl. Thus, unlike Pickford who grew older with time (and which her fans resented bitterly), Annie never did. She remained, both in body and in spirit, the same young girl of about ten-years of age that Harold Gray created back in 1924.

Annie’s true value, lay in the fact that she was the first of many small girl characters (presented throughout a variety of popular media) who provided Americans with solutions to some of their toughest challenges of the times. Thus, in chapter two, “Closing the Gaps: Little Orphan Annie in the 1920s and 1930s,” I examine Annie’s importance as the first small girl to make a real impact on the daily lives of Americans. Written by a childless adult man, Harold Gray created in Annie, the perfect little girl as he saw it: someone who could help lessen American anxiety about growing tensions with regard to urban versus rural living, modern versus traditional interpretations of children and orphans, and finally, and most astutely, the generational crisis which had reached a crescendo in the 1930s.

Unlike some of the other persons who appear in this dissertation, Annie never grew old. Her popularity, however, waned. By the end of World War II, Annie was no longer culturally relevant. She continued to espouse her conservative beliefs and Horatio Alger ideology, but as a young girl, her charm had worn off; despite the fact that she could not physically grow older, her rhetoric did. One disappointed “fan” wrote to the
Washington Evening Star and relayed the tale that for years he had waited “for that obnoxious little brat, Orphan Annie, to get her just desserts,” but that “time and again the sanctimonious smart-aleck has escaped!” Not only did he want “justice” and “retribution” he finished his diatribe with the phrase, “Little Orphan Annie delenda est!” Though most readers would not wish Annie a bad ending, as this one did, they were not as interested in following her adventures either within the funny pages, on the radio, or on film. Though she continued to appear in papers throughout the nation, Annie’s cultural significance, along with much of her readership, moved on.

While Annie helped Americans come to terms with these aforementioned crises, a different young girl of the 1930s was helping them battle yet another: the one between the sexes. Chapter three, “Daddy’s Girl and Mommy’s Rival: Shirley Temple and the Answer to the 1930s Gender Crisis,” illustrates the way in which Shirley Temple, in her films and in the publicity material circulated about her, promoted a solution to the crisis of masculinity that weighed down many American men and women of the time. Through her physical presence, childlike optimism, and innocent worldview, Temple was able to elevate men’s status and to deflate women’s. Despite this “anti-female” attack, Temple definitely helped promote the image of the small girl as one that was integral to family stability. Thus, ultimately, she championed the role of the small girl in society.

America’s fascination with Shirley did not end along with her pre-adolescent years, however.

---

3 Charles Malcomson to editor, Washington Evening Star, 9 April 1945, Box 1, Folder 4, Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gottleib Special Collection, Boston University (hereafter referred to as HG-HGARC).

4 Translation: Little Orphan Annie must be destroyed!”
Just two weeks after the world celebrated V-J day, America’s little girl, Shirley Jane Temple showed everyone that she had officially grown up. On September 19, 1945, the teenage Temple got married. Reportedly, over 12,000 fans waited patiently for Temple and her beau, Sgt. John Agar, Jr., to emerge from the church in Hollywood, California where they exchanged their vows. At one point, “military and civil police were called on to hold back the surging public.” Temple, it seemed, though now all “grown-up” at the tender age of seventeen, was still a star and her image was still in demand. Though she made a handful of films after her nuptials, including *Kiss and Tell* (1945) and *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* (1949), Temple started transitioning to radio. Temple was so pleased with radio work, she even commented that she “want[ed] to do as much radio work as [she] could.”

The radio and small girls, or rather, how small girls utilized radio and were used by it, are the subjects of chapter four, “Supporter, Soldier, Shopper, and Sidekick: American Girls on the Home Front.” This chapter examines the state of flux that the representations of young girls went through during the war years. Throughout the 1920s and 1930, the image of the small girl became so ubiquitous; that was not the case in the 1940s. Small girls, for example, appeared, in many children’s radio programs of the day, but they were no longer the major characters who drove the plot of these storylines. Thus, these girls on the radio during the 1940s signify the shift that started to occur in the portrayals of young girls. With attention on men and their manly, war duty, girls were,


perhaps, no longer able to command as much interest. Despite this, however, once again, small girls provided Americans with exactly what they needed: supporters, soldiers, shoppers and sidekicks.

As fathers returned home from war and mothers left their jobs, Americans looked forward to perpetuating the idea and practice of the “traditional” nuclear family once again. As Elaine Tyler May has noted, this outlook created an environment in America that led to a “pervasive endorsement of female subordination and domesticity.” Thus, the small girl once again tucked back into the fold of her family; her importance lay not in her skill or ability to be anything other than what she was, a young daughter and, as such, a vital member of the nuclear family. Oddly enough, as the small girl took a step back from her appearances in popular media, and into the protective realm of the family, her older sister, stepped out.

Though *Little Orphan Annie*, for instance, was bleeding fans by the end of the war, admirers of the comics turned their attention to another type of girl, the older one. Starting in the early 1940s, comics featuring teenage girls cropped up throughout the nation. First, there was the recycling of already famous heroines of Corliss Archer (*Meet Corliss Archer*) and Judy Foster (*A Date with Judy*). Both of these characters were already established hits in either radio or film, or both. By the 1940s, they had also transformed into their own comic books. Other teenage girl comics of the era included *Patsy Walker*, a teenage clutz, and *Millie the Model*, a model (in more ways than one) career girl. These teenage girl representations spoke to the emerging teen girl culture of

---

1940s; their very existence validated the lives, trials, and tribulations of real teenage
girls. Arguably the most famous and therefore influential teenage girls of the medium,
however, came in 1941-1942 when Archie Comics introduced Betty Cooper and
Veronica Lodge. With their different characteristics/backgrounds/viewpoints summed up
in their diametrically opposed hair colors (blonde for Betty and the deepest black for
Veronica), Betty and Veronica provided young girls with someone to look up to. Indeed,
Archie Comics were primarily bought and consumed by pre-teen girls, suggesting that
they looked to Betty and Veronica for “notes on how to perform their own impending
adolescence.”

The lives of teenage girls also became fodder for films. Their dominant
performances can be traced back to 1939 when MGM cast Judy Garland in their classic
film *Wizard of Oz*. Though Frank L. Baum’s Dorothy was supposed to be a “young
girl,” and in fact, an eleven-year-old Shirley Temple was originally courted for the part,
in the end, sixteen-year-old Judy Garland nabbed the role. According to scholar Lary
May, Garland’s Dorothy Gale showed teenage girls “that they are not inferior, and that
they [could] trust their resources to achieve common goals and success through collective
effort.” Garland was just one of many starlets who brought the teen girl to the big
screen in the 1940s. Others include Deanna Durbin, Elizabeth Taylor, Jane Withers, and

---

(Bloomington, IN, 2006), 13.

1988), 189.

10 Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 2000), 89.
even Shirley Temple, herself. By the 1950s, teenage girls had veritably taken over the screen. The likes of Debbie Reynolds, Sandra Dee, and Natalie Wood brought teen girls, their issues and concerns, to the forefront of American interest. Marketers took note; they saw that teenage girls were a “distinct market segment” who needed their own products, heroines, and plotlines.  

Radio too, witnessed a changing of the guard, though, because of its evolution in programming, in a different way. With the advent of the television, radio programming grew less and less popular, until it became obsolete. Listening to the radio, however, never went out of style. Instead of seeing (or rather, in this instance, hearing) the small girl replaced by the teenage one on children’s and family radio programs, the teenage girl entered a new radio market—music. Starting in the mid-1950s, teenage singers Connie Francis and Annette Funicello were heard over the airwaves singing about “My First Real Love,” (1956) and “how much I need him and how much I long for his love,” (1960’s “O Dio Mio”). Susan Douglas argues that through their songs about love, rebelliousness, and self-abnegation, teenage “girls could assume different personae, some of them strong and empowering and others masochistic and defeating.” In essence, these songs helped girls to try on different personalities to see which one suited them best. In her study of teenage girls, Ilana Nash noted that the many varied “representations of teenage girls…rapidly coalesced into a limited range of interpretive


12 Ibid., 90.
options.” She continued, “either the girl was a quasi angelic creature, praised for her bubbly charm, her obedience to authority, and her chastity, or else she was an exasperating agent of chaos who challenged the boundaries and hierarchies of a patriarchally organized society.” Unlike the useful interpretations of the small girl in the previous decades, cut from her source of power (i.e. her ability to heal society’s problems rather than cause them) the teenage girl of the middle of the twentieth-century was castigated. Despite that, however, one cannot ignore the fact that although the young girl of the postwar period fell back in line (and therefore was hidden behind) the family, the teenage girl managed to stand out. As Nash noted, “Between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, teenagers seemed to be the star of virtually every show—not just in the prolific exploitation genre, but also in mainstream dramatic films.”

---

13 Nash, American Sweethearts, 2.

14 Nash, American Sweethearts, 178.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources: Manuscript Collections

Harold Gray Collection, Howard Gotlib Special Collection, Boston University.

Margaret Herrick Library, Hollywood, CA.

Primary Sources: Periodicals and Magazines

Chicago Tribune
Daily Missouri Democrat
Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion
Life
Look Magazine
Los Angeles Times
Motion Picture Magazine
New York Daily News
New York Times
New York Times Magazine
Night and Day
Photoplay
Spirit of the Times
Times Magazine
Variety
Washington Evening Star

Primary Sources: Movies


Primary Sources: Comic Strips and Comic Strip Collections


Primary Sources: Radio Programs


Green Hornet. Select episodes, 1936; 1938-1952.


Little Orphan Annie. NBC’s Blue Network. Chicago, IL. Select episodes, 1930-1942.

Magic Island. Select episodes, 1936.


Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters. NBC. Select episodes, 1933-1950.

Primary Sources: Children’s Books


Primary Sources: Books and Articles


Primary Sources: Miscellaneous

American Film Institute. “AFI Catalog of Feature Films.”


“Cure Juvenile Delinquency in the Slums by Planned Housing.” Works Projects
Administration Poster Collection, Library of Congress. New York: Federal Art
Project, 1936. [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html]
accessed on 22 July 2005.

Armstrong-Write-A-Fighter-WAFC-Manual-For-Squadron-NO-151638-1942
(accessed 20 May 2013).


Northwestern University Library World War II Poster Collection.

Smithsonian National Museum. “Victory Mail.”
http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/letter/index.html (accessed 20 May
2013).

Terry and the Pirates. “Terry and the Pirates Official ‘Victory Airplane Spotter’ with
May 2013).

Secondary Sources

Alexander, Ruth M. “‘The Only Thing I Wanted was Freedom’: Wayward Girls in New
York, 1900-1930. In Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-
1950 edited by Elliott West and Paula Petrik. Lawrence, KS: University of

Allen, Frederick Lewis. Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America, September 3, 1929-

Anderson, Karen. Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of


Kett, Joseph. *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present.* New


Smith, Ronald. “Remembering Buster Brown’s Origin and Comic Book Froggy.”  


VITA

Stella Ress was born in Chicago and raised in New York City and Winamac, Indiana. Prior to earning her doctorate at Loyola University Chicago, she graduated from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana with a bachelors degree and received her masters degree at Loyola University Chicago.

Ress was active within the history department, and served in the History Graduate Student Association in a variety of posts including treasurer and president. While president of the organization, Ress expanded the History Graduate Student Conference to include a keynote speaker. She was also active in the community, working as a public historian in a variety of contexts in and around the city of Chicago.