

THE RISING GENERATION: MALE ADOLESCENCE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

ALICE CROSSLEY

The fluid position of adolescence in mid-Victorian society creates fascinating and informative tensions within the fiction and periodical literature of the period, in which there is often a struggle to reconcile the transitional aspects of male adolescence with more crystallised ideals of Victorian manhood. The focus of Victorian writers on the formative aspects of male adolescence, as a transient stage of development but also as a separate masculine type or identity, has as yet received limited critical attention as a prominent aspect of Victorian literature; this in turn has led to a distortion of perspectives on self-identity and self-presentation, sexual consciousness, and the discussion of manliness in such work. This article explores some different views of the history of adolescence in the Victorian era, in order to examine how adolescence is popularly understood, debated, evaluated and formulated in some of the literature of the period.

Kay Heath in *Aging by the Book* draws attention to the limited critical study of intermediary stages of individual experience as determined by age, stating that:

The few age-related studies of the Victorian era are almost completely confined to explorations of childhood and old age.... To exclude the concept of age is not only to ignore, but also to deny, its pervasive influence on the way culture constructs our identity as humans and by such denial to remain unconscious of and therefore vulnerable to age's hegemonic intensity.
(Heath 4)

While Heath's work is restricted to exploring the middle years of adult life, and this article focuses on the earlier experiences of youth, the acknowledgement of the 'pervasive influence' of age and the processes of aging offers a useful starting point, as it helps to position adolescence in relation to the discrete stages of childhood and adulthood that, in part, define the beginning and end of adolescence in terms of age.¹ The consciousness of aging, and the cultural significance and 'hegemonic intensity' that such consciousness upholds, help to define adolescence as

a crucial stage of maturation, recognisable today as being invested with a sense of personal experience overlaid with social expectation. It is this ‘essentially “psychological”’ understanding of adolescence that signifies its consolidation as a modern process or occurrence (Davis 29).

For some historians and sociologists, however, adolescence is not just a modern construct but an extremely recent one, with the idea becoming firmly institutionalised and a part of the cultural consciousness of Western society only in the twentieth century or during the *fin de siècle* at the earliest.² Philippe Ariès, for example, contends that ‘awareness of youth became a general phenomenon’ only after the end of the First World War, placing the concretisation of adolescence firmly in the 1900s (28). Kent Baxter has more recently suggested that ‘the term had little currency before 1900 and made a sudden and pronounced appearance in a wide variety of discourses at the [twentieth] century’s beginning’ (3). The term itself, as Baxter asserts, was used only sporadically until the *fin de siècle*, although many critics are adamant that the concept was nonetheless recognised, and indeed formalised, earlier in the nineteenth century. For sociologist John Davis, changes in education and legislation of the early Victorian period mark ‘the universal institutionalization of this age grade as a major subdivision of the human life–cycle’, although its origins are clearly traced back to the institutions of the *charivari* and the persistence of early modern traditions of misrule (28). Social historian John Gillis cites a drop in child mortality rates, and the educational changes that extended the period of dependence, as evidence of the ‘discovery’ of adolescence by the nineteenth–century middle classes (98, 105), and literary critics Charles Ferrall and Anna Jackson draw attention to the popularity of public schools, the Boy Scout movement, and the rise in juvenile literature during the Victorian era as likely causes for the formalisation of adolescence (1–6).³

What arises from these various contentions about dating the history of adolescence in the nineteenth century, and from the different means of justifying it as an increasingly familiar institution in the culture of the period, is significant for what it suggests about how adolescence itself is defined, understood, and discussed. For John Gillis and John Springhall, the emergence of adolescence in the mid–nineteenth century is connected to developing ideas about delinquency (13–37), and Jenny Holt expands upon private education as prompting important debate:

As the phenomenon of adolescence attracted greater discussion, middle– and upper–class boys at public school became the main focus of attention for writers,

sociologists and policy-makers eager to investigate and influence this period of life. (Holt 2)

By isolating particular aspects of the evolving focus on youth in the nineteenth century, whether this interest is related to ‘boys at public school’ or their delinquent tendencies, an understanding of the ways in which adolescence was conceptualised and defined can develop. Certain shared values or characteristics occur frequently in both the various discourses that combine to formulate the idea of adolescence in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and criticism that analyses those different forms of writing from a twentieth- or twenty-first-century perspective. These may be loosely separated (despite some inevitable overlapping) into the relationship between biological determination and cultural construction, the connections between sexual, social and psychological responses, and the relative values placed on adolescence as either a purely transitory period or as a distinct and significant experience in its own right. In many of the examples touched on here, adolescence is frequently described in terms of most, if not all, of these often conflicting characteristics and forms of experience, suggesting that this stage of life could be concurrently invested with different personal and cultural significance at any one time. As Holt has surmised, ‘changing adult priorities conditioned popular views on youth’, and so the architecture of adolescence may be seen to assume numerous shapes and forms simultaneously in the literature of this period (2).

Adolescence was understood by some between 1840 and 1880 as a biologically-determined fact of life. Such a view appears in the first lines of a work by William Carpenter, published in 1857:

The period of *youth* is distinguished by that advance in the evolution of the generative apparatus in both sexes, and by that acquirement of its power of functional activity, which constitutes the state of PUBERTY. At this epoch a considerable change takes place in the bodily constitution. (qtd. in Acton 6)

This establishes puberty as a biological fact, relative to age, and suggests that ‘*youth*’ corresponds with this view. For others, however, its cultural origins were acknowledged by comparison with earlier, less precise experiences of youth, suggesting that the concept of adolescence was not understood simply in terms of physical development. Looking back on the period, more sophisticated attempts to understand the ways that adolescence was constructed placed a greater emphasis on its evolution

as a social and cultural response rather than just a biological imperative, leading to recent observations that adolescence ‘was the response to an observable *fact* — the fact of a youth culture’ (Demos and Demos 638), that it was a ‘social role’ (Holt 8), or ‘a socio-cultural construction’ (Springhall 8), rather than a period of purely physical change heralded by puberty and experienced in the same way by each generation.

Certain typical characteristics associated with youth play a major role in the formation of adult attitudes towards this social group, and become loci of anxiety. Its innate instability isolates this stage of life as inherently problematic to social order, as well as being disruptive to personal relationships. Fear about the challenges posed by youth towards parents or other established forms of authority led writers to express concern over potentially delinquent or criminal behaviour in the rising generation:

When one unfurls the standard of Defiance to parents and guardians, he may be sure of raising a lawless troop of adolescent ruffians, born rebels, to any amount. The beardless crew know they have not a chance of pay: but what of that when the rosy prospect of thwarting their elders is in view? (Meredith 249)

This quotation, taken from *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* by George Meredith, humorously demonstrates this negative view of adolescents as ‘born rebels’ aflame at the prospect of thwarting their elders, in ‘Defiance’ of the existing social order that expects subordination from those who have not yet achieved an adult identity and earned the respect and authority commensurate to that role. Similar concerns are echoed in an 1863 article of *Fraser’s Magazine* entitled ‘Our Modern Youth’, in which ‘this arrogant, self-sufficient boyhood’, in whom ‘want of reverence is one of the common faults’, ‘rejects experience, relying instead on misguided self-importance’ (129, 116). The article goes on to invite readers to consider the gravity of such behaviour, and to reflect how such tendencies affect the present and the future of British society:

What generous action can we hope from the riper years of one who, in the age of illusions, is given up to matter-of-fact worldliness; who, in the age of trust, is proud of being suspicious; who, in the age of inexperience, is full of self-assurance...? What course of social or political improvement can we expect from one whose small self is his standard of human

achievement — to whom the experience of age inspires
no respect? ('Our Modern Youth' 129)

This article, coupled with the extract from Meredith's novel, accentuates the increasing tendency to view adolescence as strange and unfamiliar, and unlike the youth of previous generations. Such concerns evolved into later fears about degeneration, although the significance of youth in this period is still acknowledged as crucial, and as representative of the 'social and political improvement' of the future.

Such fears are countered by the theory of recapitulation. This is the idea that individual development operates in the same way as evolution, so that each stage is re-experienced in sequence from savagery to civilisation. Recapitulation as an idea found its most vociferous supporter in G. Stanley Hall's famous 1904 treatise *Adolescence*. While Hall immortalised this idea in relation to adolescence, however, the idea already held currency as a popular view.⁴ John Morss has suggested that, for Hall, mankind was continually evolving towards a higher state so that 'in passing into adolescence, the young person was reliving one of the most abrupt transitions of his evolutionary history', 'with adulthood representing a falling away, a decline into a state of rigidity' (Morss 35, 34). Two aspects of Hall's argument were already established as points of interest or anxiety: firstly, the 'deep national importance of the mental condition of the rising generation', and secondly concerns about the 'storm and stress' exhibited by youth ('Our Modern Youth' 115).

The emotional and psychological conflict displayed by adolescents in this period can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conduct novel *Émile*, published in 1762. The transition from obedient childhood to problematic teen years, before the self-mastery of adulthood may be achieved, further lends itself to a popular form of fiction in the nineteenth century: the Bildungsroman. In *Émile*, Rousseau suggests:

As the roaring of the waves precedes the tempest, so the murmur of rising passions announces this tumultuous change; a suppressed excitement warns us of the approaching danger. A change of temper, frequent outbreaks of anger, a perpetual stirring of the mind, make the child almost ungovernable. He becomes deaf to the voice he used to obey; he is a lion in a fever; he distrusts his keeper and refuses to be controlled. (Rousseau 172)

This idea is still visible in nineteenth-century fiction, and is deeply embedded in textual productions of this period that deal with adolescence. Internal conflict, ‘rising passions’ and ‘outbreaks of anger’ that combine to make youth ‘ungovernable’ are evident symptoms of this stage of individual development in, for example, Thackeray’s Bildungsroman *Pendennis* (1850), in which the young hero, thwarted in love, is seen to be ‘quivering with passion and indignation’, ‘looking death and defiance’, ‘so agitated he could scarcely speak’, and who is termed ‘the young reprobate, who was looked upon as a monster of crime’ (173–74). These depictions of the internal friction that forms a part of adolescent experience in this period (and which is still evident today) suggest that adolescence may be shown to hold great capacity and imaginative power as a period of turbulence and rebellion. Patricia Meyer Spacks has commented that adult visions of adolescence in Victorian novels recount its sexual and emotional energy as something that has been lost:

The novelists of the nineteenth century often reveal a conviction that growing up is regrettable as well as necessary, involving a discipline of the heart...a discipline that restrains, restricts, subordinates, punishes, controls the life of feeling; that implies loss.... The novelist recalls and fantasizes about what it feels like to be adolescent; the moralist comments on the social significance of adolescent action and inaction. (Spacks 206)

According to Spacks, this attitude of ‘regret’ towards, and fantasy about adolescence, provides an imaginative correlative to the ‘social significance’ of youth for moral commentators of the period.

However, a less amiable view of adolescence also emerges in Victorian literature as a stage of life in which the individual becomes a cipher, disenfranchised and generally ineffectual. This view of adolescence defines the experience of this stage as simply a transitory period of preparation for adult life and full social participation. An article of 1851 exemplifies this perspective:

Youth is properly, and by natural ordainment, a season of preparation — a sort of vestibule to the nobler temple of completed manhood. Taking this to be the case, it is manifestly desirable that the young should undergo a training or cultivation commensurate with the

requirements of that maturer [*sic*] stage of life towards which they are advancing, and wherein they will be called upon to display their powers in active connection with the affairs and duties of society. ('Youthful Culture' 234)

Rather than being valued as a crucial stage of individual development in its own right, with distinct experiences, adolescence here is understood in terms of 'preparation', an empty 'vestibule' ripe for 'training or cultivation' in the 'duties of society'.

Victorian male adolescence is constructed by a range of social discourses as a fluid period of transition, in which appropriate masculine values may be learned, although its instability features also as a cause for cultural concern. In recent decades, much has been done to establish masculinity as a multiform construct that shifts and changes in response to cultural and historical expectations of maleness. Masculinity studies within literary criticism of the Victorian period seek to emphasise, Herbert Sussman suggests, 'the plurality of male gender formations [as] crucial not only to counter the still pervasive essentialist view of maleness, but also to deconstruct the monolithic view of masculinity' (8). Given the tendency outlined above to conceive of adolescence as a state of potentiality, as well as an identity in its own right, this 'plurality of male gender formations' may be seen as an important part of understanding male adolescence in the mid-Victorian period. Male adolescence reflects this lack of single identification, or multiplicity of masculine types. Analysis of male adolescence, therefore, parallels debates about 'male gender formations', in that both are revealed to be unstable, fluid, and responsive to shifting argument about what constitutes appropriate private and social behaviour. Michael Roper and John Tosh, in their book *Manful Assertions*, have observed that:

The passage from boyhood to manhood has traditionally been bound up with expectations of and fantasies about power, not only in the home but in the workplace, politics and sport. Despite the myths of omnipotent manhood which surround us, masculinity is never fully possessed, but must perpetually be achieved, asserted, and renegotiated. (Roper and Tosh 18)

Male adolescence reflects this process of constant realisation and re-enactment, as its focus as a transient stage of life is often outlined as one

of continuous development and progress towards the same goal. Samuel Smiles, writing in 1887, declares that:

The seeds of virtue sown in youth grow into good words and deeds, and eventually ripen into habits. Where the mind and heart have not been duly cultivated in youth, one may look forward to the approach of manhood with dismay, if not despair. (Smiles 81)

This emphasises the reciprocal dependence of ‘youth’ towards ‘manhood’, and identifies the formation of ‘habit’ and ‘cultivat[ion]’ as processes central to both manliness and adolescent development. The experiences of adolescence that combine to produce this cultivation facilitate the ‘approach of manhood’ and the assumption of a full masculine role in society. Male adolescence may also, when viewed in a permanent light as possessing its own valuable experience, be considered as a masculine role in itself, to be grouped with similar varieties of masculine identity in this period, such as the typological constructs of the male writer as professional, the father, or the gentleman. Each of these figures, including the male adolescent, must attempt to resolve their own and others’ ‘expectations and fantasies about power’ in the public and domestic spheres and also in male–associative arenas. Adolescence, then, holds significance as the place where masculine traits and values may be learned, but it also forms its own masculine type.

If adolescence, in the Victorian era, may be seen as a part of wider cultural concerns, the gendered experience of adolescence may be similarly bound up with other anxieties or assumptions about masculinity. While adolescence is by no means an exclusively male experience, the formation of the nineteenth–century concept of adolescence is more readily understood in relation to ideas about manliness and other types of male experience. Jenny Holt has indicated that ‘it was predominantly male, middle–class, public–school educated writers, sociologists and educationalists who developed ideas of “normal” adolescence and who fashioned it in their own (retrospective) image’ (3). This idea accords with Spacks’s contention that adolescence ‘becomes a version of the self’, that it ‘was something adults had lost’, and that their implied status as adults who had undergone a similar experience domesticated the ‘strangeness’ of the adolescent (195, 6). If general theories about adolescence in this period are more closely related to specifically male experience, or are fabricated from a typically male perspective, it would nonetheless be misleading to suggest in any way that male adolescence in this period could be seen as a synecdoche for

adolescence in general, as pointed out by Crista DeLuzio in her recent book *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought*. DeLuzio admits, however, that adolescence was ‘initially conceptualized as a masculine construct’, and that in the nineteenth century it was produced as a ‘category that privileged maleness, whiteness, and middle–class status as its normative characteristics’ (5). Christine Griffin has also noted that ‘the “discovery” of adolescence coincided with the emerging cult of heterosexual masculinity; with the determined avoidance (especially by elite males) of all things “feminine”’ (12). By choosing to define their young male protagonists in relation to ‘the emerging cult of heterosexual masculinity’ and against ‘all things “feminine”’, much Victorian fiction narrates contemporary perspectives of specifically masculine identity.⁵

Male adolescence, as both a means to an end and as a crucial moment in life, is frequently problematic. Spacks has identified this as an inevitable result of the fact that, in the period under discussion, ‘the individual has developed full sexual capacity but has not yet assumed a full role in adult society’ (7). From Spacks’s perspective adolescence is fundamentally sexual, whether evidence of that sexuality is provided by the adolescent subject, or if sexual knowledge and desire are imposed on youth by the fantasy of adults. This characteristic can be seen in, for example, Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, or Meredith’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, in which the erotic urges of the male protagonists are considered on the one hand to be an expression of natural desire, and on the other provoke an anxious reaction from parents and guardians as an example of either precocity or as a challenge to the exclusive power and knowledge of those authority figures. The vigorous sexual identity of the male adolescents in these novels becomes alluring, yet also dangerous and subversive. The training of youth in appropriate masculine practices echoes this contradiction so that, according to James Eli Adams, the sublimation of sexual energy — as well as the rigorous regulation and control of other aspects of behaviour — enables ‘an ongoing regimen of aggressive self–mastery’, recognisable in typical Victorian figures of exemplary masculinity, such as the dandy, soldier, priest or gentleman (8–9). According to Adams:

Each of these models is typically understood as the incarnation of an ascetic regimen, an elaborately articulated program of self–discipline. As such, they lay claim to self–discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute and in their different ways embody masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism (Adams 2)

The view of this process of ‘self–discipline’ as a ‘distinctly masculine’ procedure establishes expectations about the means to assume a manly, adult identity once adolescence has been successfully negotiated. It provides a clear goal or outcome, achieved by means of a continued ‘ascetic regimen’. The ability of the male adolescent to conform to this ‘elaborately articulated program of self–discipline’ is, in the popular imagination of the period, called into question by the supposedly inherent instability of adolescence. This ‘ascetic regimen’ conflicts with the pursuit of independence, experimentation, and the emotional turmoil supposed to belong to the adolescent, all of which implicitly resist not only self–control, but social control and external authority. John Tosh, in *Manliness and Masculinities*, has emphasised this:

In most societies the energy of young men who are physically mature but not yet in a position to assume the full duties or privileges of an adult is combustible, to say the least.... Since the heyday of the disorderly apprentice, young men have been a by–word for brawling, drunkenness, sexual experiment and misogyny. (Tosh 42–43)

The instability of character and identity for male adolescence here is the contradiction inherent in the ambiguous social position of youth. Being ‘physically mature’ but still refused full masculine authority as a social participant, the male adolescent occupies the uncomfortable position of moving away from the enclosed domestic sphere, without having been accorded compensatory privileges in the ‘masculine’ public domain.

While the pursuit of manliness, and masculine recognition, form a significant part of Victorian fiction, such narratives are also preoccupied with the corresponding struggles against charges of effeminacy, the efforts to achieve autonomy, and the pursuit of both social recognition and independence from the previous ties of childhood. Many authors’ treatment of male adolescence in their work, as both a communal identity and an individual experience, tends to be sympathetic towards such efforts towards male adult status. Pendennis, for example, in the eponymous novel by Thackeray, is described indulgently, and is seen to be ‘charmed and exhilarated’ upon arriving in London, ‘whither he goes once for all [*sic*] to face the world and make his fortune’, and which prompts the young protagonist to reflect ‘I have been a boy and a dawdler as yet. Oh, I long, I long to show that I can be a man’ (Thackeray 352, 349, 350). Similar sentiments upon the charming enthusiasms of male youth for the apparent adventures that their

adolescence will bring during their progress to manhood may be found in Meredith, who writes in *Rhoda Fleming* (1865):

Adolescents, who have the taste for running into excesses, enjoy the breath of change as another form of excitement: change is a sort of debauch to them. They will delight infinitely in a simple country round of existence, in propriety and church-going, in the sensation of feeling innocent. There is little that does not enrapture them, if you tie them down to nothing, and let them try all. (Meredith 37)

These rather sentimentalised views of the male adolescent, happy to ‘delight in propriety and...in the sensation of feeling innocent’ and ‘long[ing] to show that [he] can be a man’, provide examples of an idealised, almost sanitised representation of the experiences of youth narrated in these novels. The harmless longings of Pen to ‘show’ that he ‘can be a man’, highlight the instability of both adolescent identity and masculinity, as this suggests that being ‘a man’ is something that can be ‘show[n]’ or performed, or something that ‘can be’, but that is not a stable or intrinsic identity. Meredith’s expression of ‘innocent’ adolescence is juxtaposed with ‘excess’, ‘excitement’ and ‘debauch’, indicating an anxious awareness of the less ‘innocent’ aspects of male adolescence.

Notions of agency identified as adult and masculine attributes, and the move away from passivity and dependence, are key features of male adolescence in mid-Victorian literature. In Anthony Trollope’s 1864 novel *The Small House at Allington*, he famously delineates what he describes as a typical adolescent, characteristic of the period:

There is a class of young men who never get petted, though they may not be the less esteemed, or perhaps loved. They do not come forth to the world as Apollos, nor shine at all, keeping what light they may have for inward purposes. Such young men are often awkward, ungainly, and not yet formed in their gait; they straggle with their limbs, and are shy; words do not come to them with ease, when words are required, among any but their accustomed associates. Social meetings are periods of penance to them, and any appearance in public will unnerve them. They go much about alone, and blush when women speak to them. In truth, they are

not as yet men, whatever the number may be of their years; and, as they are no longer boys, the world has found for them the ungraceful name of hobbledehoy. (Trollop 552)

These characteristics, such as shyness, awkwardness and embarrassment, determine the youth or ‘hobbledehoy’ as lacking in confidence, authority, and the will to independent action. In contrast, many adolescent protagonists may be seen to strive consciously to achieve or even to emulate manliness. This conscious pursuit of affirmative masculine identity suggests active will and intent as a significant part of male adolescent experience for these authors, as this cohort or social group in their texts must negotiate between what Martin Danahay has termed ‘repressive and enabling forms of masculinity’ (6).

The wealth of male role models that populate mid-Victorian fiction — figures such as the husband, father, dandy, gentleman, or lover — nonetheless frequently become fragmented, and interrupt the supposedly linear development of masculine affirmation and adolescent progress towards stability. This facilitates the move towards understanding male adolescence as its own category or masculine role in the Victorian age, as adolescent identity is similarly incomplete and contradictory. Male adolescence therefore exposes the practices and performances of masculinity itself by highlighting the vulnerability of established masculine roles in nineteenth-century fiction and in contemporary society. Through constant discussion and debate in various genres of popular literature at mid-century, I suggest that youth forms its own masculine model or type in the period, and occupies its own place in the fantasies of manly achievement. Franco Moretti has highlighted the significance of youth to the nineteenth-century cultural imagination:

Youth is ‘chosen’ as the new epoch’s ‘specific material sign’, and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity’s dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past. (Moretti 5)

The neglect of this aspect of masculine experience may therefore lead to a distortion of perspectives on self-identity and self-presentation, sexual consciousness, and the discussion of manliness in Victorian literature.

NOTES

¹ ‘Youth’ will generally be used here to refer to age and immaturity as a biological fact, as well as acknowledging the long history of the term’s usage as a period distinct from adulthood. ‘Adolescence’ denotes a more precise and complex definition, encompassing psychological, emotional and social elements in its construction, and considered variously as a reaction to the physiological changes of puberty, a process of individual development signified by ‘storm and stress’, a search for stable identity, and sexual maturation without full social participation.

² For many writers, the work of G. Stanley Hall on adolescence, and primarily his lengthy two-volume work *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, are central to its institutionalisation or even its ‘discovery’.

³ There are, of course, various other developments and changes listed by critics and historians, which are used as reasons for the emergence of a concrete understanding of adolescence in this period, in addition to those outlined here. A fuller account of this history, with differing emphases on period and nation, may be found in, for example, DeLuzio, Kett, Neubauer, and Savage.

⁴ For a fuller account, see Morss 151–71.

⁵ Some critics have observed that male adolescence, as an example of incomplete masculinity or manliness that has not yet been achieved, is often defined in close relation to femininity. Youth can be distinguished by gender mis-identification, so that an initial feminine stage must be passed through before masculine identity can be affirmed. See for example Nelson and Robson.

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