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Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Depiction of Children in 19th-century American Art

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Závěrečná bakalářská práce z oblasti amerických kulturních studií se bude věnovat americkému výtvarnému umění druhé poloviny 19. století. V úvodu práce studentka s využitím relevantních zdrojů charakterizuje dobové pojetí dětství, stručně nastíní převládající výtvarné směry a do tohoto kontextu zasadí zvolené malíře a malířky (např. Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, Thomas Eakins, Grace Carpenter Hudson, Mary Cassatt). Jádrem práce pak bude analýza jejich vybraných děl, v nichž se studentka zaměří na kulturní stereotypy či naopak inovace v zobrazení dětí. Bude odkazovat na konkrétní díla a svá tvrzení bude opírat o kritické zdroje. Závěrem analýzy přehledně shrne a vysloví obecnější závěr o způsobech a proměnách výtvarného obrazu dětství v americkém umění daného období.

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ANNOTATION

This thesis explores the childhood in the 19th-century American art and how various artistic movements and social issues shaped both the experience, as well as visual depiction. The thesis examines the impact of Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism on the children's artistic depiction. It also examines the social issues of child labour, its consequent reform, and the living and working conditions of children, with a particular focus on orphaned children. In addition, the thesis addresses slavery and children's position within the system of enslavement, as well as abolitionism and its representation in arts. The 19th-century also witnessed the education reform, which profoundly shaped the experience of contemporary childhood. Moreover, it examines the emergence photography in depiction of children. Drawing on these historical, social and artistic movements, this thesis presents the analysis of selected artwork that depicts children.

KEYWORDS

19th-century American art, abolitionism, childhood, child labour, slavery, photography

NÁZEV

Depiction of Children in the 19th-century American Art

ANOTACE

Tato práce zkoumá dětství v Americkém umění 19. století a to, jak různé umělecké směry a sociální problémy utvářely jak samotné dětství, tak jeho zobrazení. Práce zkoumá vliv Romantismu, Realismu a Impresionismu na výtvarné ztvárnění dětí. Zabývá se také sociální problematikou dětské práce, její následnou reformou a životními a pracovními podmínkami dětí, s dodatečným zaměřením na osiřelé děti. Dále se práce zabývá otroctvím a postavením dětí v jeho systému, následně abolicionismem a jeho reprezentací v umění. 19. století bylo také svědkem reformy školství, která velmi ovlivnila tehdejší dětství. Mimoto práce zkoumá vznik fotografování a jeho roli v zobrazování dětství. Na základě těchto historických, sociálních a uměleckých hnutí tato práce předkládá analýzu uměleckých děl, zobrazujících děti.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Americké umění 19. století, abolicionismus, dětství, dětská práce, fotografie, otroctví

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INTRODUCTION

What did it mean to be a child in 19th-century America? And does reality correspond with its artistic depictions? From today's point of view, it may seemingly appear that childhood two centuries ago was a time of pure innocence and play. These depictions offer a valuable insight to the 19th-century childhood, revealing both idealised and realistic portrayals of childhood.

Childhood and parenting style underwent significant changes throughout history. From colonial times, when children were raised with a strict discipline, through the 18th century, which saw a gradual shift towards upbringing with the loving attitude of parents, to the 19th century – the focus of this thesis. This period witnessed rapid industrialization, contrasting artistic movements, and significant social changes. All these events influenced the portrayal of children.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides the historical context of childhood, and explores the artistic movements and cultural events that influenced its depiction. The following chapter focuses on photography and its role in the depiction of children. Third chapter examines selected artwork and puts information from the second chapter into practice. The final part of this thesis summarizes the findings and explains how these artistic depictions contribute to our understanding of childhood in the 19th century America.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CHILDHOOD AND HOW IT INFLUENCED ITS DEPICTION

In the early colonial times, children were seen as “adults in training, deficient creatures”¹. The inability to walk or talk was considered an animalistic feature; therefore, this period in a person's life was to be overcome as quickly as possible. The Puritans did not think that the way children were treated would affect them in any way in their adulthood; hence, they thought it perfectly acceptable to treat their children almost the same way as themselves. The way an upbringing functioned in Puritan America was by various means of inducing fear. It was believed that

¹ Šárka Bubíková, “Concept and Experiences of Childhood,” in *Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature*, (Červený Kostelec: Nakladatelství Pavel Mervart & Univerzita Pardubice, 2008), 13.

childhood was, in its nature, sinful, so, as a result, the children had to be subjected to harsh raising to prevent them from going to hell. However, according to Bubíková, the Puritans were not as loveless and humourless as generally believed. Although any joy was considered a sin, they recognized the specialty of childhood and tried to take care of it in several different ways, a few of them being a creation of laws protecting children from physical abuse, a law assuring that parents would teach their children (mainly about God, religion and the way they are supposed to act). Puritans also invested a lot in schools and books for children². Great emphasis was placed on education, as literacy was essential for understanding the Bible. However, such education was not meant to develop the children's skills and improve themselves, but rather internalizing Puritan values. A play was considered a sign of a corrupted nature. The children were hurried into adult responsibilities. The painters did not understand that the children had different body proportions from the adults; therefore, they depicted them in the same manner, only smaller. In the paintings, they have a stiff, erect posture, while dour in face. Such an artistic approach mirrored Puritan perception of children, considering childhood a preparatory stage for adulthood rather than a separate part of life.

With the advent of the 18th century, the experience of childhood started to change, and it was perceived by the adults differently as well. The children were gradually allowed to develop at their own pace. A new concept of childhood was born; it was no longer seen as sinful and that something had to be done to correct its nature, but children were now seen as “pure, intuitive, spontaneous”³. They could behave childishly. Contrary to the 17th century, the period of youth was now to be prolonged and enjoyed. Given this changed perception of childhood, parents tended to take care of their descendants longer, as they wanted to defend them against the “hardship realities of the real world”⁴. This shift was heavily influenced by the motion of the Enlightenment, which emphasized free will and human progress. The philosopher John Locke came up with a progressive idea of *tabula rasa*, meaning that children are born with a clean sheet, they are innately good and pure. This idea played a huge role in the shift of adults' perception of children, as it completely refutes the Puritan way of upbringing. He says that parents should guide their children with affection and love and help them naturally develop their talents. If they are correctly supervised,

² Bubíková, “Concepts of Childhood“, 13.

³ Bubíková, “Concepts of Childhood,” 14.

⁴ Bubíková, “Concepts of Childhood,” 21.

they cannot become corrupted by the society. Consequently, children were not only perceived but also started to actually look like children, not miniature adults. They had less responsibilities and were encouraged to play and act like children. However, games still did not aim as much for their entertainment as they did for educational and moral lessons. Another big difference is that the welfare and wellbeing is not in the hands of God anymore, but in the hands of their mother, who now is like a guardian to her child. Adults now recognised that children need loving and affectionate guidance instead of a harsh discipline.

This perception of children also broadened into their depiction. Portraits of children changed from still, formal poses, trying to imitate adults, to sentimental depictions. Children's innocence was emphasized, often depicting them in their playful moments, not sitting and posing.

Often times there was highlighted the bond between the parents and children, as it is in the portrait of *The Copley Family*, done by John Singleton Copley in 1776/7. In the painting of his own family, where he depicted himself, his wife, father-in-law and their four children, is captured a family full of love and harmony. On the sofa is sitting Copley's wife Suzanna, who is lovingly looking at their son John Singleton Jr. On their right, there is Mary, hugging her mother's arm while attempting to catch her attention. In front of the sofa is posing, as the only child, their oldest daughter, Elizabeth. On the left side of the painting is depicted Suzanne's father Richard Clarke, with his granddaughter Susanna climbing on his lap. Parents, as this painting underscores, attribute considerable gravitas to the expression of their love through physical contact. Behind Susanna and her grandfather is standing the author himself, looking straight at the viewer, as is typical in self-portraits. As Dr. Bryan Zygmunt stated in his analysis of the portrait, the painting served as a visual testament of his love and devotion to his family. He also notes that with this depiction, Copley proved his ability to depict not only the looks of people, but also to show a bit of who they are, all through the canvas⁵. This work, among others of the era, evinces the artists' endeavour to portray the maternal role as one of nurturing, alongside a depiction of childhood marked by its inherent spontaneity and levity. In addition, they sometimes put symbolic things in their paintings. For instance, by picturing children with books, they showed their moral upbringing and education, or by putting a flower in their hand, they tried to capture the fleeting nature of the youth.

⁵ "John Singleton Copley, *The Copley Family*," Smart History, last modified August 9, 2015, <https://smarthistory.org/copley-the-copley-family/>

The structure and dynamics of the household continued to change throughout the 19th century. Paternal employment migrated to external venues, thereby placing the responsibility for domestic governance upon mothers. This evolving separation between professional and familial domains further solidified the prevailing gender roles. These gender roles played a significant role in shaping the way both genders were portrayed, as there was a vast disparity in upbringing, education, and the overall perception of both genders. As described by Lesme, daughters were brought up to be chaste, loving and nurturing, preparing themselves for marriage and the experience of motherhood. Meanwhile, boys were expected to be ambitious, competitive, assertive and to exhibit gentlemanly self-control within the family⁶. As Bubíková quotes Mintz, “Femininity meant self-sacrifice and service, meanwhile masculinity meant aggressiveness and daring”⁷. This diverse attitude toward both sexes resulted in far more paintings of boys than girls; also, the setting differed. Whereas boys were pictured outside playing and enjoying childhood, as well as in school, girls were mostly portrayed at home in the nurturing role, as they were supposed to be the responsible ones. Some of them are pictured playing with dolls or arranging flowers; others are helping their mother with taking care of the household. As Lesme further states, we cannot even be sure that the girls attended school, since they are not portrayed with this background⁸. On the contrary, later in the 19th century, a girl’s pose, where she is reading a book, became very popular. Parents were fond of having paintings made of their daughters posing in this way because it reinforced a sense of social class. Whereas these poses were usually at a table or, perhaps, standing, later in the 1870s this position was changed into reading in bed to their younger sibling, depicting once again the parenting role of a woman. At times, the author also highlighted the bond between the siblings.

By the beginning of the 19th century, Neoclassicism, which was the predominant art movement at that time, slowly started to disappear and instead it was replaced by Romanticism. This movement began as an opposition to the Enlightenment’s rationalism and emphasized showing and depicting emotions, as well as using one’s imagination in painting. Driven by their perception of nature’s formidable power, Romantic artists elected to feature it prominently as a subject of their pictorial

⁶ Anne Lesme, “Depiction of 19th-Century American Girls in Paintings and Photographs: Lack of Agency and Empowerment,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (2014): 4.

⁷ Quoted in Bubíková, “Concepts of childhood”, 16.

⁸ Lesme, „Depiction of 19th-Century American Girls in Paintings and Photographs”, 4.

works. The idealization of the American wilderness was the subject of those who belonged to the Hudson River School, an art movement belonging to Romanticism. Romantic artists put huge emphasis on the individualism – their thoughts, feelings, and their connection to the nature. In their paintings, a figure may often be found standing alone in the landscapes, highlighting human insignificance against the nature’s grandeur. Such theme may be seen in perhaps the most famous painting of the Romantic movement, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, done by Caspar David Friedrich in 1818.

The romantic movement influenced the depictions of childhood as well. Increasingly, children began to be depicted in more relaxed, expressive poses. Such natural poses aimed to emphasize their innocence and purity, often depicting them outdoors in soft, natural settings. By depicting children of their age, the artists wanted to evoke emotions in the viewer. By depicting them as pure and vulnerable, depending on the setting, the painter's aim was to evoke joy, or sadness. The idealization of childhood innocence and purity may be best seen in paintings depicting boys barefoot. As Sarah Burns explains, picturing young men as such intended to bring the feeling of nostalgia to the viewer as well as evoked lost youth and vanished happiness⁹. In the 1860s, childhood was considered a “status of a precious, magical condition, privileged to the evils of the adult world”¹⁰. Although this idea of an innocent, happy country boy with a carefree existence in a rural childhood was disseminated at a very high pace, it could not be further from the truth. Especially after the Civil War, the gap between the depicted ideal and the real became profound. Artistic depictions portrayed society’s desires, how they wanted the children to be, rather than accurate portrayal of children’s experiences.

A common practice in the 19th century was the post-mortem paintings. Although it did not belong into any particular art movement, this type of paintings contained some features of Romanticism. Romantic paintings were concerned with the emotional expression of the human experience, and the post-mortem paintings captured the emotional weight of death, while often idealising the depiction of the deceased. This habit of posing for portraits with their dead child had already existed in the previous century, however, with one significant difference: in the 18th century it was

⁹ Sarah Burns, “Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children: Sentiment and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” *American Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1988): 26.

¹⁰ Burns, “Barefoot Boys,” 26.

clearly visible that the child had already passed away. To quote the Princeton University Art Museum, the painting from 18th century “made no attempt to give new life to the memory of those who had passed”¹¹. That changed with the turn of the century; later, parents of the deceased children had portraits done with more enlivened representation of their children and they served more purpose than just recording the family lineage. They were intended to give life to those who had already passed away.

There are several symbols that painters used to indicate that the pictured child is no longer in the realm of the living. Presumably the most used one was the usage of the colours white, red and black, which were long associated with death. A perfect example of such mourning colours is a painting *A Daughter of Elkanah Watson* from 1818 by Ezra Ames, one of the most prominent American portraitists in the late 18th and early 19th century. It is believed that Elkanah Watson, a grieving father of the pictured woman, had the portrait done for her recently deceased daughter – newly married Mrs. Emily George B. Larned, who was 26 years old by the time of her death. However, it is not clear whether the sitter was actually the deceased daughter, or if it was Watson’s other daughter, Mary. The second alternative is more probable, as the portrayed woman is not wearing a wedding ring. An account book of the painter was found, stating the prize for the painting, unfortunately it does not include the sitter’s name. The young lady depicted in the painting is dressed in an all-black costume, with a rosary of the same colour hanging around her neck. The background consists of a whiteish column and red drapery, the colour reminding of cloth palls laid over a coffin in funeral. Further in the background is depicted a weeping willow, a tree associated with mourning. As the Princeton University Art Museum explains, the weeping willow is intended as an analogy of sorrow and grief¹². Under the tree is pictured an urn standing on a tomb, undoubtedly belonging to Mrs. Larned. On it there is engraved “E. W. L. Ob. 3 January, 1817”, standing for Emily Watson Larned and the date of her death, January the 3rd, 1817. According to Frances Follin Jones, former curator of collections at The Art Museum of Princeton University, she was buried in a relative wilderness far from her home, which in the portrait is represent by 2 Indians in the canoe on the water to the left of the monument¹³. In another painting

¹¹ “Life after Death: Mourning Practices through Posthumous Portraiture,” Princeton University Art Museum, accessed February 3, 2025, <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/terms/2199295>

¹² “Life after Death: Mourning Practices through Posthumous Portraiture.”

¹³ “A Daughter of Elkanah Watson,” JSTOR, accessed February 3, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3774537.pdf>

Josiah B. Woods Jr., portrayed by Erastus Salisbury, the symbols seem to resemble the prior portrait quite a bit. The boy is dressed in a black blouse, standing in front of a red drapery. In addition, a sunset sky is depicted behind him, symbolizing the mourning.

Another often used symbol of death is rendering children with one shoe off. In an unsigned portrait *Father and Junior* is pictured a father, dressed in black as he is mourning, holding his young son in his arms. The young boy holds his gold slipper while letting his barefoot leg hover, his other leg being out of the frame. As the Princeton Museum states, the father seems to be quite uncomfortable, maintaining a deliberate distance from his deceased son¹⁴.

Oftentimes, deceased children were pictured with their still living sibling, as in *Mary and David Dalzell of South Egremont, Massachusetts*. It is quite obvious which siblings have already passed away. One indicator is their clothes; Mary is dressed in a mournful red, while her brother in a lively green. Both are holding a book with a flower, which is another pointer. Whereas David's flower is a red, blooming one, Mary holds a pallid, white flower. The background is very dark, with a striking sunset, another indicator of the death of the child. Later, with the come of photography, the child who passed away would be arranged as if resting or sleeping, conveniently positioned in bed, or in the arms of their parent. Although it may sound "creepy" and unimaginable to people in the 21st century, it served as the only preserved memory of the child to parents in the 19th century.

Throughout the mid-century, a new artistic movement emerged as a reaction to the romantic idealized depictions. Realist artists captured everyday life moments according to reality, without any exaggeration or dramatic emotions. Instead of sentiment and imagination, they used ordinary people engaged in their everyday activities as their subjects, picturing them with accuracy, honesty and detail. They were common people, such as farmers or workers in their domestic scenes. Through an objective and detailed portrayals, artists achieved an authentic and truthful picture, with which they often addressed some issues of class or race inequality, or the issue of labour. The predominant setting that appeared in their depictions were rural and urban themes. Certain artists sought to chronicle the transformations inherent in urban development, whereas others prioritised

¹⁴ "Life after Death: Mourning Practices through Posthumous Portraiture."

the representation of the tribulations endured by those residing in agrarian locales. Photography played a huge role in this movement, as it allowed artists to depict the scenes with more accuracy.

The 19th century witnessed the pervasive proliferation of child labour within the working class, thereby exacerbating the socio-economic disparity between the middle and working classes. Whereas the children in the middle class no longer had to work, working of children in the lower class was essential for the family's living and could bring even one-fifth of the total income. Even with their children working, many families still lived in poverty. Contrary to this, children in the middle class were no longer seen as a "working tool" but rather as an emotional investment. This attitude may be condensed into the phrase "economically and productively useless but emotionally priceless".

Child labour was widely exploited by employers; children from a very young age, sometimes as young as five years old, were employed in mines, factories or even working at home. The hours were long, and the employers provided them with terrible conditions. The ideal child was seen as productive, working, trying to prevent the sin of idleness. As the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics states on their website, by 1820, children made up more than 40% of the mill employees in three New England states¹⁵. The most common occupations were the most visible ones, happening right on the public street. Children were carrying messages, selling the newspapers or offering to shine shoes. The first one was essential for banks, factories and offices, as this was the fastest way to communicate. Not as visible, but far more dangerous was working in mines. There, the children served in roles as a trapper or a breaker boy. The so-called "trappers" would sit all day in the dark, waiting to open a door to allow a passage of coal cars, meanwhile breaker boys, as the name already suggests, were "using a coal breaker to separate slate and other impurities from coal before it was shipped"¹⁶. Another place that would frequently employ children was the cotton mills. According to the U.S. government, by 1900, from 100 000 employees in the cotton mills, a quarter of them were children under the age of 16¹⁷. With rapid industrialization, more potential occupations were generated for children. Consequently, factories became another frequent place to employ children.

¹⁵ "History of child labor in the United States—part 1: little children working," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/history-of-child-labor-in-the-united-states-part-1.htm>

¹⁶ "History of child labor in the United States – part 1: little children working."

¹⁷ "History of child labor in the United States—part 1: little children working,"

Given their size, they were capable to perform tasks that adults would find challenging. For instance, in glass bottle production, they were able to clean the bottles with their little hands. An inexpensive alternative to factories was home workshops. Some children said that they liked school better than home, as home for them meant labour. While mills and factories started after the industrial revolution, farms were a working space for children long before that. They provided a beneficial source of manual labour, and as one farmer noted, that “Every boy born into a farm family is worth a thousand dollars”¹⁸.

Throughout the century, there are not many paintings of child labour; its depictions became more frequent towards the end of the century when artists were able to provide a more accurate representation of the circumstances with the photographic media. However, in 1886, John George Brown painted *A Tough Story*. It depicts a group of four young bootblacks (shoe shining boys) sitting in an intimate semicircle. One of the boys is telling the story, whereas the others listen to him with interest. They look full of life, and despite their tattered clothes, they appear clean and well-fed. Ironically, two of the boys are missing their shoes, despite their occupation of shining them for others. Despite these minor details, John Brown is well-known for his idealisation of paintings with similar subjects. According to Lisa Duffy Zeballos, a Director of Art Research at the International Foundation for Art Research in New York, he recruited street children as models but refined their appearances, such as in this painting¹⁹. This idealisation highly contrasts with photographer Lewis Hine’s later depictions of child labour.

Lewis Hine became a photographer for the National Child Labour Committee in the early 20th century. Since then, he spent around ten years travelling and exposing the harsh conditions of children working in mines, factories, and other dangerous professions. Hine was a cornerstone figure of the child labour movement because his photographs spread awareness of this issue to the public. One of his most famous compositions, *Making Human Junk*, was a montage of pictures and words, in which he aimed to convey a message that children themselves were the product of the factories.

¹⁸ “History of child labor in the United States—part 1: little children working.”

¹⁹ Lisa Duffy-Zeballos, „John George Brown’s *A Tough Story*,” *Facial Plastic Surgery*, September, 2004.

In response to the prevalence of child labour and the conditions the children were working in, the child labour reform emerged. However, the society was concerned with the lack of education that the children were getting, rather than the labour they had to provide in such conditions. For Puritans, education was essential for reading and understanding the Bible, and for secularists, education was essential for a democratically functioning society. There were some efforts in the beginning of the century to produce laws adjusting the child labour, but they did not get enough attention and not much could have been done. Because, at that time, parents had a right to raise their children as they pleased, most of the parents sent their children to work rather than to school, as they needed money. Despite this fact, in 1813 Connecticut passed a law that all children employed in factories had to be educated in reading, writing and arithmetic, and in 1850 three more states followed. There were also some calls from the National Trades' Union for the minimum age of factory workers. Followingly, Massachusetts passed a law that children under 12 years could not work more than 10 hours a day; in Connecticut, the limit was 14 years. By the end of 1840s, every New England state had passed a similar law, the limit of age ranging from 9 to 14. However, these laws had numerous loopholes so employers, as well as parents, were able to go around it quite easily. Given the absence of birth certificates, the age of the children was very easily faked.

The fight for protecting children was a long one. In 1872, the Prohibition Party was the first political party to include a provision condemning the use of children in industry in its national platform. However, not all the people agreed. Apart from some parents and even some children, many employers resisted as well, especially in the South. They tried to persuade others by stating all the reasons why children in industry are a positive attribute. In addition, manufactures argued that without child labour they would be bankrupt. Throughout the years 1885-9, 10 states passed the minimum age laws, 6 states passed laws stating maximum work hours for children. However, a complete abolishment of children at work still had a long way ahead. The reform gained momentum in the early 20th century, when the public gained more awareness. Two of the key figures of the activism were Edgar Gardner Murphy, a founder of the National Child Labour Committee, and Mary Harris Jones, also known as Mother Jones because of her deep commitment to advocating child labour rights, as well as her maternal persona. A gradual progress led to the establishment of the Fair Labour Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, establishing the minimum working age for 16 years, 18 for hazardous jobs.

Given the contemporary circumstances, many of the working children were living in poverty, having parents who abused alcohol or engaged in criminal activities, while others did not have parents at all. The contemporary death rates were high; 25% of children had lost their parents before they reached puberty. Such orphaned children did not have any place to stay, therefore they slept on the streets, commonly referred to as “street Arabs”. In contrast with the previous centuries, when children without their parents did not get any attention or help, in the 19th century the state started to recognize this issue and take actions necessary for helping the orphans. Consequently, the state established orphanages. They were terrible conditions to live in, and they also lacked emotional care. Nevertheless, it was still better than dwelling on the street.

A man named Charles Loring Brace decided to change that. In 1853, he and other ministers created a Children’s Aid Society organization, aiming to help orphans. At a time, when the only social services available were orphans' asylums and almshouses, Brace, with others, built lodging houses, founded industrial schools and a farm school. In addition, he pioneered the Orphan Train movement, which, as stated on the official website of the CAS, was an ambitious and widely controversial experiment and marked the beginning of the foster care system in the US²⁰. Brace was convinced that institutional care destroyed children and advocated that the best place for a child’s upbringing was a Christian farmer home. He stated three factors needed for a reform of the orphans and street children into self-reliant members of society: work, education and wholesome family atmosphere. In order to give children the last one, in 1854 he thought of a “placing out” program – the Orphan Train movement. As described by the Social Welfare History Project, which is led by several highly educated researchers; a group of forty-six young boys were taken by train to Michigan. There, an agent who travelled with them, introduced the children to the assembly of the townspeople and explained that these children are in need for a home. In a week, local farm families took the children into their care²¹. However, as is noted on the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics website, “Trains for orphans and other vagrant children arranged by the CAS ended up being a conduit into the factories. This finding is ironic considering these trains were sponsored

²⁰ “A History of Innovation,” Children’s Aid, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://www.childrensaidnyc.org/about/history-innovation>

²¹ “Charles Loring Brace (June 19, 1826 – August 11, 1890): Congregational minister, child welfare advocate, founder of the New York Children’s Aid Society and organizer of the Orphan’s Train,” Social Welfare History Project, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/people/brace-charles-loring/>

by the CAS, which sought to protect children from the ravages of the inner-city labour market by providing opportunities for them to earn an “honest living” in a rural setting.”²²

Similarly to the depiction of child labour, artists did not often depict the harsh living conditions of children, as they rather liked to paint their idealised versions of childhood. The real children’s living conditions were captured by Jacob Riis, a Danish-American photographer. In his most famous photography series, *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters*, the photograph documented the terrible conditions of poor, working class children. Originally, his photographs were not published, as the editors thought they were too disturbing. For this reason, he published his own book *How the Other Half Lived* (1890). The aim of Riis was to show upper classes that poverty and homelessness are not only about adults but also apply to children. In his presumably most-known photograph *Street Arabs in the Area of Mulberry Street*, he depicted three young boys sleeping close to each other near a heated vent. Their names or occupations are unknown; however, their clothes and the absence of their shoes refer to their background arising from the poor working class. Many experts discuss whether the photography was posed or not, but either way it achieves its purpose; that is to spread awareness about the poverty among children. With the angle utilised on the photography, Riis takes the viewer on the same level as the children, aiming for the connection with them. Given that the photography was taken in broad daylight, all the details are perfectly visible, such as the expressions on the children’s faces. By using children as his primary subject, he is able to obtain more emotional response from the viewer, therefore, more likely to steer the viewer's emotions towards taking action in order to aid the situation.

The late 19th century may be characterised not only by Realism, but also by the emergence of a new artistic movement: Impressionism. The main focus of impressionists was genre painting. An important artist belonging into this movement is Mary Cassatt. As stated on the National Gallery of Art website, she was one of the few American women to become a professional artist in the 19th century²³. Her focus on paintings was quite unique. She focused on modern middle-class women with their offsprings in an everyday situation. Her portrayals were quite revolutionary, given that she broke away from the traditional formal pictures and rather depicted natural

²² “History of child labor in the United States – part 1: little children working.”

²³ „Mary Cassatt – selected paintings,“ National Gallery of Art, accessed March 1, 2025, https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/mary-cassatt-selected-paintings.html#slide_1

interactions, with an emphasis on physical closeness and the emotional bond of a mother and her child. This kind of casualness is perfectly depicted in her *Young Mother Sewing* (1900), displaying a young woman sitting in an armchair and sewing, while her daughter is casually leaning onto her lap, looking behind the viewer. Such poses of the child shows its feelings of trust and safety with her parent. Cassatt also in her depictions showed the unseen labour of women in the household, all while taking care of their children. Her paintings may be characterised by the depiction of physical closeness and intimacy, which she achieves through the use of loose brushwork, pastel colour pallets and soft lighting. In addition, she is known for the absence of men in her paintings, which keeps the focus entirely on the women's world, highlighting their strength and identity beyond the traditional notions of beauty.

While Mary Cassatt focused on the domesticity and maternal theme of paintings, the 19th century American art also turned its gaze into larger social and cultural issues, including slavery.

The slave population in the US grew naturally through reproduction, and as the US National Archive states, by 1860, half of the enslaved African Americans were under 20 years old²⁴. Not every African American child was enslaved. However, those who were born as free children faced hard challenges as well, living in a white-dominated society. Contradictory to some depiction of happy and care-free slave childhood, primarily by pro-slavery artists, enslaved children lived very hard childhood. They lived in a constant fear of being sold any time, in malnutrition, harsh punishments and abuse, which often involved sexual abuse. However last aspect was not talked about much, because of the social taboos. They could be sold anytime, as African American marriages and families were not legally recognised. As further described on the website of the National Archive, despite of the laws in several states that children under 10 years old cannot be sold without their mothers, however such laws were often bypassed, commonly when the owner died, and the slaves were sold out. When selling children, owners would exhibit them naked, dehumanised as a mere property²⁵.

²⁴ "What Was it Like to be a Child Slave in America in the Nineteenth Century?," The National Archives, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/childhood-slavery-contextual-essay.pdf?utm>

²⁵ "What Was it Like to be a Child Slave in America in the Nineteenth Century?."

Children would perform a number of different jobs from different age. As soon as they were capable of any kind of work, typically from the age of five or six, they would help the adults in the fields, tend animals or serve and clean their owner's house. They would also often take care of the younger children, while their parents were working. Children were recognised as valuable assets, the owners typically wanted to keep them until they reach an age of a strong worker, but provided them with a very poor conditions. There was a constant dilemma of the owners between keeping them on a daily cost, but for the future reward. Enslaved children did not get enough clothes or food, therefore they were particularly inclinable towards all kinds of diseases. As previously mentioned, marriages of enslaved African Americans were not legally recognised, therefore they sometimes did not even live with their parents. The majority of enslaved children remained illiterate, as they were legally required, however, a small portion of them were secretly taught how to read. Games were their momentary escape from reality, though sometimes they would be inspired by their actual situations. Sometimes very young black and white children would play together, however this ended by the white children's turning school age.

The majority of paintings, where the object is African American people is intended is to make mockery out of them, depicting them predominantly according to certain stereotypes that were widely spread among their contemporaries. According to Lesme, a large proportion of white painters pictured African Americans as lazy, ugly and irresponsible figures being susceptible to every kind of vice²⁶. Only a few of the artists were not prejudiced and decided to fight these stereotypes by picturing African Americans as they really looked like, predominantly in their childhood, aiming to get sympathy. However, such strategy did not help at all, as white Americans also thought of them as childlike. This changed only with the invention of photography, when African Americans started to be portrayed as they looked like in reality. As Lesme also mentions in her book, the most typical stereotype of black girls was that they were in a position of a servant, not having enough common sense and being "stupid". Such a depiction may be exemplified by a portrait done in 1848 by Harriet Cany Peale which she named *Her Mistress's Clothes*. In another painting *Hight of Fashion* from 1854 is shown an African American young girl wearing an adult dress holding a lorgnette. As Lesme states in her book, the painter, Lilly Martin Spencer, intended

²⁶ Lesme, „Depiction of 19th Century American Girls in Paintings,” 21.

to mock the girl's pretension of being fashionable²⁷. Among other stereotypes of African Americans are those depicting them with big lips and "funny" hair. African Americans were also depicted while playing a banjo, as in *The Banjo Lesson*. In this painting is captured a young boy, sitting on his grandfather's lap, learning how to play this instrument. Music was one of the few things they were able to cheer themselves up with, given their circumstances. This painting was created by African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, the first artist of his race to gain an international acclaim. It is important to note that in this case, the stereotypical painting was not meant to make fun of people of his race, but to emphasize their cultural identity. Thirty years earlier, in 1859, Eastman Johnson depicted a moment in the life of enslaved African Americans, naming it *Negro Life at the South*, which will be analysed further in this thesis. This painting is considered Eastman's masterpiece, making it an important visual commentary on the situation of slavery in the South and it had sparked various interpretations.

As enslaved African Americans could not take the terror anymore, some started to rebel against their owners. One of the biggest rebellions in the history of slavery was led by Nathaniel "Nat" Turner in Virginia 1831, an American enslaved man, who with seventy other slaves slaughtered their owners with their families. Consequently, he was hanged, beheaded, and then quartered. Unfortunately, the rebellions of enslaved people were not enough for the abolition of slavery. Many people of both black and white race fought for over a hundred years for the abolitionist reform for the freedom of enslaved people. Such efforts began in the mid-18th century and continued until 1865, when slavery was officially outlawed with the passage of 13th Amendment to the Constitution with the end of Civil War in the US. Abolitionism originally started as a religious and moral movement, spreading the idea that everyone is equal, regardless of race. By the early 19th century, the most active abolitionists started to form anti-slavery societies. With them, they aimed to raise awareness about the issue. Some thought it was a good idea to send African Americans to Africa, as their continent of origin, however most enslaved Black people have lived in America their whole life. For that reason, abolitionists decided against this and tried to devise other strategies of how to end slavery.

²⁷ Lesme, „Depiction of 19th Century American Girls in Paintings,” 22.

There were several prominent activists in the abolition movement, playing a crucial role in advocating for the end of slavery. Among them was William Garrison Lloyd, a Massachusetts journalist, renowned for his radical approach in the abolition movement. Due to his commitment, Garrison is widely regarded as a leading figure within the movement. Garrison's primary technique was moral suasion. By organising public speeches, he sought to appeal to the conscience of the public, particularly slaveowners. In 1831, he founded an abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, which he published weekly until slavery was officially abolished by law.

However, abolitionists did not always agree on the methods used to achieve their shared goal. Whereas Garrison strongly urged his followers not to take part in any political processes, James Gillespie Birney, who served as an executive secretary at the American Anti-Slavery Society, adopted a different approach. He believed that the key to ending slavery was through political engagement and the influence of religious principles.

Former enslaved African Americans, who escaped their bondage, took part in this movement as well. Frederick Douglass, who fled to New York in 1838 after enduring twenty years of enslavement, argued that political action and moral arguments are essential in the fight against the slavery. He held various governmental positions and delivered public lectures on slavery. As part of his advocacy, Douglass authored his memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), where he revealed the cruel nature of slavery by describing his own experience. Another key figure was Harriet Tubman, who also escaped slavery. During her life, she made over thirteen return journeys back to the South, in order to help others do the same. Tubman employed various techniques and strategies to ensure both her own safety and that of those she escorted. Some of them were using the master's horse, disguising as a man or carrying a gun. The weapon served not only for protection, but also as a dissuatory means for the other escapers.

During the abolitionist movement, activists often used the figures of children in their narratives, aiming to appeal to the listeners emotions. In addition, pictures of enslaved children were used in the forms of engravings, pamphlets and posters. Such depictions would show children working, in chains or being torn from their mothers.

Another social reform which largely influenced the experience of childhood was the education reform. Its main goals were to establish a centered education for everyone, regardless of a race, gender or a status, and to standardize curriculum. The reform also aimed to improve the quality and professionalism of teachers, as well as their pedagogical skills. The most influential figure of this movement was Horace Mann, otherwise known as “the father of American public education”. He was a Massachusetts politician, lawyer, and educator. Mann founded “normal schools”, which were institutions where he educated teachers to elevate their quality and professionalism of teaching. The opening of such institutions had a positive impact on women’s position in society, as it offered them a professional training, with a career advancement. Besides Horace Mann, another influential figure in the education reform movement was Catharine Beecher, a founder of several women’s schools²⁸. Both Mann and Beecher, as well as many other reformers, built their revolutionary ideas on the ideas of earlier educators, in particular John Amos Comenius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. John Amos Comenius, a 17th-century Czech philosopher and educator, introduced groundbreaking educational principles. As Jelena Osmanović and Dragana Dimitrijević note in their analysis of his pedagogical work, the primary concept of Comenius’s thoughts, *pansophia*, sought to establish a centralized education accessible for everyone, regardless of their nationality or social. He advocated for a teaching approach where learning progressed from simple to more complex ones and emphasized learning through experience rather than memorization²⁹. He incorporated his revolutionary ideas into many of his works, for instance his well-known *Pampaedia* (1669) or *Great Didactics* (originally *Didactica Magna*, 1632). On Comenius’ thoughts then built and developed Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher, an educator and a writer. In his presumably most-known book *Emilia or On Education* (1762) he identified the main developmental stages of children and noted, that education should follow these stages. Rousseau also carried on Comenius’ ideas about highlighting the importance of nature in children’s education, relating to the principle of autonomous learning through experience. In addition, he proposed that the main role of a teacher should be a guide, helping children to explore on their own. It was his belief that education should be focused on developing the child’s interests

²⁸ “Catharine Beecher, Champion of Women’s Education,” Connecticut History, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://connecticuthistory.org/catharine-beecher-champion-of-womens-education/>

²⁹ Osmanović, Jelena, ,Dragana Dimitrijević, “Pedagogical Work of John Amos Comenius as an Inspiration for Modern Pedagogy: Didactic-Methodological Approach,” *Siedlce Comeniological Research Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (2019): 278.

and skills, rather than forcing a knowledge of subjects that do not interest them. Another important figure influencing the motion of education reform was a philosopher John Locke, coming up with his most known idea of tabula rasa. This idea implies that every child is born with a “clean sheet”, without any innate attitudes, therefore they learn everything through experience. That means that education plays a crucial role in shaping children’s mind. Locke as well shared ideas of previously mentioned figures about learning through experience, a teacher being a guide rather than a teacher and that good education is the most important foundation for a just and functioning society. This reform largely influenced position of children in contemporary society, as they started to be seen as the hope of the future. Consequently, their depiction changed as well, with artists beginning to portray them with a book in their hand, or in school setting. However, the divergent gap between genders, as well as what each of them should be educated on, was profound. Boys were pictured surrounded by a “serious” education, to prepare them for their role in a society. To the contrary, girls were prepared for their roles as mothers and wives. Children also started being idealized. The 19th century’s transcendentalism took Locke’s idea of tabula rasa to another level. One of its prominent beliefs is the innate goodness of people, meaning that humans are born good and are capable of self-improvement, if they are not corrupted by society. In addition, parents now understood that the needs of their children are vastly different than theirs, and they began to treat their children accordingly. A considerable shift happened from physical punishment to upbringing with love and care. Physical punishments did not vanish entirely, however their usage rapidly decreased.

II. PHOTOGRAPHY

The invention of photography and photographic processes marked a prodigious moment in the history of the arts and in the everyday life of people. This invention was made possible thanks to two main principles: the camera obscura image projection and the discovery that some substances are visibly altered by light exposure. As is explained on the website of Science World, the camera obscura principle consists of a box, with a small hole in one of the walls. Through this hole, the light passes through, and it will project an image of the outside scene on the surface opposite the hole. And because light travels in light rays, the projected image will appear inverted and upside-

down³⁰. A crucial point was made by the scenic artist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, with his invention of the daguerreotype. It was introduced in Paris on August 19, 1839. Some attempts for permanent-lasting photographs occurred before that, but the products of these processes did not last, or the exposure time required up to several days, which made it impossible to create for example, portraits. To use an exact definition, according to the Library of Congress, the daguerreotype is “a direct-positive process, creating a highly detailed image on a sheet of copper plated with a thin coat of silver without the use of negative.”³¹ It is quite a complex process with its exposure time ranging anywhere from three to fifteen minutes. Soon enough, modifications appeared, reducing the exposure time to only several seconds, which made portraiture, especially those of children, more doable and popular. It produced clear and embellished photographs. Whereas this process became highly popular in America, in Europe, photographers took a liking to the calotype invented by Henry Fox Talbot in England in the same year as the daguerreotype. Compared to the latter, the former was cheaper and easier to produce, since it utilised a paper negative process. On the other hand, the quality of calotype’s photographs was not as good. These two inventions marked the beginning of photography. Of course, the rapid development of photographic processes followed, making it more accessible for people to take photographs of themselves, their loved ones and their surroundings. Therefore, the depiction of children became more common, as it became much easier to capture the fleeting moments.

One difference between a painting and a photograph is that the latter is objective. Given the fact that it captures the scene precisely as it is, the author cannot change it in any way. Objectivity, however, does not also apply to meaning. Each viewer of the photograph will understand a photograph slightly differently, depending on their own experience of the photographed object. As Miles Orvell stated, “just because we can see the photo, we cannot say that we know what it means.” He also pointed out that to truly understand the meaning of a photograph, we must find why the image is here – to develop a historical sense of its original purpose³². The difference is especially noticeable in visualising the childhood. Whereas paintings were often romanticised through the contemporary notions of childhood purity and innocence, photographs captured

³⁰ „Camera Obscura,“ Science World, accessed January 19, 2025, <https://www.scienceworld.ca/resource/camera-obscura/>

³¹ “The Daguerreotype Medium,” Library of Congress, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/daguerreotypes/articles-and-essays/the-daguerreotype-medium>

³² Miles Orvell, *American Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13.

children in an unembellished manner. However, even with the come of photography, the representations of some artists still were not according to the reality. Photographers would often stage their compositions by dressing children in particular attire or positioning them in the frame accordingly to the prevailing notions of contemporary childhood. Moreover, children in post-mortem photography would be arranged as peacefully sleeping, preserving the romantic perceptions of children even after their death.

Miles Orvell, in his book *American Photography*, gathered 4 reasons, why photography became so appealing in such a short period of time to the American people, as well as the whole world. The first reason Orvell mentioned is the growing enthusiasm for technology. The 19th century, also called “The Age of Steam”, may be characterized by rapid industrialization; therefore, another mechanical process was widely welcomed, as it perfectly aligned with modern life. As stated in the book, photography was “bringing the wonders and sights of the world into the parlour with an immediacy.³³” This immediacy was particularly significant for the visualisation of children, as it allowed parents to document their children’s daily lives and growth in a way that had never been possible before. Photographs of children became cherished mementos. Another reason for the popularity of photography is that the camera is the prime instrument for self-representation and is “capable of fashioning an image for public consumption in a democratic republic where personal identity and national identity were always to be invented and reinvented.” Middle and upper class families would use staged photographs of their children wearing elaborate attire to express their social status and reflect their family’s wealth. Third, a photograph provides a family with its own history. In the 19th century, paintings were quite expensive; therefore, there was only an elite percentage of people who could afford to pay an artist to make a hand-made portrayal of them, mostly from the upper or middle class. Moreover, painting a picture was a very lengthy and tedious process. Given these facts, a photograph was a much easier, cheaper, and more accessible way to capture something. Photography allowed families from all the classes were able to preserve the images of their children, not just the elite. In the face of high child mortality rates, such image could be a lasting memory of their child, having enormous sentimental value. Lastly, given the rise of realism in the American arts and culture, photography perfectly aligned with this movement, since it objectively captures the exact scene being captured. As previously mentioned, the main

³³ Orvell, *American Photography*, 12.

object of capturing realism is, besides nature, a contemporary everyday life to which a camera helps immensely³⁴.

Miles Orvell also stated different uses for photography: the photographs may be intended either for the public eye or for private use. To give an example, photographs being made to be featured in newspapers, books, or other media are meant for the public eye. On the contrary, a picture taken of a family or perhaps the children alone is intended to be displayed only in the family album, where only those being pictured would see the photo. Therefore, the private use. Such photographs had a huge sentimental value to the family. In addition, the style in which a photograph is taken may be aesthetic or documentary. The difference between these two modes is that a photograph serving purely for aesthetic purposes prioritises elements like light, colour and mood and is often intended to evoke an emotion in the person looking at the photo. On the other hand, a photograph taken using a documentary approach tends to be more objective, aiming to capture the scene precisely as it is. Children may be found in both styles. The aesthetic style of pictures was mainly influenced by the notion of childhood innocence and purity, whereas the second style was used for instance in pictures documenting child labour and the harsh realities of children. Such photographs focus on authenticity and social context. Of course, these functions often overlap, as it may not always entirely clear which purpose the photographer intends to convey.

Given the long exposure times needed for a clear photograph, photographers had to get creative and come up with ways to get children to sit still for such a time. There were several of them; however, the most widely used and widespread method was called “hidden mothers”. Used predominantly with toddlers and infants, the child was sat on their mother, who was covered in some kind of material. It might have been a blanket or any other fabric. Most times, it was the child’s mother it was sitting on, but occasionally, it could be their father, a nanny or the photographer’s assistant. Whether this attempt to make it look like the child is the only person there was successful or not was questionable. However, in most cases it was highly obvious, as the material was just thrown over the parent and the shape was very prominent. In addition, there were clearly visible the arms of the parent, as they were holding their baby. Other times, when the material was perhaps heavier and did not shape the human under it, it was less visible. In some

³⁴ Orvell, *American Photography*, 15.

cases, the photographer, manipulated the photograph, making it a vignette, therefore only the photographed child was visible. This methodology persisted until the early 20th century, and it began slowly fading as the exposure time of cameras got shorter, therefore rendering unnecessary to hold a small child still for such a long time. Another way to keep the child without moving was by putting them in a high chair or a stool, where they were too frightened to move. They were usually holding onto a part of the chair. Lastly, if possible, an older sibling was photographed with the child, in order to calm them. The last two strategies were often combined together, where the presence of a familiar person helped the child to feel less uptight.

In spite of the fact that African Americans were not subjects of many photographs, among them had been quite a few successful photographers. Their businesses were not race-biased; they welcomed both African Americans and white Americans. Among the most celebrated photographers were James Presley Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge or Augustus Washington. As stated on the website of the National Gallery of Art, all of them owned successful art studios, such as the Great Daguerrean Gallery of the West, which was run by James Ball in Cincinnati, Ohio. Ball specialized primarily in family photographs, and many white families came to him, such as *The Hercules family*. This photograph was taken in 1850 and on it is depicted a mother, sitting on a stool, with her three children, two daughters and a son, who is standing behind them. Another of his daguerreotype, *Portrait of a family* from 1848, depicts an unknown family with both parents and their four children. Meanwhile, Glenalvin Goodridge opened his gallery in New York, Pennsylvania, and Augustus Washington worked in Hartford, Connecticut. The latter aimed to demonstrate his expertise with a daguerreotype showing a cat laying on the chair. The photo is of exquisite quality, given the time of exposure at that time. In some portraits of African Americans, the subjects are shown holding objects symbolizing their newly attained freedom. One example of such objects is a book or a schoolbag, both pointing to education that had previously been denied to them.

A photography symbolising a girl's entrance into the adult world, *Blessed art Thou Amongst Women* by a German photographer Gertrude Käsebier, is thematically very similar to the painting *The Party Dress*. In this scene, a young woman is poised symbolically at the doorway, while her mother is bending down to her with the intention of giving her a last advice and her blessing before leaving her home. According to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the figures in the picture are

Agen, the wife of Francis Watts Lee, an amateur photographer and printer, and her daughter Peggy. The composition mirrors Victorian ideas about femininity and motherhood, and the title is biblical. The theme of the maternal protection and guidance towards the new phase of her life may also be seen in the photograph. This photograph also aligns with the author's broader themes of maternal relationships and women's role of society.

A photographic representation of African Americans made by Helen M. Summer, with her photo Sharell Showing Easter Dress to Grandmother. Summer many times returned to the neighbourhood of Newark, New Jersey, where she documented their inhabitants. Miles Orvell stated that she depicted them with empathy and understanding, focusing on their dignity, beauty and never-ending hope. In this one, she deliberately brought into the frame not only the girl, proudly showing off her dress, but also the stove as part of the kitchen to show contrast and their living conditions.

III. ANALYSIS OF ARTWORK

There are several paintings I consider to be great examples of themes explored in this thesis.

One of the most famous paintings of the 19th century is *Snap the Whip* (1872), by Winslow Homer., done between the end of the Civil War and the national centennial in 1876. The painting is part of a series depicting country boys at school. The depiction shows a group of boys playing a boisterous game, which was highly popular at that time, called snap the whip. It also gave the painting its name. The game allowed the boys to release all the energy they stored during their morning lessons. The game was prominently played by boys from rural background, as it was considered too rough in the polite society and newly emerging suburbs³⁵. As Perry adds in her book, "the painting contains a variety of elements that allude to the cycles of agrarian and human life, as well as rhythms of the school day."³⁶ Shifting the attention to the setting, it is spring, as the meadow is strewn with flowers. In the background of the painting, judging from the position of the sun, it can be seen that the boys have a school's noon break. The boys will have to return to school soon, and their fun care-free activities will end. This parallels the fact that they will soon step into adulthood

³⁵ Lesme "Depiction of 19th-century American Girls," 28.

³⁶ Lesme "Depiction of 19th-century American Girls," 29.

and will have to leave their childhood behind them³⁷. The game, according to Claire Perry, is intended to represent “the freedom and abundant liberties of country life, as well as the idea of national independence”³⁸, which was on the mind of every American citizen. As she further explains, it also stands as a powerful symbol of the nation’s accomplishments, given the qualities that children need to possess to be competent to be a part of the game; those qualities being strength, speed and momentum.

To exemplify the theme of the roles between boys and girls, a painting by Seymour Guy called “*Unconscious of Danger*” (1865) was chosen. Later in this chapter, there are paintings focusing on how both genders were looked at individually and what was expected from them. However, I would like to begin with a painting highlighting the contrast between genders. The painter pictured a boy standing on the edge of the cliff, looking down, unconscious of the danger. His sister reaching out her arm to pull him back, saving him from what might have happened if he took only a step forward. In just one painting, Guy perfectly summarises the diverse roles of both genders, picturing the boy free while his sister taking care of him. As Claire Perry explained, from the boy’s untidy hair and the girl’s clothes, one can deduce that they spent the day immersed in outdoor leisure and enjoyment, referring to the little freedom women can experience while being children³⁹. Another possible interpretation of the girl’s reaching arm toward the boy might be with the purpose of pushing him down, as he might be her oppressor. However, as stated in *Young America—Childhood in the 19th-Century Art and Culture*, this is not a probable explanation of what is happening, given the beliefs of the 19th century⁴⁰.

Focusing on girls’ and women’s role in contemporary society, the painting *Girl with Canary (The New Arrival)* (1860s) by Seymour J. Guy is an exquisite illustration. In 19th century America, depictions of girls with different kinds of animals were common. Guy took inspiration for this painting from a story by Louisa May Alcott Jack and Jill, where a young girl, after a terrifying accident, rethinks and changes her behaviour. “She had learned to love her cage now.” In the painting is depicted a young lady dressed in a long-sleeved blue blouse and a big skirt, which

³⁷ Claire Perry, *Young America – Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 35.

³⁸ “American ABC: Childhood in 19th century America,” *Antiques and Fine Art*, accessed December 16, 2024, <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=704>

³⁹ Perry, *Young America*, 35.

⁴⁰ Perry, *Young America*, 35.

includes many layers. Judging from the way she dresses, she comes from an upper-middle-class family. The young lady is watching “the new arrival”, a canary in a cage standing on a highly decorated table, which comes from the gothic style. An idea can be drawn based on the style of the table and the image of the rooms in the house being decorated in the same style; highly extravagant, overstaffed with comforts – a typical house in the Victorian era. The scene is set in an entry hall, which serves as a passage segregating parts of the house allowed to the public from the private rooms only for the close family. The girl had just come from outside, as she is still wearing a hat. Because of this, a viewer of this painting is unable to see her expression in her face, as most of it is overthrown by a shade from the hat. However, her hands may offer a clue to her possible feelings. As she is reaching toward the caged bird with her right-hand finger, she is welcoming it into its new home. However, her left hand on her chin shows an ambivalence with this welcoming gesture, as the girl resonates with the bird and “acknowledges it as her fellow inmate⁴¹.”

Elizabeth with a Dog (1871), a painting by Thomas Eakins, is quite contrasting against the previous painting regarding the position of women. Being one of the few ones depicting a woman who is in power. As was his custom, Eakins challenged the contemporary traditional concepts of genre painting and contradicted it with women’s actual position at the time, as well as with most of their depictions. According to Claire Perry, the painting shows the author’s friend Elizabeth Cromwell instructing her poodle to sit on its hind legs. Sitting on the floor, she is on equal standing as animals; however, “the keen intelligence of her gaze sets her apart from the docile creature who obeys her, as well as from society’s expectations for female passivity”⁴². The textbooks, laying on the floor behind Elizabeth, point to her intelligence, as well as status, as lower-class women did not have many opportunities for a proper education.

Most times, girls were painted in the surroundings of their home, learning how to take care of the family and the household. Very rarely are they pictured outside, but when they are, they are usually alone and pictured as innocent (for instance *Resting in the Woods* (1886) by John Brown). Nonetheless, some painters decided to challenge these stereotypes, two of them being Seymour J. Guy in his painting *Temptation* (1884), or John G. Brown and his *Three Girls on the Swing – The*

⁴¹ Perry, *Young America*, 61.

⁴² Perry, *Young America*, 69.

three Tomboys (1868). In the latter depiction, there can be seen three girls, judging from their clothes presumably from middle class, having fun and playing outdoors. Returning to *Temptation*, a girl is depicted as taking care of her little brother, however, she is giving him a red fruit. That might be interpreted as the forbidden fruit from the Bible, which “clearly undermines the supposed innocence of the child girl who is not passive anymore but could be seen rather as an agent of sin”⁴³.

Two paintings should be highlighted regarding the theme of transition from childhood to adulthood, *The Party Dress (The Finishing Touch)* (1872) by Eastman Johnson and *Breaking Home Ties* (1890) by Thomas Hovenden. Both pictures show a young person – a girl in the former painting and a boy in the latter – at a pivotal moment of preparation, symbolizing their impending journey into adulthood.

Despite the celebratory name *The Party Dress*, the young lady is certainly not cheerful about the event she is about to attend. Her hesitant look and the way she awaits still, until her sister adjusts her robe, reveal to us that this is her first time wearing woman’s attire. The fact that it is a collar that her companion is adjusting, as well as the crumbled doll laying on the chair, tells us about the stepping into the unknown womanhood which will end the pleasures of her childhood. The light coming through the window falls on her face, highlighting her expression of uncertainty and unease.

Similarly, in *Breaking Home Ties*, a young man is preparing to leave his family and fulfil his duties as a young man. He may be leaving in order to get an education, or perhaps, more likely, his goal is to find work in the urban areas, as it was necessary to provide his family with additional financial income. The highest values of contemporary society, especially in rural settings, were family unity and sacrifice of oneself in order to help their family. Given the rapid industrialization, as well as westward expansion, new job opportunities arose, and therefore many young people left their home to find a job there. In contrast with the previous painting, this one depicts the family in a rural setting. All generations of the family gathered to give the boy their last goodbye before setting out into the world. The boy is depicted in the middle, staring ahead, unsure about what the future holds for him. His mother is giving him her last goodbye, with a distressed expression in her face.

⁴³ Lesme, “Depiction of 19th-Century American Girls”, 6.

The feeling of sadness and sorrow can be seen in the whole room and, as Philadelphia Museum of Art suggests, the dog, sitting next to one of the boy's sister can also feel the sadness going through the room. Moving the attention to the door, a man, presumably the boy's father, is shown holding a suitcase, indicating that the departure is imminent. According to the Museum, each person in the painting is either a relative or a close friend to the artist, including the dog⁴⁴. Therefore, this painting is highly personal to Hovenden. The setting together with their clothes indicates, that they are of working class. In the background there is a cup with a teapot on the table, meaning that before the boy's departure, the family gathered together for the last time and had a cup of tea, perhaps even lunch together. Thanks to the amazing details that the author managed to capture, he grasped the painting's emotional complexity, depicting complicated family relations, as well as a moment in the everyday life of the common people. The melancholy emanating from the painting, arouses many emotions in the observer, as many of them experienced a situation comparable with this one, as they had to say goodbye to their own child.

Moving on to the theme of education, a painting by Francis William Edmonds, *The New Scholar* from 1845, perfectly exemplifies the situation of 19th century American education. Francis Edmonds depicts a boy, about to attend school for the first time, as he is grasping his mother's skirt in fear of the schoolmaster, in whose face may be seen an expression of sympathy. However, he is prepared for all kinds of situations with his whip, which he is shown to be hidden behind his back. Schoolmasters were frequently depicted holding such tools, as this shows discipline at schools. A whip was, at that time, a symbol of authority that teachers had over children. Some teachers even had different types of whip, which differed in sizes and material. They used them on children depending on their age and the severity of their sins⁴⁵. There is also a dog pictured, being held by the boy on the leash, sniffing up to the teacher's leg in distrust. On the left side of the composition, there are depicted two boys in a classroom. One student is confusingly scratching his head and trying to understand the subject matter, whereas the other one is writing in his notebook. A critic in a contemporary magazine wrote that "the painting appealed not to the intellect, but to the heart." This painting critiques contemporary educational methods and harsh, tyrannical school practices. The painter was not the only one ?? with these practices, but also some of the educators,

⁴⁴ „Breaking Home Ties,“ Philadelphia Museum of Arts, accessed February 21, 2025, https://legacyweb.philamuseum.org/doc_downloads/education/object_resources/47809.pdf

⁴⁵ Perry, *Young America*, 186.

as well as physicians and parents of the children. In an American Medical Healthy journal, there was a question about whether such practices were harmful for children, but people responsible for the educational methods suppressed any scrutiny. These practices were later replaced by newer, easier ones throughout the mid-century.

Partially continuing the country boy theme with a painting *The Watermelon Boys* (1876), also by Winslow Homer, although perhaps not as known as the previous one. This piece of art shows three boys, two of them being black and a white one in the middle, eating a watermelon. Being depicted as friends, the author attempted to demonstrate the adaptation of black children in the new post-Civil War period. Fruits, in general, served as a symbol of country boys in the 19th century American art, while watermelon in particular represented the black community. It was predominantly used in racist depictions, which rapidly spread in the period after the Civil war, making watermelon an emblem of racism. However, in this case, it is not used to diffuse hatred towards the African American people, but to raise the painting above the stereotypes. By depicting them in their childhood, Homer disengaged the portrayal from the wildly disseminated negative fears of the White population about the Blacks. In the background, there may be seen a long fence dividing the landscape, which shows the divided society the boys will grow up in.

There are very few paintings that realistically portray Black people, however, recently one of them was discovered, *Bélizaire and the Frey children*. It is believed the painting was done in 1837 and it was attributed to Jacques Amans, a French scenic painter active primarily in New Orleans between 1830s-1850s. The portrait depicts an Afro-Creole boy named Bélizaire standing behind the children of Frederick Frey, a wealthy German-born merchant and a banker, while leaning upon a tree. The children were probably in his care. Bélizaire was 6 years old when he was, together with his mother Sally, purchased by the Frederick Frey in 1828. He became a close companion to the head of the family, as Bélizaire accompanied him on several of his voyages. The boy was approximately 15 when he was painted. In the portrait, he is seemingly portrayed on the same level as the other children, as he was a valued part of the family, despite his actual position. After the death of Frederick, Bélizaire was sold by the wife of Frederick on Christmas Eve in 1856. Some time later, he was painted out of the portrait, presumably by someone from the Frey family who did not want him to be related to them in any way. Later, it was found that the painting out happened around the turn of the century. When the painting was donated to the Metropolitan

Museum of Arts, there could only be seen a shadow in a clear shape of a person, or it may have been perhaps a ghost behind the children. The children were also not identified at that time. The descendant of the Frey family, who donated the painting, passed it on with a story – the family had several slaves, but one of them was their favourite. Therefore, they thought that the shadow might be him; however, they could not be sure. The painting was kept in storage for 32 years, as no one realised its worth. Subsequently, it was sold for 6.000\$ and its subsequent owner restored it in 2005. Only then, B elizaire’s appearance was revealed. Later, the painting was acquired by Jeremy K. Simien, an American art collector, who cared to find out more about the teenager. He hired an expert to do a second restoration, as well as other experts to find out who were the children in the portrait, but, most importantly, who is the teenager of dark skin. When he acquired the painting, it was unsigned, and the names of the children were not identified. Through a stylistic resemblance, he attributed the painting to Amans. After a long period of research, experts found out about the fates of the portrayed children. Both sisters, L eontine and Elisabeth passed away the year the portrait was done, and their brother, Frederick Frey, Jr. 9 years later. B elizaire survived the Civil War and lived to experience freedom.

In keeping with the theme of racial and status inequality, aligning with its name, a painting *Her Mistress’s Clothes* depicts – presumably an upper-class – white lady standing behind a black woman, most likely an enslaved figure. Despite the fact that the African American woman is pictured in the front, the woman behind her is her Mistress, concluding from the controlling way she holds her face in a tight grasp. Picturing African Americans in the front of a painting was a common way to mock them, hinting at the idea that they would never be actually important enough to be in front realistically. In addition, the white lady is pictured taller, symbolizing a state of power and control. As already mentioned in the title, the servant is dressed in her Mistress’s clothes and is wearing her jewellery. With her grasp, she is forcing her to look at her reflection in the mirror dressed like in such a way. The Mistress dressed her in such a way to make fun of her, offering her a slight glimpse into a world that had been denied to her. The painting highlights inequality based on race and status, as the features of both women appear to be in contrast with each other. Given that the expression on the Mistress’s face is not exaggerated, the painting is not intended to mock African Americans, but rather to draw attention to enforced racial disparities of the time.

Eastman Johnson's significant painting *Negro Life at the South* – soon well-known under the name *Old Kentucky Home* – offers a glimpse into a domestic scene of African American slavery. The setting is in front of a dilapidated house, which is standing right next to another house, however that one being in much better condition. The left corner of the painting shows a couple, in which the girl seems to be interracial. Above them, there is a woman with a toddler watching the scene through a window. She is of lighter skin as well. Moving to the centre of the yard, there is a man playing a banjo. In front of him there is a dancing a woman with presumably her child, showing a moment of joy despite their circumstances. Johnson used the music here to emphasize the richness of the Black culture. On the right side, is depicted the only white woman in the painting dressed in an ostentatious attire, stepping from the well-maintained house. There had been speculations that it was the painter's daughter, while other experts considered her to be a representation of the North's gaining insight to the situation of slavery in the South. Every person has a slightly different colour of skin, which points to a possible miscegenation.

And lastly, a painting by Eastman Johnson represents America early past the Civil War. In the painting is captured a young woman, standing on a promontory while doubtfully staring into the distance, creating the appearance of waiting for some sign of what will come next. The path before her trails off, therefore she must either find a new way forward, or retrace her steps and come back. The fence below her, as well as the fog surrounding her, symbolises a world fraught with ambivalence and division. She is wearing a wedding ring, which seems to be glittering in the light and is deliberately positioned almost in the middle of composition, highlighting her devotion not only to her husband, who has gone to the war, but the Union. The wind, which is blowing in her hair, as well as her cape, adds to the sense of the passionate love they carry for each other. According to the Smithsonian Institution, artists typically that wanted to capture the era of Civil War did not do it through depicting battles and the violence. Through symbolism, landscapes and genre painting they depicted the transformative impact of the war on the families of the fighting soldiers⁴⁶. The author supported the theme of Civil War in this painting with the given title. It refers to an Irish ballad carrying the same name, that was popular with the army of both Union and Confederate during the Civil War. According to American Art Collaborative, author is referring to these particular lines of the regimental song:

⁴⁶ “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” Smithsonian Institution, accessed March 21, 2025, https://www.si.edu/object/girl-i-left-behind-me:saam_1986.79

“My mind her full image retains

Whether asleep or awaken’d

Hope to see my jewel again

*For her my heart is breaking.”*⁴⁷ – once again referring to the unconditional love of captured girl and her husband.

IV. CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to examine the depiction of childhood in the 19th-century American art and explore how artistic movements and social changes influenced these depictions. The Romanticism movement highly emphasized depicting emotions and children as innocent and pure, making the depictions of children highly idealised and not accurate. The emergence of Realism marked a big shift from this approach, which, on the contrary to Romanticism, depicted everyday life without any exaggeration or dramatic emotions. Artists captured the real conditions of working children and children living in poverty, helped to raise the awareness of such issues among the upper class. In addition, the thesis also explored the issue of slavery, as well as children’s position within the system of enslavement and the way to abolitionism. Another social reform that largely influenced the childhood was the education reform, as children from all social background were able to go to school. In addition, photography played a crucial role in the depiction of children, as it was able to capture them as playful, in the fleeting moment. Lastly, this thesis analyses selected artwork and explains, how these artistic and social movements influenced the experience of children, as well as their depiction.

⁴⁷ “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” American Art Collaborative, accessed March 21, 2025, <http://browse.americanartcollaborative.org/object/saam/1986.79.html>

RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazením dětí v Americkém umění 19. století a zkoumá, zda je toto zobrazení pravdivé a odpovídající skutečnosti, nebo idealizované. Práce je rozdělena na dvě hlavní části: teoretickou a praktickou.

Teoretická část zahrnuje historický kontext vývoje dětství od 17. po 19. století a věnuje se tomu, jak bylo vnímáno dospělými a jejich přístupem k dětem. Popisuje, jak umělecké směry a sociální reformy změnilo toto vnímání dětí, stejně tak jejich zobrazování v umění. Důležitou součástí je také kapitola ohledně fotografování, která vysvětluje, jakou roli hrály fotografie v zobrazování dětí a jak přispěly k jejich umělecké reprezentaci. Praktická část zahrnuje analýzu vybraných děl z 19. století, kde je na konkrétním obrazech ukázáno, jak sociální a umělecké změny ovlivnily zobrazování dětí.

Na úvod, teoretická část zahrnuje historický kontext dětství a jak ovlivnil jeho zobrazení. Je zde nastíněno, jak se styl výchovy měnil od 17. století za dob Puritánů, kdy byla velmi tvrdá výchova. Děti se nesměly chovat jako děti, jelikož to bylo považováno za hřích a chovali se k nim jako k malým dospělým. To se promítlo i na zobrazování, kdy umělci nerozuměli proporcím dětského těla, tím pádem je vyobrazovali jako zmenšené dospělé. Lehký progres nastal s 18. stoletím, kdy namísto tvrdé disciplíny rodiče používali lásku a péči ve výchově. Snažili se je ochránit před světem, a děti si toto období mohli užívat. Měli mnohem méně povinností a více možností na hry. Stejně tak v umění se pózy dětí odchýlily od upjatých a formálních a namísto byly děti zobrazovány, jak si hrají. Tato změna je krásně vidět na obraze *The Copley Family*, kdy matka je vyobrazena usmívající se na své dítě, zatímco druhé se jí snaží vlézt do klína. Z tohoto obrazu vyzařuje láska a harmonie.

V 19. století zobrazení dětí výrazně ovlivnily genderové role. Zatímco dívky byly vyobrazovány v domácím prostředí, jak si hrají s panenkami, aranžují květiny do vázy nebo pomáhají matce doma, chlapci byli zobrazováni venku, hrající hry, nebo ve škole. Dívky začaly být vyobrazeny s knihami až ke konci století, kdy tím rodiče chtěli vyjádřit její postavení ve společnosti.

Tato práce se zabývá Romantismem, kde se umělci malbou snažili zachytit emoce, a jejím vlivem na zobrazení dětí. Malíři je zobrazovali jako nevinné a zranitelné. Bosí chlapci bylo často zachyceni, s cílem malířů zachytit vesnickou idylku a jejich bezstarostné dětství. Nicméně, tyto obrazy byly velmi idealizované a daleko od pravdy. Částečně patřící k Romantismu byly malby zesnulých dětí, kteří si rodiče nechávali malovat na památku. V této době, kdy ještě nebyl

vynalezen fotoaparát, to tak často byla jejich jediná vzpomínka na jejich dítě. Malíři často využívali několik symbolů ukazujících na zemřelé dítě, jako bylo použití smutečních barev – černé, červené a bílé, jako je použito v obraze *The Daughter of Elkanah Watson*, nebo zobrazení dítěte bez jedné boty, kterou pak např. drželo v ruce.

Tato práce dále popisuje rozšíření zaměstnávání malých dětí, klidně od jejich 5. roku a reformou, která usilovala jeho zrušení. Zatímco děti ze střední třídy pracovat již nemuseli, toto u dělnické třídy neplatilo. Rodiny mnohdy žily v bídě a chudobě a spoléhaly se na příjem dětí. Umělci nezobrazovali tento problém často, jelikož se spíše soustředily na převládající názory 19. století, že dětství je bezstarostné a veselé. Nicméně, malíř John George Brown namaloval obraz *A Tough Story*, zobrazující děti z dělnické třídy, jak si vypráví. Avšak i tento obraz je velmi zavádějící, protože je zobrazil jako veselé, čisté najedené děti. Pravdu se rozhodl zdokumentovat až Lewis Hine na počátku 20. století, kdy cestoval a dokumentoval děti pracující v továrnách, nebo v dolech.

Stejně tak podmínky, ve kterých pracující děti žily byly otřesné. Rodiče mnohých dětí byli zapojeni v kriminálních aktivitách, byli alkoholici, nějaké děti neměly rodiče vůbec. Rozhodl se jim pomoci Charles Loring Brace, který pro ně postavil ubytovny. Brace je také označován za průkopníka pěstounské péče, jelikož s jejími základy začal již tehdy. Stejně tak jako se malíři nezaměřovali na děti, které musely pracovat, také nezobrazovali drsné podmínky, ve kterých žily. To se opět změnilo s příchodem fotografií. Fotograf Jacob Riis se rozhodl rozšířit vědomí o tom, jak tyto děti žili se svou fotografickou sérií *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters* a vzhledem k tomu, že žádné noviny jeho fotografie nechtěly vydat, s tím, že byly moc znepokojivé, Riis následně vydal knihu, aby mohl šířit povědomí o životech mnoha dětí.

Historický kontext dětství v teoretické části také zahrnuje otroctví a život dětí v něm. Prožívali těžké dětství, kdy žili v neustálém strachu, že budou prodány, potrestány, nebo zneužity.

Neodstávalo se jim dostatek jídla a oblečení, protože nebyly v plné síle na práci. Většinou už od 5 let pomáhaly dospělým na poli, staraly se o zvířata, nebo uklízeli v domě otrokáře. Rodiny a manželství zotročených Afroameričanů nebyly legálně uznávány, takže dítě mohlo být kdykoliv prodáno a odloučeno od rodičů.

Důležitá reforma, která taktéž ovlivnila tehdejší dětství výrazným způsobem byla reforma školství. Nejvlivnější postavy tohoto hnutí, jako Horace Mann a Catharine Beecher, usilovali o zrovnoprávnění přístupu školství pro všechny sociální třídy, což se jim nakonec povedlo. To také

ovlivnilo zobrazování dětí. Malíři je začali zobrazovat více ve školním prostředí, stejně tak např. s knihami v ruce.

Významnou událostí v umění byl vynález fotoaparátu, který pomohl zachytit prehavé okamžiky v životě dětí. Vzhledem k tomu, že malba byla velmi drahá a trvala dlouho, mnoho rodin si ji nemohlo dovolit. Fotoaparát nabídl rychlejší a levnější možnost, jak se vytvořit vzpomínku. Fotografie přinesly pohled na dobové dětství, které sice zobrazovaly přesnou skutečnost, i tak se však nedá říct, že byly autentické. Umělci často zmanipulovali scénu tak, aby odpovídala jejich představám.

Poslední částí této práce je analýza vybraných děl, která reprezentují různá témata dětství 19. století, na kterých je ukázáno, jak sociální a umělecká hnutí ovlivnila nejen zobrazení dětství v umění, ale i dětství samotné. Obrazy zastupují témata, témata, jako je např. děti na vesnici, genderové role a role žen ve společnosti, ale i otroctví.

Umělecká díla poskytují velmi cenný pohled na tehdejší vnímání dětství. Ačkoliv mnohdy idealizované, odrážející dobové normy, tato umělecká ztvárnění přesto umožňují nahlédnout do reálného života dětí a problémů, se kterými se museli potýkat.

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