

## Picturing Childhood in Mangan's Poems (1838-1844)

Burak Candan<sup>476</sup>  
Öğr. Gör. Dr. M. Galip Zorba<sup>477</sup>  
Prof. Dr. Arda ARIKAN<sup>478</sup>

### Abstract

Irish poet James Clarence Mangan influenced many of the Irish writers and poets of the forthcoming generation but his works could not get the literary attention he deserved, either in or outside Ireland. Although the poet never left Ireland, he portrayed many different geographies in his poems. In addition to that, the poet was especially inspired by the Ottoman geography and particularly its sultans and literature. Despite the unique quality of his writing, Mangan has not received much attention in Turkish academia apart from a few articles that commented on his life and work. Mangan's poems include various themes and images that await the attention of Turkish academics. Based on this need, this study aimed to focus on Mangan's poems written between 1838 and 1844 to show how childhood is represented in his poems. While doing that, how Mangan portrayed childhood as a personal and experiential phenomenon is exemplified through an analysis of the images used to depict childhood both as a stage in one's biological life as well as a phenomenon surrounding his material.

**Keywords:** J.C. Mangan, Irish, Poet, Childhood, Children

### Introduction

Childhood is a matter of concern in many literary works written in various periods, and depictions of child and childhood in texts have long been a subject matter of literary studies because, as Brooks (2014) enunciates, the story of childhood is one of the most influential stories that authors tell the reader. Besides, these depictions not only show how writers were “influenced by views on childhood in their times” but also “reflect and reveal concerns, cultural tendencies, and areas of interest in the period of their composition” despite the fictional nature of literature (Gavin, 2012, p. 3). The pendulum of literary portrayals of childhood has swung from ‘useless’ and ‘evil’ to ‘redemptive’ and ‘innocent’ since the Middle Ages (Covenay, 1967; Kuhn, 1982; Temple et al., 1997; Demirkol, 2008). Jenks (1996) regards this broad spectrum of childhood as bipolar and labels these two contradictory poles as the Dionysian Child

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<sup>476</sup> Antalya Bilim University

<sup>477</sup> Akdeniz University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature

<sup>478</sup> Akdeniz University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature

and the Apollonian Child. While the former is based on “the doctrine of Adamic original sin” and “the assumption of an initial evil or corruption within the child” (pp. 70-71), the latter regards the child as “angelic, innocent and untainted by the world” with “a clarity of vision” which might be idolized or worshipped “as the source of all that is best in human nature” (p. 73). However, Honeyman (2005) underlines that childhood is also depicted as “irrational, in the worst cases primitive, and in need of taming” (p. 80), and such depictions may be seen similar to the Freudian unconscious whose urges and wishes are often considered irrational and unreasonable by the conscious mind.

The tenets of the contemporary view of childhood are based on the emergence of the middle class and the Romantic Movement as these milestones re-shaped the concept of childhood in social and literary terms. Middle-class people could afford to live in spacious houses which eventually resulted in the separation of the child's world from that of the adult's (Postman, 1994). In this world, norms of parenthood and particularly motherhood were re-established (Grenby, 2009) whereas poets of the Romantic-era depict the child as “an innocent and otherworldly creature of nature” (Ruwe, 2014, p. 47) who is “precious and spiritually pure” (p. 48). More importantly, this child is rational who has “reasoned decisions” that makes him or her “learn from mistakes” (p. 52). Thus, such child is not seen as cognitively deficient and innately evil living beings.

### **Childhood in Mangan's Poetry**

When compared to other Romantic poets, it is obvious that Mangan shares similar characteristics with them in terms of his view on children although Mangan's poems often involve a mysterious and gloomy side of childhood. He explicitly as well as implicitly reveals his own childhood experiences in his poetry. Holding this view, it is a need to understand Mangan's psyche and his images of childhood as reflected in his poetry.

In Mangan's poems, childhood connotes the existence of all “Mankind” which refers to the unconscious state of mind. This state is expressed through positive words such as purity, innocence, unworldliness, guilelessness, and brightness. For instance, his poem titled *Kasseedeh* is a spot-on description of all humanity in which the poetic persona says “Man is a pilgrim amid worlds a child that seeks his father” (Martin, 1996, p. 170). It is acknowledged that Mangan uses the children as an image of all mankind in other words “everyman” who seeks his father or God and his usage of the image of a pilgrim is not a coincidence since pilgrims represent purity and innocence in a biblical sense.

Children also stand out as a reference to the unconscious state of mind in which Mangan wields children as a burrow to hide himself from his wailful world. In his poem *The Time of the Barmecides*, the writer suddenly returns to his childhood while wandering between his mature and mournful days. The poetic persona seems to be lost between his conscious and unconscious state of mind. There is no direct usage of children in the poem. However, it might be said that the persona is not a child anymore. His beard is grey, and his eyes are filmed as a reference to maturity. To him, childhood is nothing but an image of hope, joy, and happiness. Another poem that has a shift between the conscious and unconscious state of mind is *Heaven First of All Within Ourselves*. In the poem, the poet stays where the home of his boyhood had been and he

loses himself with the dreams of “the Past” which makes his soul calm. At that moment, there is nothing but hope for the poet. “The Past” means hope and “hope” means “childhood” for the poet. Moreover, Mangan's descriptions of childhood are not limited to the state of being conscious and unconscious. In his poems, children are seen as irrational, unreasonable and unwordly creatures. Although it has parallels with the state of being unconscious, a shift cannot be seen between those states. There is direct usage of children as an unconscious state of mind. In the poem *The Divorced*, Mangan wields the word unconscious as an adjective to describe children and says “unconscious child!”. In his poem, a baby is seen in the cradle, and the baby's mother leaves the house, but the baby is not able to figure out what is going on. It is obvious that the baby is there as an image of an irrational creature and the unconscious state of mind. Also, in the poem *The Game of Life*, it is seen that the word “sleeping baby” is a direct reference to the unconscious state of mind and the baby is not aware of what is going on around him/her. Another poem that Mangan focuses on unconsciousness is *The Words of Reality*. In the poem, there are human beings who are not able to figure out their ultimate goal or what their purposes in this world are. In this sense, their existence is uncharted to them due to having childlike mind. Once again, Mangan uses the childlike mind as an irrational or unreasonable element. Last but not least, Mangan’s poem *Thecla: A Voice from the World of Spirits* summarizes the poet’s view of unconsciousness and childhood. The poet says, “mysteries often lurk in childish play” (Martin, 1996, p. 178) which means children with their pure and innocent hearts can see or solve the mysteries in their childish plays but they are not able to understand or figure out because they do not have the conscious. They are not aware of what they are doing. In all Mangan’s poems, although he mentions his past, there is no explicit evidence about the details. As we mentioned earlier, he only implicitly reveals the stories about his childhood.

Apart from the references to Mankind and unconscious state of mind, it is a must to look at Mangan's descriptions of children through positive words such as purity, innocence, unworldliness, guilelessness, and brightness, to understand Mangan's view on children. In his poem *Mynheer Van Woodenblock*, the poet says “she was a pure, unworldly, guileless creature” (Martin, 1996, p. 49). In this line, “she” refers to a child who has all the connotations Mangan chooses to use for children. To him, the children are so innocent that they cannot be from this world. Another poem that includes positive connotations for a child is titled *Opium and Wine*. In this poem, the poet describes a queen with the title of “Child of Wine” whose brightness and purity are expressed directly. In another poem, *The Bereaved One*, the description of a child is provided who: “like a messenger, sent from some pure sphere above unto Man's unhappy race on an embassy of love!” (Martin, 1996, p. 257). It is obvious that, Mangan uses the image of children as an angel. The last poem that includes positive connotations is *The Brother and the Sister*. In the poem, children are described by Mangan in terms of their “Innocence, and Gracefulness, and Joy” (Martin, 1996, p. 299), and in the last stanza of the poem, Mangan writes “Shalt have children good and innocent even / As my Father’s angels are in Heaven” (p. 299).

In conclusion, images of childhood in Mangan’s poetry are given as a state of in-betweenness: the unconscious state of mind in a gloomy atmosphere while, on the other hand, it appears as a bearer of purity, innocence, guilelessness. Although Mangan uses

images of childhood as an escape tool and a place of disguise, he gives us clues about his own childhood experiences.

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