In this paper, I explore the evolving conceptions of childhood and motherhood as expressed in Victorian and Edwardian children's literature generally, and specifically in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden, and J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan. An overview of the history of children’s literature and its development with relation to the changing cultural concept of childhood, as well as a discussion of social, economic, and creative factors impacting the ideological position of women at the turn of the 20th century provide the necessary background for said exploration. A variety of primary and secondary sources relating to relevant social history, artistic and literary movements, and the specific authors were consulted to ascertain the prevalent and emerging attitudes about women and children, and to determine how these were manifested in the books mentioned above. The woman as the “Angel of the House” and the child as innocent were prevailing ideologies embraced in both America and Britain at the time. All three authors incorporate these ideas into their work, but each appropriates them uniquely, revealing personal biases. For Alcott and Burnett, the mother characters function as spokespersons for the metaphysical beliefs of the authors. Little Women retains traces of the Puritanical preoccupation with sin while simultaneously reflecting Alcott’s progressive social attitudes resulting from her Transcendental roots. Marmee March embodies this duality by both advocating and challenging conventional femininity. Influenced by New Thought, Spiritualism, and Theosophy, Burnett adopts a hopeful view in which mothers, represented chiefly by the Madonna-like Mrs. Sowerby, and children are collaborators in bringing about physical and mental healing. Barrie’s approach to the mother-child relation, rather than metaphysical, is gendered and semi-erotic. He depicts a sustained tension between innocence (the child) and experience (the mother). Wendy Darling functions as the girl-mother through which Barrie probes the schisms between child and adult, male and female. Together, the three highlighted works provide a fairly comprehensive representation of the cults of childhood and the household angel as manifested in The Golden Age of children’s literature.

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Two classic studies of modern childhood are Ariès 1962 and Coveney 1967, both of which place the Victorian period within the wider context of the longue durée of post-medieval Western culture. Of the two, Coveney’s book devotes more time to literature. Significant account of how cultural conceptions of childhood shifted in the Victorian period to reposition children as victims, driven partly by growing secular individualism. Uses Oliver Twist, Dombey and Son, Wuthering Heights, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, and Adam Bede as reference points. Boas, George. The Cult of Childhood. Studies of the Warburg Institute 29. The Fictional Role of Childhood in Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Children’s Literature. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004. E-mail Citation ». The Secret Garden, A Little Princess, Little Lord Fauntleroy. London: Octopus, 1978. Coveney, Peter. The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967. Craik, Mrs (Dinah Mulock). The Little Lame Prince and His Travelling Cloak: A Parable for Young and Old. New York: Macmillan, 1923. Montgomery, Lucy M. Anne of Green Gables. Ware, Herts: Wordsworth, 1994. in the Childhood Galleries. q Role-play using the domestic objects in the Victorian kitchen in the “Home” area. q Compare the Victorian clothing with both older and more modern examples in the. Working in their History detectives groups, children prepare and present their findings to the rest of the class. This could take various forms (e.g. an oral presentation, a wall display, an ICT project). Changing fashion. With the help of information about Victorian children’s clothing collected during their visit, children design two different outfits of clothing. These could include accessories and/or underwear. One of the designs should be for a 21st century child and one for a Victorian. The designs should be labelled to show details (e.g. fabrics, buttons, zips, trimmings).