2021

Performance and Fantasy in Edwardian Childhood: Representations of Class, Gender, and Education

Amy DeLaBruere
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
DeLaBruere, Amy (2021) "Performance and Fantasy in Edwardian Childhood: Representations of Class, Gender, and Education," The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2. Available at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol2/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.
Performance and Fantasy in Edwardian Childhood: Representations of Class, Gender, and Education

Cover Page Footnote

This article is available in The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol2/iss1/2
ABSTRACT
This essay explores, by way of visual and textual examples, the role of performance and fantasy in Edwardian childhood. The traditional imagery of childhood in the Victorian and into the Edwardian eras incorporates a connection to innocence and naivety through nature. In contrast, John Singer Sargent’s painting, *Marionettes*, revitalizes the viewer’s understanding of adolescence in the Edwardian era by reframing a puppet show to focus on the young puppeteer boys rather than the marionettes themselves. Further considerations, by way of *Marionettes* and related paintings, literature, film, and poetry, reflect on the concepts of representation, theatricality, and social performativity. Sargent’s painting also illuminates themes of sexuality and the freedom of emerging adolescence, which accentuates the divisions of class and gender in relation to this freedom, or the lack thereof. Moreover, each of these components centers on the function and necessity of performance and the social constraints on fantasy in Edwardian childhood, both in social self-presentation and educationally.

INTRODUCTION

John Singer Sargent’s *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-86) presents a quintessential fin-de-siècle characterization of childhood (see fig. 1). Art at the end of the Victorian and into the Edwardian eras often illustrates children in idealized settings of nature, meant to emphasize their innocence and disconnect from the world of adult anxieties and responsibilities (Gallati, 110). In *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, two young girls stand in a vibrantly blooming garden in pristine, starched, and frilly white dresses that contrast with the untamed nature surrounding them and suggest a middle to upper-class standing. The combination of the seemingly-angelic dresses and the natural setting suggest a naive, soothing, and virtuous relationship between children and nature. The soft glow of the Japanese lanterns on the ground and in the girls’ hands and their resulting wonder accentuates their disconnect from the world beyond their safely-constructed and superficial environment, despite the scene’s obvious association with the openness of the landscape and the adolescent concept of freedom. Sargent forces the viewer to suppress their immediate association of the Japanese lanterns with international commerce or empire, conveying a feeling that the lanterns are natural by the banks of the upper Thames River in the Cotswolds. The balance between this natural feeling and an underlying sense of otherness in relation to the lanterns reinforces the childish naivety of the painting. In his 1903 painting, *Marionettes*, Sargent introduces the viewer to a revised visualization of Edwardian childhood, centering on themes of performance, functional fantasy, and the divides of gender and class (see fig. 2).

His painting breaks through the façade of social performativity and the idealization of universal experience that frame Edwardian perceptions of childhood and illustrates a distinctly working-class, gendered experience of children. This representation, in turn, both contrasts and complements diverging representations of adolescent life from the same period. The Edwardian period represents a time of intense social and political upheaval, and Sargent’s *Marionettes* reflects this self-conscious critique and evolution of established Victorian concepts. Through this painting, Sargent evokes questions of representation, theatricality, freedom, and sexuality.
However, because of the perspective, the performers’ bodies and the rods controlling the puppets become confused. Sargent adds to the layered and interconnected appearance by refusing to paint the rods connecting the boys and puppets with any kind of solidity; in fact, as the rods descend to the puppets, the line becomes a single, dry sweep of the brush. The obscurity of the line appears almost as though the connection is evaporating from the surface; evidence of reality—the rod—is giving way to the world of fantasy where the puppets simply mirror the actions of the boys as they create a fantastical narrative for the audience. The inconclusive nature of the presented show’s story and the relationship between the puppeteers and puppets accentuates the dynamism of the scene and the parallelism of the fantasy realm and the real world.

The illegibility of the painting’s narrative raises the question of the role of the artist in this period. It is not for the artist to make the narrative happen or construct the fantasy; it is for the boys to do so. Sargent draws attention to and reframes the narrative before him; he is both the revealer of the scene and the ideologue of this nuanced visualization of childhood performance. No visual, textual, or aural representation, not even film—which did not include sound at this point in time—can convey the exact lived experience of a performance. In Marionettes, Sargent illuminates a lost component of the performance, namely the young boy performers usually overlooked by the audience, by highlighting them with dramatic lighting, as though placing a spotlight on the working-class boys rather than the show they orchestrate below.

Sargent further distinguishes this portrayal from his other works involving children, usually commissioned portraits, through the size of the painting. At 29 by 20 7/8 inches, Marionettes signifies a small canvas for Sargent, indicating an intimate interaction between viewer and image. This size contrasts directly with Sargent’s monumental, opulent portraits for patrons; it also introduces the possibility of Sargent painting the image in situ, rather than in a studio like his larger works. Moreover, he retained the work in his personal collection throughout his life, only exhibiting the painting once in 1906 for the New English Art Club Summer Exhibition (Ormond, 56). This suggests the painting explores a personal or perhaps even experimental approach to the subject matter, more so than his many commissioned works. The painting depicts a marionette show Sargent witnessed in the “slums” of Philadelphia on a months-long visit to the United States (Ormond, 56). He conveys the atmosphere of the environment in his inclusion of the dingy and confining backstage area behind the vibrantly-painted backdrop of the stage.

Considering the origin of marionette shows in Sicily, the performers of this seemingly-neoclassical narrative could be Sicilian immigrants (Ormond, 57). Such an assumption asks the viewer to reconsider which figures Sargent manufactures as othered in the scene, and actually aligns the striking otherness of the neoclassical puppets with the puppeteers themselves, intensifying their social displacement. This possible identification of the boys as Sicilian immigrants also adds another dimension to the painting of performing one’s own culture for a foreign audience, not entirely dissimilar from Sargent’s own ex-patriate status in England. This cultural distance allows Sargent to act as a third-party critical observer in his works and often penetrate the social façades of
his sitters (Stephenson, 210). Despite the painting’s intimate size and his personal connection with it, the nuanced perspective suggests that Sargent maintained his ability to critically observe and reframe the social performativity he witnessed, even in his home country and culture.

The boys in the painting themselves reflect a sense of social performance and constructive fantasy as strongly as the physical performance of the puppetry. They create a world of fantasy for their audience, transporting them to a skirmish of soldiers many centuries in the past; they cannot just observe the marionettes for their own enjoyment. Sargent draws attention to the act of their performance to capture this image of the Edwardian mentality of performativity, as it relates to children specifically. These working-class children see behind the curtain of the fantasy, having to create it rather than purely consume it like the middle and upper-class children can on the other side of the stage. Those consumers cannot see or rather disregard the painting’s view of the boys hard at work with this older man aggressively instructing them, and the façade of the stage and backdrop giving way to the backstage area. The performing boys do not have the privilege of the “introspection associated with the adolescent state” by the Edwardian middle class (Gallati, 104). Their experience with fantasy is structured, regulated, and fully guided by their director in a way that destroys their own ability to freely fantasize for themselves; their disillusionment pairs with their need to perpetually create a sense of fantasy for others. This sacrifice of their fantasy realm comes not by choice but by necessity to provide for themselves and their families.

**REPRESENTING GENDER AND CLASS**

The function of fantasy for the working-class boys in Sargent’s *Marionettes* directly contrasts with the depiction of middle-class children engaging with fantasy in William Rothenstein’s *In the Morning Room*, 1905 (see fig. 3). Rothenstein’s painting, like *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, represents the idea of “a playful childhood masquerade,” which was central to the Edwardian concept of childhood identity and its associated innocence (Gallati, 109). His focus on the middle class does not exude the same level of opulent privilege evident in some of Sargent’s grandiose family portraits, like *The Sitwell Family* (1900), but these solidly middle-class families do not have the same anxieties as the working class (see fig. 4). In the Rothenstein painting, a young girl and boy stand with their mother in a carefully constructed interior of gender binaries and conveyors of social status.

The girl holds a doll, suggesting that her fantasy is mothering—a fantasy which has probably been urged upon her and encouraged by her parents and society. The evidence of this influence lingers through the mother holding the girl’s hand and gazing specifically down upon the girl rather than the boy as if approving of her daughter’s chosen performance of her not-so-fantastical future. Girls of the working class must mother younger siblings rather than imagining the experience with dolls. She is clearly associated with the decorative, floral curtains hanging behind her and the paralleled arrangement of flowers on the mantle, which draw the viewer’s attention to the massive landscape painting above the mantle. This landscape symbolizes the general association of children with nature, though the colors of the landscape painting reflect the colors in the prominent Native American headdress of the boy.

The boy possesses the most freedom of fantasy and self-conscious performance. He can dress up however he likes without any real repercussions because of both his gender and station. At the same time, the boy is clearly learning either directly or subconsciously about imperialism and popular culture through his choice of a Native American costume. The performance connotes relations to the American westward expansion of the previous decades, and the clear reference to the Lost Boys, who first appear in J. M. Barrie’s 1904 play and the subsequent 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy* (Barrie). The allusion suggests a connection between the young girl and Barrie’s character Wendy, who—despite being a child herself—mothers the Lost Boys in the story. These same Lost Boys symbolize a sense of boyhood freedom and wildness that Rothenstein’s boy embodies through his associated costume. He presents himself as though on stage in his costume, reminiscent of the *Marionettes* scene, except he knowingly places himself on view, while the puppeteer boys usually remain behind the obscuring surface of the curtain. Furthermore, the interior space connects the boy with the large bookcase behind the group of fig-
Rothenstein conveys that these middle-class children are provided with the tools and the freedom—though limited in the case of the girl—to create and live their own fantasies. They do not contribute to the family either economically or domestically like working-class children. The presence of the mother in the scene reinforces this separation between the middle-class children and the outside world, with her actively embracing and holding the children as though restraining them from straying too far from social and familial expectations. Rothenstein accentuates the performativity of children in society through the costuming and composing of his figures and interior. However, Sargent not only considers the fantastical display of the puppet show but also physically and metaphorically draws back the curtain of the scene to reveal the construction of the fantasy and the real source of the performance.

Sargent’s Marionettes reveals to the viewer the same perspective Lily Bart encounters when—broke and judged for rumored affairs—her upper-class social circle rejects her in Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel, The House of Mirth, set in New York City. Sitting in a room surrounded by her former peers, Lily experiences “an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung” (Wharton, 291). She describes finding “amusement in the show” of the people’s behavior and interactions (Wharton, 291). Lily recognizes the performativity at the center of society in this period and reflects on the prescribed, superficial lives of those around her. Her ability to see behind the curtain and observe the ‘knotted threads’ and ‘loose ends’ of society, allows her to reflect on her role in the “great civic machine” (Wharton, 291). Similarly, Sargent reveals to the viewer the role of the boys in the marionette performance—their own position in the ‘great civic machine’ of society: Just as Lily sees ‘behind the social tapestry,’ Sargent brings the viewer “Behind the Curtain” of the show, which, appropriately, acted as the painting’s alternative title when presented in the 1906 New English Art Club Exhibition (Ormond, 56). The composition deliberately draws attention to the deception of the performance through the framing of the scene, but also the appearance of an offstage performer or observer glancing around the edge of the backdrop from backstage.

The man on the far right of the scene observes the dual performance of the puppeteers and puppets, yet he fixates on the marionettes and not the boys, similar to a traditional audience. He acts as a commentary on the blindness of most viewers who do not consider the real performance occurring behind the curtain, only the fantastical presentation in front. The mysterious man watches the puppet show intently, adding drama and suspense to the scene, and offers a strange parallel with the male puppet facing the viewer. The observing man exactly reflects the soldier puppet’s visage through a similar tilt to their heads, similarly shaped headgear, thick eyebrows, dark eyes over a large nose, and a drooping black moustache. The seemingly impassive or anticipatory expression on both of their faces completes the juxtaposition and raises the question—does Sargent suggest through the comparison that the performance is reflecting real life or that life reflects the performance? Or, perhaps Sargent indicates that the two are one and the same in his own modern world of idealized social facades and the employment of fantasy in childrearing practices. In a time of such explosive advancement and social, political, and economic upheaval, the turbulence of the constantly-evolving Edwardian culture manifests itself in this uncertainty of distinction between illusion and reality.

In his poem, “If—,” Rudyard Kipling acknowledges similar concepts of necessary performance in real-life situations through a call for self-control and self-awareness of young boys in order to achieve success and manliness. He reflects on all of the binaries, or contrasting ends of various social and personal spectra, that define a man’s position in society. This direct reference to opposing pairs of concepts contemplates the more general theme of the Edwardian era as a period of dualities—tradition and social upheaval, nostalgia for the past and present moment versus anticipation for the future, calm contentment and political unrest. Kipling references fantasy throughout the poem, both obliquely and directly:

Figure 4. John Singer Sargent. The Sitwell Family. 1900. Private Collection.
If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim [...]  
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch [...]  
(Kipling, lines 9-10, 25-26)

He clearly conveys the importance of fantasy and ‘dreams’ in childhood learning and development, but only up to a point before they impair one’s ability to remain rational in manhood. Kipling also references the necessity of performance and façade in order to maintain and protect one’s true identity and ‘virtue’ in all social situations. A self-conscious performativity is crucial to success as a man; one should not “look too good, nor talk too wise” or risk straying too far from the social status quo (Kipling, line 8). Level-headedness and creativity that does not surpass the expectations of decorum lead to the ultimate achievement of social and personal success, according to Kipling. He critiques the idea of boyhood as an age for physical liberty and freedom, recognizing its virtues in the development process, but the necessity of its careful restraint and ultimate restriction in order to conform to the expectations of the Edwardian social order.

EMERGENT ADOLESCENCE AND SEXUALITY

In Marionettes, Sargent similarly reflects on concepts of boyish physicality and freedom through the physical space he constructs and his embodiment of sexuality and interpersonal tension in the figures. The puppeteers’ performance necessitates a position so high up in the space that their heads almost reach the ceiling. The shadow of the older man’s head on the ceiling above him nearly touches his hair, signaling the confining environment in which Sargent depicts them. The composition almost imagines the figures are sitting in the ‘gods’ of a music hall watching their own performance, while also recognizing them as gods of the scene, manipulating the puppets on the stage below. The warm, dramatic glow of the lighting illustrates the heat of the space, especially up in the rafters of the building. The space itself, both physically and atmospherically, oppresses the burgeoning physicality and boyhood freedom of the young performers.

Illustrating the sweltering environment, the boy closest to the viewer and commanding the most space in the scene has removed his shirt, and the sleeves of the other boys’ shirts are rolled up, exposing their forearms. The combination of the heat, the labor of their performance, and the palpable sense of tension in the space between the boys and their director hints at a sense of “sexual awakening” (Gallati, 110). The boys, especially in their interaction with the older, authoritative man inserted between them signals a similar, though subtler, “fetishization of male sexuality” to many of his male portraits, like his garish, red-obsessed, theatrical portrait of Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi at Home (1881) (see fig. 5) (Stephenson, 212).

As in Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi, the scene in Marionettes conveys a sense of eroticism through the intense physicality and dramatic mannerisms of the figures (Stephenson, 212). The homoeroticism emerges most strongly through the juxtaposition of the semi-nude young boy and the older, fully-dressed man looming over the trio, accentuating the restrictive space and exacerbating the tension of the contrast in their portrayals and the protruding limbs of the boys. Even the loose, tactile way in which Sargent paints the shirtless boy’s protruding arm and torso demonstrates a distinct physicality, dynamism, and fleshiness in his representation.

Indicating a direct contrast with this sexuality-focused aspect of Sargent’s subversive presentation of Edwardian childhood, the universal image of the child in Edwardian society promoted a necessary shielding from “adult knowledge” like economic concerns and sexuality (Davin, 52). This period also featured a distinct rise in anxiety about urban children’s health, which directly correlated with worries about England’s imperial and economic future (Davin, 53). As a result, along with the implementation of mandatory schooling, education came to include physical improvement
through exercises called ‘physical jerks.’ This educational and societal evolution of childhood development manifests in Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon’s film of children doing airplane exercises at Audley Range School in Blackburn (ca. 1904) (Mitchell and Kenyon). In Marionettes, Sargent counters this view of working-class children as ill, unhealthy, and weak; in fact, the three young boys appear quite strong and healthy, possibly as a result of their intense labor.

The ‘physical jerks’ exemplified in the film aimed to prepare boys for becoming soldiers and address the general anxieties about the urban world degenerating the human body, especially that of the working class (Davin, 53). Upon a first viewing, the video clearly illustrates the employment of fantasy, even in schoolroom education. The children pretend to fly like an airplane or Peter Pan; the teachers encourage the children, for the purpose of exercise, to imagine they are someone or something else. The routine, orchestrated manner of the continuous rounds suggests a learned performativity of the airplane and other exercises. Additionally, through the subtle or overt glances of children toward the camera, they know someone is filming them, which adds another layer of self-conscious performance to their actions.

Upon closer analysis, the gendered distinctions and limitations of the exercises become clear. The boys bend at the waist and reach their arms over their heads; their movements convey a feeling of freedom and explosive action. Meanwhile, the girls’ exercises only require that they hold their arms out straight from their bodies and bend them at the elbow—they reflect a clear restriction of movement. Even in these schoolyard exercises, the sense of educational fantasy for girls is limited. Boys can roam free and hold complete control over their fantasy worlds, but social expectation still confines girls even within that constructed fantasy.

**CONCLUSION**

This clear distinction between genders calls attention to one of the most defining aspects of Sargent’s Marionettes, in consideration of representing the purpose and function of fantasy in Edwardian childhood. The image presents a distinctly gendered scene. The youngest boy farthest from the viewer controls the only female puppet, suggesting a hierarchy among the puppeteers, with the manly, fighting roles preferred. Furthermore, the only female figure in the scene is the female puppet itself. While the male puppets, presumably a Roman soldier by his distinctive, crested helmet and an adversary, engage in a theatrical battle, the young lady puppet in black stands motionless—the only truly static figure in the composition. This visual manifestation of the ‘damsel in distress’ perpetuates the limitation of fantasy in the minds of many girls watching the performance to a strictly inactive and helpless role in society while the male marionettes and the boys manipulating them engage in an intensely physical act just in front of her.

This lack of female representation in a working-class setting contrasts with Sargent’s Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, which emphasizes the naïve charm of young girls in Edwardian culture, as seen in Rothenstein’s painting, but also centers on their proper, middle-class dress and natural environment, outside of which their very representation becomes sidelined, as in Marionettes. While Edwardian culture historically reflects a universal “middle-class ideal” of childhood, lessening the distinctions between class and gender to some degree, Sargent’s Marionettes highlights the multifarious nature of children’s experiences at the time (Davin, 62).

Rothenstein’s In the Morning Room, Sargent’s Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, and Kipling’s “If—” convey a distinctly middle-class, innocent, and structured representation of childhood. They each illustrate the social norms of children and unobtrusively reflect the differences between gendered expectations in respectable society. Rather than obscuring the demarcations between these ‘Edwardian childhoods,’ Sargent illuminates the class and gender divides in Marionettes. He reframes these divisions to illustrate the necessity of performativity and the central role of fantasy in the lives of the Edwardian child; he opens the viewer’s eyes to a multi-faceted, layered understanding of the child’s experience in Edwardian society. The Mitchell and Kenyon film further indicates the variety of experience as it relates to education and gender in the Edwardian school system, illustrating the functional implementation of fantasy, but also evidencing the distinction between male and female physical movement, or the lack thereof. Sargent additionally ruminates on the duality of childhood innocence and the inherent sexuality of emerging adolescence, adding to the kaleidoscopic representation. Similarly, Sargent presents a juxtaposition of burgeoning boyhood freedom and the limitations of children at the time, especially in relation to class, as he reflects on the contrast of the working-class boys to the nicely-dressed, adult director.

By approaching these themes through examples of paintings, literature, poetry, and film, the reframing of childhood in the Edwardian period and its various layers in Sargent’s Marionettes manifests itself with greater clarity. The multiplicity of media works to balance the drawbacks of each, giving words to the silent film, images to the texts and poetry, and movement to the still compositions. This balance of media and the consideration of class, gender, and education illuminate the implementation and practical function of performance and fantasy in Edwardian childhood, whether that function applies to physical education, work, family responsibilities, or general preparation for the child’s future in society.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

REFERENCES


For Amy DeLaBruere, the literary and visual arts are two branches of the same organism. Amy is a senior pursuing a double major in Art History and English who uses her study of English to better understand artworks and uses examples of visual arts when reading literature or studying poetry. She grew up making visual art in her small hometown in Northern Vermont where she also spent a lot of her time outdoors, running and hiking. As an artist, she enjoys black and white analog photography and printmaking the most. She believes that the darkroom is one of the most relaxing and meditative places you can find. However, as an art historian, she thinks that painting is often the most approachable art medium. One of the people who inspires DeLaBruere and her love for art is her mom, who is an artist and an art teacher. She encouraged her to convey her thoughts and feelings through art while growing up, and they would frequently visit museums as a family.

DeLaBruere’s love for reading has motivated her hobby of collecting old books, including first edition copies of her favorite books such as Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Dorothea Lange’s *Ireland* (1996)—a collection of Dorothea Lange’s black and white photographs in the west of Ireland with an accompanying essay! Moreover, her favorite artist is Edward Hopper, but she also has a soft spot for the French Impressionists. In her first year at Yale, DeLaBruere began working at the reference library in the Yale Center for British Art where she became an expert in bibliographies while sifting the library’s resources to find references to specific paintings in the collection. She later became a gallery guide and a curatorial assistant in the prints and drawings department at the Yale University Art Gallery. On-campus, she serves as the managing editor for *Asterisk* Journal for Art and Art History, an art history journal based in New Haven, which provides an outlet for discourse around art for undergraduates. DeLaBruere’s favorite place on campus is the ancient gallery in the Yale University Art Gallery, which has a beautiful neo-gothic interior, massive ceiling windows, and a two-story-high ceiling that lets in light that beautifully illuminates the statues and mosaics.

In her research, DeLaBruere uses her background in the visual arts as a lens to look at Edwardian (1901-1910) childhood to explore the role that performance and fantasy play in it as a way to extrapolate gender roles and class divides. Inspired by a graduate-level history class she took on “Edwardian Modernity” with Professor Timothy Barringer, her research incorporates visual arts, music, and poetry as a means to look at history differently. Her practical and experimental exploration of art and her background with an artistic mother allow her to see art through both an analytic and creative perspective.

For the full-length profile, visit yalesymposia.com