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DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION



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SOUS LA DIRECTION DE MM A.JUNQUA

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DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

“Education should train the child to use his brains, to make himself a place in the world and maintain his rights even when it seems that society would shove him into the scrap-head” Helen Keller, *The Home Magazine* (in the article “going back to school” *The True Meaning of the Value of Education*, September 1934¹)

Human beings are lifelong learners, and the role of education is placed in the hands of many key figures who will follow them throughout their development. First of all, parents are responsible for family education. Their role is to protect, raise and educate and transmit values. Family education is about learning how relationships between people work and to enable physical, intellectual and emotional development. Then the teachers provide knowledge, guide and "teach how to learn". The process established by the teacher is called instruction : through a didactic approach, i.e. the transmission of knowledge and the science of teaching, and a pedagogical approach, i.e. strategies and methods associated with teaching, the teacher must ensure the proper training of his pupil in his intellectual development. The teacher is what we call a pedagogue. Not only does he have a sense of teaching, but his training makes him a specialist in education. In other words, education is essential in the world we live in, as it allows us to evolve, to learn, and to understand how to live and integrate in society. More generally, and according to Michel Blay's definition of education in his publication "Dictionnaire des concepts philosophiques", education is an action that aims to make the child a complete man. ² Also, it helps us stand out against others, learning more, building up our general culture, mastering knowledge, learning new skills. It defines our personality and opens doors in life.

1 Keller, Helen. “Essay by Helen Keller about Education, ‘Going Back to School’, in *The Home Magazine* 1934.”

2 Blay, Michel. *Dictionnaire Des Concepts Philosophiques (In Extenso) (French Edition)*, LAROUSSE, 2013.

But education is also the knowledge and practice of social customs. It is about all the habits integrated into daily life, at work and in the domestic sphere. All these habits, routines and traditions are what dissociate us from the State of Nature, what developed, and formerly colonial countries define as “savagery” and psychologists as and immaturity.

As early as the 18th century and especially at the beginning of the 19th century, a new and unusual phenomenon fascinated people: that of feral children. A feral child, or wild child means a child who, through some known or unknown circumstance, had grown up apart from any other human being, from any social group.

The first known and reported case at the time was that of Victor de l'Aveyron, in France, Occitanie. Victor, then aged about ten, was captured in 1785. He was unable to speak and socially unfit. He was rescued by a pedagogue, Jean Itard, who tried to re-educate him, in vain. This story gave rise to a film directed by François Truffaut "The Wild Child", released in 1970. This film has popularised a rare phenomenon, but one that fascinates us : the concept and examples of unsocialised children. Let us define more precisely the terms and roots of this fascination : the terms “feral”, “wild” establishes a causal link between a human child and the state of Nature as defined by J.J Rousseau. One child is taken away from social interaction, deprived of the human “other” and grows into what we consider “strange” and “other”.

Rousseau defines the State of nature as a myth to help us understand how illegitimate power came about, but also to try to understand what the deep nature of man is. In his myth he explains that at the time people were free, preserving their integrity and their survival instinct which resulted in a form of intelligence. People naturally felt pity and shared a common compassion and suffering as something innate. Thus, deeply disgusted by Mankind, he believes that civilised people have been perverted and idealises his pre-civilisation ideal, a period he presents as idyllic, peaceful and pure.³

'Man is born pure, society corrupts him.'

3 Munro, André. “State of Nature | Definition, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Social Contract.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 July 2021

Victor represented a forgotten attempt at education, but children deprived of communication can achieve fascinating results when they are rehabilitated and integrated into a human social system : Helen Keller is a good example. Helen Keller was an American author, educator and lecturer. She was born in 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama and she died in 1968. She became deaf and blind as a result of a disease, that medical professionals attribute to scarlet fever or bacterial meningitis, when she was only 19 months old and became “wild”. In her autobiography, she explains :

“I think I knew when I was naughty, for I knew that it hurt Ella, my nurse, to kick her, and when my fit of temper was over I had a feeling akin to regret. But I cannot remember any instance in which this feeling prevented me from repeating the naughtiness when I failed to get what I wanted.”

She had no discipline, no awareness of social codes and no understanding of the restraints and rules of society, her parents could not control her anymore. Unable to communicate and frustrated, she was in need of communication, solicitation, and attention, which her parents alone could not provide. In 1887, Mrs Sullivan, a 20-year old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, became her teacher. Anne followed Helen throughout her life. Helen became a famous author and wrote numerous books, including her autobiography *The Story of My Life* first published in 1902. Her story has inspired many films including “Deliverance”, a 1919 silent film directed by George Foster Platt, and “The Miracle Worker” directed by Arthur Penn and released in 1962.

In this research study I will therefore focus on the place of education in these works.

I chose this topic with my tutor, Mrs Junqua, to better understand these so-called "wild" children and the fascination that their strangeness and singularity arouse. It is also for me a subject that echoes my curriculum, because understanding education and the different attitudes towards learning in my pupils is also the task of a teacher.

Helen Keller is particularly relevant for a future foreign language teacher because learning how to sign and how to communicate with other people re-integrated her into a social group, taught her concepts and mental frames that allowed her to find a stable awareness of herself, to develop her abilities and to express her thoughts about a society she could not perceive before.

I] Isolation and its devastating effects on language acquisition

Education has been the subject of much research, theory and experimentation for centuries. In the two films I will be analysing, I will also focus on the development and acquisition of language, which is a fundamental stage of cognitive development in children. I will also focus on the disastrous consequences and brain alterations on children who are isolated from birth or deprived of affection.

A) Early work on language acquisition and isolation on the cognitive system :

In the Middle Ages, the debate raged between the theory of language as a gift from God, and language as the result of shared cultural conventions. In the middle of the 12th century, the debate took on a scientific dimension.

The first experiment of torture that we can mention is that of the controversial Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who was very interested in education. His curiosity and thirst for knowledge led him to ask the question: "What was the first language in history? The language of God, the original language?" He thought that language was something innate. For this he conducted a terrible experiment in the 13th century: it consisted of raising babies away from the world, in a confined space, and asking nurses to look after the group of babies, without ever speaking to them. All the children died from this experiment without ever having spoken a word. ⁴

4 Winsham, Willow. "Emperor Frankenstein: The Truth Behind Frederick II of Sicily's Sadistic Science Experiments."

But Frederick II was not the first to ask this question and a similar experiment had already been carried out in the middle of the fifth century BC.

This story is reported by Herodotus in his "Histories", a record of traditions, politics and geography published in 430 BC. He recounts the experience of the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus, who in order to determine "what the original primitive race was" gave a shepherd the responsibility of raising two children far from civilisation. Legend has it that after two years of isolation, the children spontaneously learned vocabulary. One day, they ran to the man, distinctly asking for bread.⁵

Even if the veracity of these stories is now questioned, and they can be considered as legends, they still raise strong sociolinguistic questions : "Can you learn to speak if you have never been exposed to a language as a child?".

Today, such experiments to confirm or refute this question would be unthinkable, but many cases have occurred accidentally throughout history: those of feral children.

Victor de l'Aveyron was one of the first cases documented by his teacher Jean Itard.

Despite his teacher's determination to reintegrate him into society, Victor never managed to reach the level of children of his age.

'My expectations were entirely frustrated; and all I could obtain from this long series of cares was reduced to the emission of a few shapeless monosyllables, sometimes acute, sometimes grave, and much less clear than those I had obtained in my first attempts. I held on, however, and struggled for a long time against the stubbornness of the organ, until at last, seeing that the continuity of my care and the succession of time made no change, I resigned myself to ending my last attempts at speech, and abandoned my pupil to an incurable mutism.' Jean Itard - Mémoire (1801)

et Rapport (1806) sur Victor de l'Aveyron

5 Sulek, Antoni. "The Experiment of Psammetichus: Fact, Fiction, and Model to Follow." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 4 (1989): 645–51.

More recently, another wild child was discovered in 1970. The Genie case is different from that of Victor, who grew up in the wild. Genie grew up in an abusive and unbalanced family. She was forced to wear a straitjacket for more than 13 hours a day, was tied to a chair that served as her toilet, isolated, in the dark. If she made the slightest noise, her father would beat her with a wooden board, bark at her, growl at her, scratch her. Her father forbade her family members to talk to her, so until the age of 8, Genie was never spoken to. The physical consequences were terrible: at the age of 14 when she was found by social services, she was 1.37m tall and weighed only 27kg. She could not stand normally and had the mentality of a 13-month-old child. She showed no signs of attachment or love for anyone and would not let anyone approach her. When she was sad or angry, she would hurt herself and had no reaction or expression towards people who spoke to her⁶.



Within a year of her being found, she had already learned about 15 words but was never able to learn language. She was the subject of much research but was greatly protected by one of her teachers, Jean Butler.

6 Carroll, Rory. "Starved, Tortured, Forgotten: Genie, the Feral Child Who Left a Mark on Researchers." *The Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2018

However, rumours gradually spread that Butler wanted to make a success of the case by becoming the 'new Anne Sullivan' who had enabled Helen Keller to speak.⁷ As a result, Genie was removed from Butler's home and taken in by David Rigler, a psychologist who took her in for four years. In 1975, Genie returned to live with her mother before being sent to the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. Today, Genie lives in an institution for underdeveloped adults but she cannot use her vocal chords: she expresses her needs through signs.

This demonstrates two things: the first is that from a certain age, usually after the onset of puberty, it is impossible to acquire language, or at least to catch up with other children. The second is that isolation has terrible consequences for cognitive and social development. This also can be explained by the deprivation of affection from an early age.

René Spitz's works in the 1940s were the first to confirm that social interactions with other humans are necessary for a child's proper development.

While following a group of babies placed in a prison nursery because they had been abruptly separated from their delinquent mothers, he noticed various stages that testify to the separation: in the first stage, the child screams and cries, seeking contact. Then the separation influences the child's quality of life, sleep and growth. Finally, in the third month after separation, the child is emotionally detached and no longer shows any interest or affection for people or the surroundings. All these stages mark the irreversibility of the disease of hospitalism, also called "separation disease" discovered by the psychoanalyst René Spitz. Children who suffer from this illness are often mistaken for autistic or retarded children. They show several symptoms such as repetitive rocking or staring into space. Some even go so far as to hit themselves. This reveals that the nursery system is detrimental to the child's quality of life, as the nannies were not able to provide individualised care to the child, nor were they able to form a bond of affection or attachment with them.

⁷ Cherry, Kendra. "The Story of 'Genie,' a Child Deprived of Nearly All Human Contact." *Verywell Mind*, 7 Feb. 2022

The nature of this care was more of an automatic one. As the child is not accompanied, this causes psychomotor and intellectual delays. It is only recently that the psychology of the baby has been really taken into account in the field of paediatrics.⁸

In the early 2000s, a team of researchers from the University of Wisconsin conducted an experiment analysing the presence of two hormones that play a key role in regulating social behaviour, stress and the establishment of bonds of trust: vasopressin and oxytocin. The experiment compared the levels of these two hormones in the urine of two groups of children, natural children and babies who had been adopted after more than 16 months, after they had played with their mothers. The hormone levels increased significantly in the natural children after contact with their biological mothers. Late-adopted children, on the other hand, did not show this response.

The conclusion of this experiment may show that care during the first years of an infant's life is necessary for good development. For their part, children who have not received affection during their early childhood may in the long term develop behaviours linked to this deprivation.⁹

To conclude this section, today the debate about whether language is innate or acquired is still pervasive among thinkers. Nativists, such as Noan Chomsky, consider that humans have a universal grammar within them and that culture and the social environment only provide elements to unlock the levers linked to language acquisition. For others, like Piaget, language is the result of a complex construction. They believe that the individual's experience must be taken into account, and that social construction is an integral part of language learning.

8 Rowold K. What Do Babies Need to Thrive? Changing Interpretations of 'Hospitalism' in an International Context, 1900-1945. *Soc Hist Med*. 2019

9 Morin, Hervé. "Privé d'affection, le nourrisson souffre de modifications cérébrales." *Le Monde.fr*, 22 Nov. 2005

B) Para-verbal communication.

As seen above, children who are cut off from the world during the first years of their lives fail to develop verbal language and often only manage to learn a meagre vocabulary.

However, wild children are both portrayed as very good para-verbal communicators:

They had no difficulty expressing their basic needs or simple feelings.

Their means of communication is therefore similar to animal communication: in animals, the degree of displacement is relatively limited. For example, it is impossible for an animal to express ideas related to the concept of the past or the future. As Professor R.Sapolsky says in his lecture on language "the overwhelming majority of animal communication is about emotion". Also, the arbitrariness of language is important: to express a feeling of fear, an animal will produce a sound, a cry. Human beings, in a situation of fear, will be able to explain what they feel by using words that in another context would not be attached to this particular feeling. Sapolsky explains that "it's an arbitrary relationship between the signal and the message".¹⁰

C) Language acquisition through sign language: the education for the blind in the 19th century.

Helen Keller's success, despite her disability, is a testament to a great deal of support throughout her life. Historically speaking, blind people have been provided with support since the beginning of the 13th century. In particular, Saint Louis founded the Quinze-vingts hospice for the blind in Paris.

In 1784, Valentin Haüy founded the first school for the education of young blind people, a project that was taken up in many European countries and also in the United States. The Perkins School for the Blind, which Helen Keller's teacher Anne Sullivan attended, opened its doors in 1829 and was the first institution for the blind in the United States.

The learning techniques were also developed by Haüy: this consisted of an alphabet with embossed

letters. After 1852, this system was replaced by the Braille alphabet.

For deaf and dumb people, the first to establish a teaching method for them was the Spanish Benedictine Pedro de Ponce (1520-1584)

In 1760, the Abbé de l'Épée created the first public school for the deaf and dumb, where the method used was the so-called "mimic" method, where each letter of the alphabet was associated with a certain finger placement. While today institutions are in place to enable children with visual or hearing disabilities to find their place in society, this was not always the case. Deaf and blind people have long lived as prisoners in their families, in hospitals and asylums. The motivations for educating these young disabled people took on a whole new dimension, from the desire to "normalise" and rehabilitate the excluded through education in the 18th century, to the desire to train deaf and blind people for adapted jobs.

In 1829, the aim of the Perkins School for the Blind was to open doors to education, and above all to make these people more independent.

The support for the blind and deaf today still offers family support but also counselling and vocational integration. The palliative techniques used remain strangely similar to those used since the beginning of education, from the use of embossed Roman letters, engraved boards and tactile maps to the study of Braille, the use of pictograms and typewriting.

II- The importance of Education and the role of the instructor

A) Similarities between the two teachers

In the two main sources that make up this dossier, *The Wild Child* by François Truffaut and *The Miracle Worker* by Arthur Penn, the teacher is a key element because it is through his education that the whole film evolves. The two teachers have many things in common, starting with their age. Anne Sullivan is portrayed as a 20-year-old teacher who has just graduated. These defining features make Captain Keller incredulous that a half-blind, inexperienced teacher will not

be able to help his daughter. In *The Wild Child*, Itard's age is not specified, but historically speaking, he was a member of a Parisian society set up for the purpose of preparing research on the wild child. Itard was a 26 year-old medical student at the time Victor was captured. Both are initially presented as the saviours of the children they will try to educate.

At the beginning of *The Miracle Worker*, the opening scene shows Helen's parents standing by the cot, looking very involved in their child's health and well-being. Then, very quickly, we learn that the disease has left Helen blind and deaf. So the parents are terrified when they discover their baby's deafness and blindness. Their reaction may seem excessive to the spectator, but we understand their fright, they are distraught (*The Miracle Worker* 00:00:23 - 00:03:10). The film then jumps back in time to show us Helen at the age of 6. Helen discovers the world with her fingertips, closely followed by her mother. Wild, due to the pity of her parents who let her do everything during the first years of her education, she is unstoppable and fights with the other children. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:05:36) One of the first facts we can observe is the opposition between the two parents, with on the one hand the mother who is determined to find a solution for her daughter and on the other hand the father who says he has tried everything, showing himself to be defeatist and pessimistic, even refusing to contact the Perkins School for the Blind to ask for help for his daughter. The father uses very violent words, calling his daughter retarded, and even thinking of sending her to an asylum. We also learn that she is not yet potty trained. Overall, she is seen by the men in her family as a savage. For her mother, Helen's behaviour is explained by her frustration at not being able to see or speak. This is made clear in a dialogue between the parents where Helen tries to imitate her parents' mouth movements by touching their lips when they speak. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:08:50- 00:09:50)



This is followed by a scene where Helen accidentally knocks her baby sister down, indicating to her parents that she is becoming a danger to the house and that it is more than urgent to teach her discipline. It is therefore in this negative climate of indiscipline and conflict that young Anne Sullivan intervenes, becoming the saviour of her young pupil, but also the saviour of the whole family.

In *The Wild Child*, Itard is also quickly presented as the child's saviour. The child's wildness is made clear from the beginning of the film. The child is directly opposed to humans who could be described as 'civilised' and 'educated': he has all the characteristics of an animal. He is naked, climbs trees and even lives in a burrow. Its opposition to humans is also illustrated by the fact that a peasant woman runs away out of fear of the child. During the chase scene with the hunters, the child is presented as game and is almost more similar to the hunting dogs that chase him than to the hunters. (*The Wild Child* 00:00:46 - 00:08:41)



This animalisation of the child continues when he is captured and tied up in a barn. Victor is gradually humanised throughout the film, as he is first covered in a suit of clothes.

When he tries to escape, everyone runs after him. The child tries to hurt several people and conversely. It is as if the survival of the fittest had to be re-established between two different species. (*The Wild Child* 00:09:31- 00:12:03)

Jean Itard, for his part, is presented as a doctor, serious, clean-cut, almost stuffy in his suit. He can be presented as a bourgeois, as well as an educated man. The child having just been captured, he attracts the morbid curiosity of the Aveyron village in which he was captured and causes the same reactions in Paris. In Paris, he is considered as an object of investigation, of experimentation. The crowd goes so far as to chase the cart that brought him to Paris, as if the child were a freak. (*The Wild Child* 00:15:44 – 00:16:28) At the National Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, he is later exhibited in front of bourgeois Parisians, who queued up to satisfy their desire for "unwholesome sensationalism". (*The Wild Child* 00:22:14 – 00:23:31)

Jean Itard, among all these people, seems to be the only one concerned by the well-being and the future of the child. He finds it unworthy that people treat him as they do, and that he is not considered like other children on the pretext that he is an "inferior being".

"The child will die here, all we do is exhibit him like a freak" Jean Itard
– *The Wild Child (1970) (00:24:42)*

A sentence uttered in the film reflects this strong discrimination : "he's lower than an animal". (*The Wild Child* 00:24:49). According to Philippe Pinel, he belongs in Bicêtre, an asylum. However, Itard is eager to know about where and in what conditions Victor will be sent. The discussion between Philippe Pinel and Itard is fundamental because it bears witness to the scientific thinking of the time. According to Pinel, Victor was abandoned because he was abnormal. For Itard, Victor became abnormal because of his isolation. (*The Wild Child* 00:25:21 – 00:26:33)

Both theories are plausible, although as seen earlier, Spitz's work seems to confirm that the damage of isolation can fully explain the situation of the wild child. Itard then decides to take the child under his wing, out of a desire to try to educate him. The two teachers thus become the saviours and educators of the two children. However, they adopt different methods and follow different paths in the two films.

B) The methods of the two teachers

Anne Sullivan is sent to the Kellers by the Perkins School for the Blinds, from which she has just graduated. Anne naturally shares similarities with her young pupil, as she herself was blind as a young girl and had undergone numerous operations to regain her sight, the latest just before she takes the train to help Helen Keller. Anne is presented in the film as an extremely charismatic woman who is determined to get what she wants. At the beginning of the film, she makes initial contact with the girl by working with the senses she has and which she uses extensively throughout the film: touch and smell. Annie allows herself to be touched, and Helen to touch her things. Her teaching begins very quickly, using games and typewriting. It is through this method that Anne wishes to teach Helen the signifier/signified link: the idea that words mean ideas, that everything has a name that is associated with a word. She forms the letters in her hand and associates them with objects Helen knows, and starts with a doll, for which she mimes the word DOLL in her pupil's hand. She teaches her to mime first before establishing an association in her mind. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:16:30 – 00:25:10)



Helen soon sees Anne as an intruder in the house, and overall, Anne is not taken seriously, especially by the men in the family. Helen's mother is more concerned about her daughter's learning, as she asks Anne to teach her the alphabet so that she can communicate with her daughter. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:34:50)

A scene that may seem ironic but which will make sense by the end of the film is when Helen decides to lock her teacher in the bedroom and then hides the key to prevent her from leaving. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:26:20) The beginning of the film largely represents Helen's wild and unruly side, throwing tantrums and hitting her teacher.

In order for Helen to understand more abstract concepts such as "BAD" and "GOOD", Anne goes through facial mime exercises, which she lets Helen touch so that she can express them in turn. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:31:20). Helen puts her teacher to the test, going from a moment of success, to a moment of failure and discouragement. However, even in the scene when Helen breaks an object, it is understandable that she understands, as she immediately manages to mimic the emotion "BAD", which is encouraging for her teacher because despite her stubbornness, the student is learning. The learning process is puzzling for the family, as the father considers it useless to mime. Anne Sullivan manages to make her method clear through the metaphor of the baby: A baby who is spoken to does not immediately understand everything that is said to him, to his ear it is gibberish, but little by little everything can be learnt and understood. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:33:50)

Both teachers report their progress by writing it down. It seems that their strategy is quite different: Annie wants to undo in order to better rebuild, because her pupil has been badly brought up and badly educated. This is particularly the case in the meal scene, in which she wants to start from scratch her whole education from the beginning to place her pupil in a framework that will make her more civilised. Jean Itard, on the other hand, wants to take over the education of a child who has never known any framework, who is uneducated. In order to continue Helen's education in the most effective way, Annie decides to remove Helen from what she believes has handicapped her all her life: her parents' pity. She refuses to give up and wants Helen to depend entirely on her. She understands her pupil and wants to protect her from the fate that would befall her if she were abandoned, the asylum. She explains to the family the sad youth she spent there, demonstrating once again her closeness to her pupil, but also her empathy for little Helen, similar to that of Itard

for Victor when Pinel wanted to send him to Bicêtre. To further her education, she wants to live with Helen in the family cottage. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:57:33-1:02:43).

The father gives her two weeks to make progress with her daughter. Helen is forcibly separated from her mother and is like a prisoner of her teacher whom she is now afraid of. This is a huge challenge for the young teacher, who must not only win back the trust of her student, which she has lost, but also make progress to keep her job with the Keller family. The success of her apprenticeship lies in the unconditional love she has for Helen, but also in the understanding she shows by seeing herself through her. As Helen is not very demonstrative and cannot express herself, Anne Sullivan will succeed in understanding her deepest needs.

"That little head is dying to know". Anne Sullivan – *The Miracle Worker* (1962)
(1:09:03)

In questioning how she will awaken Helen, Anne operates with a new idea: she teaches another child in front of Helen in order to frustrate her and by her attention to another child, to make her want to learn. In this way, Helen demonstrates that she can spell but does not yet know the link between the gestures she is learning and their meaning. Annie then works with a reward system very similar to the one Itard uses with Victor. (*The Miracle Worker* 1:11:30)

Both teachers use milk as a reward because these are primary needs that satisfy the children. Itard uses a combination of game and food as a reward to keep his pupil's attention. Victor's intelligence is demonstrated in all the strategies he employs to claim for milk. First of all, he taps on the cupboard where he knows the jug of milk is kept. Itard teaches him by showing him how to turn the key to open the cupboard. (*The Wild Child* 00:38:26 – 00:39:30)

Then, later, during a new visit to citizen Lmeri's house, he brings his bowl to ask for milk, proof that he can make the connection between milk and the container that holds it. (*The Wild Child* 00:43:45 – 00:44:23)

He finally manages to associate his desire with a word and its alphabetical representation. He brings the wooden letters to form the word. (The Wild Child 01:03:29 – 01:05:41). As seen earlier, Victor is a very good paraverbal communicator. He is able to make his needs understood by tapping on objects as if asking for milk or food, but fails to ask for what he wants using language.

After many attempts, he manages to say the word MILK but only after receiving milk, which is a great frustration for Itard. In his report, he explains:

[free translation] “If this word had come out of his mouth before the concession of the desired thing, it would have been done; the true use of speech would have been grasped by Victor; a point of communication would have been established between him and me, and the most rapid progress would have depended on this first success. Instead of all this, I had just obtained an expression, insignificant to him and useless to us, of the pleasure he felt.” Jean Itard – *Mémoire et Rapport sur Victor de l'Aveyron* - 1806



Through frustration, Helen wants to approach her teacher again, and this is how Helen regains confidence in Anne Sullivan. After teaching her the proper way to eat and fold her napkin, Annie wants to teach Helen how to dress herself, in order to make her more independent. This learning is also rewarded. (*The Miracle Worker* 1:18:45) Once again, it is a method that both teachers use in

their learning. In *the Wild Child*, Itard says, “we show him the usefulness of clothes by leaving him in the cold with his clothes beside him until he decides to put them on without assistance” (*The Wild Child* 00:32:11)



This is followed by an accumulation of scenes where Annie makes Helen touch objects before miming their word in her hand. Annie gradually loses her courage, as her pupil is only receptive to the playful aspect of her learning. She is not satisfied with obedience; she wants to give her access to language.

Annie learns from her learning for Helen, but what is particularly striking is how she never questions her student's intelligence, abilities or motivation. As she goes along, she questions her own learning:

"I feel every day more and more inadequate" Anne Sullivan – ***The Miracle Worker*** (1962)

In *the Wild child*, Jean Itard uses different methods to try to educate his pupil. First of all, Jean Itard makes him more “human” by providing him with a more “human” or social appearance : such as cutting his nails, hair and giving him a bath. Then the doctor works on his posture. It looks as though he were teaching a baby how to walk. (*The Wild Child* 00:27:21 – 00:29:25)

In addition to learning academic skills such as reading, writing and language, Itard also had to teach his pupil how to behave in society, including the ritual of eating. (*The Wild Child* 00:29:30). The latter is what dissociates us from the animal stage. It is also a ritual that is explored in both films. It also shows Helen's wildness, which, despite having grown up in society, has not been taught to eat properly.



Also, after the MILK as a reward, the two teachers make their students work with water. Again, this is a primary need. Their strategies are also different:

Jean Itard constantly repeats the "O" sound to which Victor is very receptive. At the table, he repeats the word "WATER" several times so that the student makes the connection between the word and the concept. When Victor asks for water, he waits for him to repeat it before giving him the glass, but he is confronted with a failure and gives him the glass without any result from Victor. (*The Wild Child* 00:42:42 – 00:43:50). Anne for her part, makes Helen touch water before miming the word on her hand. She repeats it several times, using the water of the washroom, but also the water of the river. It is by the word WATER that Helen will finally reach the meaning.

More interestingly, by choosing the name Victor, Jean Itard killed two birds with one stone. Not only did he give him an identity, so that he can build himself and forge his personal history, but his first name was not chosen at random. Very receptive to the sound "O", the choice of the name Victor is no coincidence. It is a name that allowed his teacher to stimulate him and maintain his attention. In the film, he also teaches him how to write his first name and tries to teach him the link between the word and his identity. (*The Wild Child* 01:09:48). Itard realizes that he is asking much from Victor and he also questions his teaching:

“I see I've gone too fast” Jean Itard – The Wild Child (1970) (00:47:30)

At that moment he tries to inculcate language to him, with the help of a candle but also by placing his hands on his vocal cords. To work on his hearing, he uses instruments, on which he taps.

Victor, blindfolded, must reproduce the sounds he hears. (*The Wild Child* 00:47:41 – 00:49:28)

While observing Victor trying to put the objects around him in the right place, Jean Itard introduces a new exercise to Victor: he draws objects with chalk on a board, and Victor has to hang the objects on their visual representation. This exercise is rewarded with a glass of water. By making this exercise more complicated by asking Victor to associate the object with the simple writing of the word, Itard is confronted with a new failure. (*The Wild Child* 00:55:04)

[free translation] "I resigned myself to it courageously, persuaded that if I had not been understood by my pupil, the fault lay with me. I resigned myself courageously, convinced that if I had not been understood by my pupil, the fault was mine rather than his. From the figure of an object to its alphabetical representation, the distance is immense and all the greater for the pupil as it presents itself there, at the first steps of instruction. " Jean Itard – *Mémoire et Rapport sur Victor de l'Aveyron* - 1806

A new exercise consisting of a wooden alphabet requires Victor to classify the letters. He cleverly uses a trick and stacks letters in order beforehand. After the reward system, during Victor's tantrums, Itard gives him punishments: he locks Victor in the black cabinet. Victor then succeeds in completing the required exercise. (*The Wild Child* 01:00:57 - 01:03:24). Itard also presents an exercise in the form of lists of objects that Victor must bring back to him. During this exercise, Itard realizes that during his learning process, Victor acts out of fear of punishment and desire for reward.

Itard wishes to make him understand the meaning of justice by confronting him with an injustice and by punishing him unjustly when the student was right. He wants to see if the student will rebel. As Victor rebels and bites him, Jean Itard is satisfied and considers that justice and injustice are no longer foreign to Victor who, according to his doctor, has just risen to the stature of a moral man. (*The Wild Child* 01:11:07- 01:14:20) This is again in line with Rousseau's theory that justice is absent from the world of the savage man. Indeed, Rousseau explains :

"This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces in the man a very remarkable change, by substituting in his conduct justice for instinct, and giving to him and giving to his actions the morality which they lacked before." (Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, Livre I, chap. VIII)

Between failures and successes, the film does not take sides with the Noble savage, although at times it seems that the doctor, discouraged, regrets that men have torn Victor away from his innocent and happy life. In his report, as well as in the film, Itard says

"Oh! how in this moment, as in many others, ready to to give up the task I had imposed on myself, and considering as lost the time I was giving to it, I regretted having known this child, and highly condemned the sterile and inhuman curiosity of the men who, first, tore him away from an innocent and happy life". Jean Itard – *The Wild Child* (1970)

C) The place of affect in education

What differs greatly from Jean Itard is Anne's unfailing affection for Helen. She wants to

help her in her heart of hearts, and although she is harsh at first, blaming the family for the child's condition, she shows her determination in a nearly 8-minute scene where she teaches the child the ritual of mealtime. This scene is violent and neither the student nor the teacher is ready to give up. Helen challenges her teacher who pursues her relentlessly. Although this scene may seem ruthless, it seems to send a much stronger message that Anne will always be there for her and will fight relentlessly to get the result she wants. (*The Miracle Worker* 00:38:50 – 00:48:52)

Even though Anne says "I don't even love her, she's not my child", Anne is kind to Helen, she hugs her, defends her when her father wants to send her to an asylum, understands her needs, wants to help her, to awaken her, she is tender towards her. In short, she acts as a second mother figure when her mother is not around. The end of the film is very striking : the fountain scene makes explicit the access to meaning and language as well as the sudden madness and Helen's desire to learn all the words around her. (*The Miracle Worker* 1:39:35) This metaphor is stated earlier in the film, when Annie explains to the Captain her desire to teach Helen a language that she has inside her "that inside is waiting like water underground". (*The Miracle Worker* 1:32:30)

This is the achievement of the film, the climax, what Anne has been fighting for for days. Not only does Helen make sense of the mime and the words, she also manages to pronounce the word 'WATER'. Helen hands over the key to the room she had stolen earlier, as a symbolic message that Anne has given her the key to language, Helen then affectionately hugs and kisses Annie. The film ends with a hug between the two characters. Annie's apprenticeship therefore goes well beyond instruction; it is the construction of a relationship between the two characters who learn from and about each other. (*The Miracle Worker* 1:45:00)

In *The Wild Child* by Truffaut, the director wants to show us Itard's will to work, his system of pedagogy and the relationship of science to education. He applies the methods of the time which were in the range of experimentation. The great problem of the whole film is that the doctor is a scientist and forgets what is essential to the development of the young boy. Thus, by refusing an emotional connection, he condemns his method, which will cause the failure of his pupil's learning. The film has great emotional power, and for good reason, Truffaut is both director and actor in his film. He plays what he wanted to show: the doctor's coldness in his relationship with Victor, but his warm relationship with his character. The film raises questions about the myth of the Noble Savage but also about education itself: Is it human to train a human being?

Indeed, if Victor is intriguing at the time, it is because his status makes him a person that Rousseau would have considered pure, sane. According to Rousseau, the Noble savage is the ideal of Man and society makes him unhappy. Here there is a desire to express the opposite, that the savage state is catastrophic and that society is indispensable for raising a human being. People around him seem to think that he is stupid and that it is necessary to educate him to integrate him into society. In other words, this suggests that nature is bad and that only the act of training him to live in society is good for him. Jean Itard even goes as far as to teach him injustice so that he understands justice, he wants him to become aware of good and evil, concepts that were then absent in the world in which the child lived. This experience is rather questionable.

The film depicts a society that is gradually developing its means of education, and it is a strong moment in history when the deaf and dumb began to be taught, but the instructors cannot yet know that a child who has not had a relationship with other humans cannot learn at the same rate. The duality of an affective relationship is represented on all three sides. On the one hand, doctor and scholar, Jean Itard, cannot express this affect with the child and holds back his possibilities of tenderness towards the child, on the other hand, the role of Madame Guérin, although minor in the film, is essential because she acts as a mother figure for the child, she is partly responsible for his accompaniment and care. It is her who teaches him everyday tasks such as setting the table. She

considers that the child works too much and protects him. When Victor gets angry after an exercise that is too complicated, she does not hesitate to tell the teacher that he is overworking his student and that he is not allowing him a moment of pleasure and respite.

"this little one works 10 times more than a normal child". Madame Guérin – *The Wild Child* (1970) (00:57:57)

The relationship of affection that is predominant in this film is that which the child has with Nature. Jean Itard does not know that he can have an affectionate relationship with the child and unconsciously he makes the child a scientific experiment: this submits a vision to the viewer that is authentic and real from the medical reports of the time. It is a film that has not been well understood, particularly with regards to the failure of the child. Overall, François Truffaut treated this film with honesty and rigour, and did not romanticise reality. This film is a far cry from the Hollywood vision as it questions the audience about the film's uncertain ending. The fact that the child returns at the end of the film gives a note of hope and success even if the truth is the failure of the physiological limits of language. We know, however, that language does not define a person. The viewer unconsciously wants the end of the film to be positive. The end of the film is intriguing and the viewer may even wonder if the child came back to Itard's house out of love, or because his teaching of the previous 9 months and the new needs that resulted could not be fulfilled in nature. To conclude, what I find most striking is that the ending illustrates a very different relationship from the one between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller. Here, Jean Itard is reassured by the child's return, but does not change his bond with the child in any way: his status and role as a teacher overrides everything. The child has hardly returned when he tells him that they will continue the exercises soon. It is on this note and a particularly sorrowful and neutral expression of Victor that the film closes.



III- The journey of the children from their education to their renown

A) Children's predispositions to learning:

Society, which was not aware of the difficulty of such an apprenticeship, thought that Victor's education would only be a matter of a few months. However, once he arrived in Paris, their expectations were completely not met because the child they discovered was dirty, indifferent and wild. He was not curious about his environment and had spasms that would reveal once again that the child was suffering from the disease of hospitalism, resulting in developmental delays. This is depicted at the beginning of the film when, perched on a tree, the child is swinging frantically. Also, in a conversation between Itard and the governess, Mme Guérin, Jean Itard explains that the child hears them but he does not listen, just as he sees without looking which is also a symptom of anaclitic depression. In Paris, his environment is vastly different from that in the countryside. He arrives in a scientific world, surrounded by body schematics and a medical check-up is carried out on him. During the scientific assessment, a scene in which Jean Itard shows him food in front of a mirror reveals that the child is not aware of himself, which is a major stage in the development of babies, and which must be acquired in the second year of life of a baby.¹¹ (*The Wild Child* 00:20:10). This "stage of the mirror" is at the origin of Henri Wallon's (1879-1962) studies of the construction of infantile personality. This work was taken up by Jacques Lacan, who replaced the

¹¹ Rochat, Philippe. « Conscience de soi et des autres au début de la vie », *Enfance*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2003, pp. 39-47.

mirror stage by a “founding moment of identification and the formation of the Ego”. The fact that Victor is not conscious of himself shows a real delay in development.



However, in spite of all these difficulties, Itard notes at the beginning of his teaching that Victor is apt to learn to speak. He just has not interacted with speech and that his hearing has not been developed enough.

Despite numerous approaches, methods and exercises, Victor never learned to speak. In his article "The case of Victor of Aveyron from the perspective of language acquisition" Guillaume Roux cites several hypotheses that could explain this failure, the first being that " Itard's work focuses on access to the sign by substituting the idea for the missing object, giving only holophrases to learn to Victor. However, the interactional and affective dimension is not present, nor is the learning of context reference (who, where, and when), which has led to different interpretations of why Victor never learned to speak." He also relates this to the Genie case cited above, explaining that the reason the child never learned to speak is that his learning occurred far too late. ¹²

The failure of Victor's education caused him to be forgotten. Still at the charge of the state, he was kept isolated from the world for 20 years before dying in obscurity of pneumonia and being thrown into a mass grave.

12 Roux Guillaume, « Le cas de Victor de l’Aveyron au regard de l’acquisition du langage », *Revue d’histoire des sciences humaines* Juillet 2021

Helen's pre-education history is vastly different and prepares her for a bright future despite her disability. Indeed, Helen grew up in a wealthy and loving family. She learned a few words before she lost the ability to speak. In her autobiography, she explains her illness as follows "In the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a new-born baby." The arrival of her teacher is therefore, unlike Victor, not a scientific experiment but rather a rebirth, a reawakening. This is made clear when she uses biblical undertones to symbolically represent her teacher bringing the Word into darkness :

"Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came-my teacher-who was to set my spirit free." (Chapter 1)

Helen is a curious, lively child, eager to learn. From a young age she manages to find strategies to express her needs through signs. In her development, Helen understands that the signs she uses are not used by the people around her and understands her difference, her "strangeness".

"I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people; [...] I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths."

Helen for years feels by a strong desire to express herself, and this sensation of being a prisoner of her own body will drive her mad. Although the film portrays the encounter between Anne and Helen as mixed, as the child is curious but wants to prove that she is in control, Helen describes in her autobiography "The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me" (Chapter 4, line 1)

Indeed, Helen's education has been more than a success. The results of her education demonstrate

several things: a mutual willingness to learn, and to learn how to learn, a relentless motivation on both sides, the result of a friendship and an unconditional love. Their journey is the story of a lifetime. We can understand Helen's success first of all because it was not too late to teach her language. Also, Anne understood that affection was necessary for discipline and in a letter addressed to the Director of the Perkins Institution only 3 days after her arrival in Tusculum she wrote "The greatest problem I shall have to solve is how to discipline and control her without breaking her spirit. I shall go rather slowly at first and try to win her love".

In the course of her apprenticeship, Helen learned the meaning of the signifier-signified bond, as depicted as the absolute climax of the film *the Miracle Worker*, but her education did not end there. Helen was thus able to learn to read, write and speak. As a young woman, she studied at prestigious universities, even being admitted to Radcliffe College at the University of Harvard, and learned a number of disciplines and even several languages. She went on to become an author, activist and teacher.

B) A separation to progress

Victor, having spent the first years of his life in the wild, had to adapt to his new environment. The nature of Victor's abandonment is undetermined today. Rumors range from abandonment because the child was illegitimate, to an assassination attempt from which the child miraculously survived; other rumors say that the child fled into the wild of his own free will because his family was neglectful and alcoholic.

Whatever the reasons for this abandonment, the testimonies tell that the child was seen in the forest between 1795 and 1800. During these years, the wild child built a strong relationship with nature that is represented in many scenes throughout the film. The beginning of the film represents this total openness to nature, and this closure to the human species. It is notably the case when Victor

refuses to apply so-called "human" practices such as eating with cutlery and sleeping in a bed. At the beginning of the film, the imprisonment he undergoes when he arrives in the village presents the child trying at all costs to escape to regain his freedom. Then, at the institute for the deaf and dumb, instead of getting on with the other children, Victor expresses his uneasiness and maintains his relationship with nature by lying down in foliage. (*The Wild Child* 00:21:50) During the discussion between Itard and Pinel about Victor's future, the child is presented in a scene of reconnection with nature. (*The Wild Child* 00:25:10)



There is a distinct separation between nature and the world of civilized humans: the window.

The window is an important element in the film. It symbolizes the division between inside and outside, between imprisonment and freedom, civilisation and nature. By taking Victor home, Jean Itard brings him into his private sphere, but his home is also presented as an ivory tower. The framing of the shots sometimes show the window in the foreground or filmed from the outside as if to intensify and emphasize this separation.



Thus, the child oscillates between the two worlds. This ambivalence is made explicit when Jean Itard says “You're no longer a wild boy even if you're not yet a man”. The child needs the outdoors as a way to revitalize himself.

During the film, he seems to be able to endure the exercises in exchange for his weekly reward: his walk in the countryside.

"Nothing brings more joy to the savage than a walk in the country."

Jean Itard – *The Wild Child (1970) (00:33:29)*

Similarly, at the end of each exercise, he goes to drink his glass of water by the window, as if to celebrate this reward by reconnecting with his original cradle. He makes of this reward a ceremonial that Itard explains to us as follows:

"It is near the window, standing, eyes turned towards the countryside, that our drinker comes to place himself as if in this moment of delectation this child of the nature sought to reunite the only two things that had survived the loss of his freedom, drinking clear water, seeing the sun and the countryside." Jean Itard – *The Wild Child (1970) (00:52:02)*

This idea is demonstrated when, after being deprived of his daily walk, the child runs away. During this escape, the child tries to regain his wild instincts and habits. He drinks from the river, tries to chase a chicken, but his education, even if it is a failure from Itard's point of view, has nevertheless transformed the child who is no longer capable of living as a hermit. (*The Wild Child* 01-15:45-01:18:08)

To enable their education, both children are symbolically torn from something: nature for Victor, her own mother for Helen.

The window is also omnipresent in *The Miracle Worker*. Here, it separates Helen's family and herself, locked in the cottage with her teacher. It divides the private sphere from the educational sphere. Anne isolates her student in a bubble to teach her confidence, discipline and communication. This window allows the family to keep an eye on Annie's practices while leaving her in charge of Helen from whom they are forcibly separated. In fact, the whole film plays with the notions of confinement and freedom to stage Helen's own imprisonment in her body. The family itself is depicted as a cage that hinders Helen's desire for freedom and learning. The very first shot of the film is itself revealing as we do not even see Helen but only the bars of the child's bed, symbolising the barriers that her disability creates. symbolising the barriers that her disability creates. (00:01:35)

The family is also a cage whose members are unable to communicate. The relationships in the film are conflictual: first of all in the parent-teacher relationship as regards authority over Helen. However, we cannot be dogmatic because in some decisions, the parents are right, and in other decisions, Anne Sullivan is right. Secondly, the parents do not understand each other and the mother seems oppressed by the authoritarian father who seems to be behind every decision concerning the family. This echoes the context of the time, a generation before women's suffrage. The brother, for his part, is never heard.



C) A drastic transformation :

The children in these two films undergo a real change in both their attitude and their living habits.

Helen is presented in the film as an animal to be tamed. She is violent and finds it difficult to trust the people around her. She refuses any form of affection from her teacher. However, at the end of the film, she shows her affection for her teacher on her own. In addition to her education in obedience and discipline, Helen grows from this experience and undergoes trials that challenge her sensitivity and emotionality.

As we saw earlier, Victor undergoes a drastic change in his life. First he wears clothes, then he stands more and more straight (this reminds us of the pattern of the human lineage and of the straightening up of Man over time, as if symbolically, Victor was gradually getting closer to our species, and away from his animality).



From a physiological point of view, the child has also gone from a wild diet to a human diet, which is quite an achievement. Similarly, in *The Wild Child of Aveyron*, Itard describes him as insensitive to any form of moral affection and explains that despite his mistreatment in Paris, no one has ever seen him cry. However, towards the end of the film Victor begins to cry in situations of failure, punishment and injustice. This reveals that he increasingly understands evil and acts like a "normal" child. As such, Jean Itard's education of him has worked in part, even if the child cannot be reintegrated into society, which was the doctor's original goal.

To conclude, both films are based on real-life events that demonstrate the importance of education and the role it played for both pupils. Both stories have been celebrated in popular films and the research and methods of both teachers have been widely cited by educators of subsequent generations. Overall, Victor's education is a warning about what not to do in education, while Helen's learning is remembered as a gift from her teacher who has accompanied her throughout her life. The two students, isolated, one by abandonment, the other by disability, have had their education handled by dedicated teachers. The first part of this paper therefore outlines the potential effects of isolation on language acquisition. In terms of the film analysis, I decided to focus first on the teachers who are the key actors in education and then on the pupils' journey through their education. When looking for my dissertation topic, I first thought of a research paper on freak shows and moved on to that of wild children because this subject echoes the themes of difference, disability and "strangeness". One of the tracks that seems to me under-exploited is that of the society facing these two stories. Indeed, I could have made a fourth sub-section on this subject by showing that society is largely represented in *The Wild Child* but that this is not the case in *The Miracle Worker*.

The fact that society is so differently represented also symbolizes the renown of children: Victor's story was the talk of the town when he was captured and then during the first months of his

education. The failure of the story made the crowd lose interest in the child and he was forgotten. As for Helen, she was only a young child, her renown and the public's interest in her only appeared years later, as she progressed. In *the Wild Child*, the scenes in which society appears represent the crowd as brutal, or self-interested. Sometimes, this gives the illusion of overturning the social order, and the child seems almost more human than the crowd which is hysterical and aggressive. This is very reminiscent of the brutal treatment Joseph Merrick, better known as the Elephant Man, receives in the film of the same name. To continue on this track, society is completely absent from *The Miracle Worker*, as if reinforcing the idea of a cage where the same characters cohabit in misunderstanding, and where Anne brings her innovative methods to save an entire family and allow them to reconnect.

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