

## Earliest Impressions

AUTHOR	Addams, Jane
GENRE	Article/Essay
OVERVIEW	Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House and winner of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize, begins her famous <i>Twenty Years at Hull House</i> with recollections of her "earliest impressions" of the world around her. These impressions are connected to memories of her father, who first drew her "into the moral concerns of life." This reading looks closely at the role of moral educators and raises questions about the influences that strengthen our ties to humanity and drive us to serve others.
FULL TEXT*	<a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1325/pg1325.html">http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1325/pg1325.html</a>
SOURCE	<small>*CCR cannot guarantee the accuracy or continued availability of this online text. Please notify us if you encounter any problems.</small> <i>The Civically Engaged Reader</i> , eds. Davis & Lynn, (Great Books Foundation, 2006).
TYPE	Reading
THEMES	<a href="#">Connection and Relationship</a> <a href="#">Diversity and Difference</a> <a href="#">Giving and Receiving</a> <a href="#">Justice and Equality</a> <a href="#">Serving and Volunteering</a>
BIG QUESTIONS	<a href="#">Why is connection important? What does it enable? What does it impede? What does good giving require? What makes a good gift? When I give, what do I expect in return? What do I receive? Who should we give to and why? What is justice? How do we recognize it? Do acts of service lead to social change? Is my service changing the world or only myself? Is that enough? Why do we serve?</a>
PUBLICATION	Civically Engaged Reader Talking Service

### SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the first "incident" in the beginning of the chapter?
2. Why does the speaker confess her sins? What kinds of sins does she have and how does she feel about them?
3. What kinds of things does the speaker learn in this chapter?
4. What does her parenting have to do with her concepts of faith, ethics, and giving?
5. How did your childhood inform your ethical worldview?



## TWENTY YEARS AT HULL-HOUSE

---

### CHAPTER I

#### EARLIEST IMPRESSIONS

---

On the theory that our genuine impulses may be connected with our childish experiences, that one's bent may be tracked back to that "No-Man's Land" where character is formless but nevertheless settling into definite lines of future development, I begin this record with some impressions of my childhood.

All of these are directly connected with my father, although of course I recall many experiences apart from him. I was one of the younger members of a large family and an eager participant in the village life, but because my father was so distinctly the dominant influence and because it is quite impossible to set forth all of one's early impressions, it has seemed simpler to string these first memories on that single cord. Moreover, it was this cord which not only held fast my supreme affections, but also first drew me into the moral concerns of life, and later afforded a clew there to which I somewhat wistfully clung in the intricacy of its mazes.

It must have been from a very early period that I recall "horrid nights" when I tossed about in my bed because I had told a lie. I was held in the grip of a miserable dread of death, a double fear, first, that I myself should die in my sins and go straight to that fiery Hell which was never mentioned at home, but which I had heard all about from other children, and, second, that my father--representing the entire adult world which I had basely deceived--should himself die before I had time to tell him. My only method of obtaining relief was to go downstairs to my father's room and make full confession. The high resolve to do this would push me out of bed and carry me down the stairs without a touch of fear. But at the foot of the stairs I would be faced by the awful necessity of passing the front door--which my father, because of his Quaker tendencies, did not lock--and of crossing the wide and black expanse of the living room in order to reach his door. I would invariably cling to the newel post while I contemplated the perils of the situation, complicated by the fact that the literal first step meant putting my bare foot upon a piece of oilcloth in front of the door, only a few inches wide, but lying straight in my path. I would finally reach my father's bedside perfectly breathless and having panted out the history of my sin, invariably received the same assurance that if he "had a little girl who told lies," he was very glad that she "felt too bad to go to sleep afterward." No absolution was asked for or received, but apparently the sense that the knowledge of my wickedness was shared, or an obscure understanding of the affection which underlay the grave statement, was sufficient, for I always went back to bed as bold as a lion, and slept, if not the sleep of the just, at least that of the comforted.

I recall an incident which must have occurred before I was seven years old, for the mill in which my father transacted his business that day was closed in 1867. The mill stood in the neighboring town adjacent to its poorest quarter. Before then I had always seen the little city of ten thousand people with the admiring eyes of a country child, and it had never occurred to me that all its streets were not as bewilderingly attractive as the one which contained the glittering toyshop and the confectioner. On that day I had my first sight of the poverty which implies squalor, and felt the curious distinction between the ruddy poverty of the country and that which even a small city presents in its shabbiest streets. I remember launching at my father the pertinent inquiry why people lived in such horrid little houses so close together, and that after receiving his explanation I declared with much firmness when I grew up I should, of course, have a large house, but it would not be built among the other large houses, but right in the midst of horrid little houses like those.

It is hard to account for the manifestations of a child's adoring affection, so emotional, so irrational, so tangled with the affairs of the imagination. I simply could not endure the thought that "strange people" should know that my handsome father owned this homely little girl. But even in my chivalric desire to protect him from his fate, I was not quite easy in the sacrifice of my uncle, although I quieted my scruples with the reflection that the contrast was less marked and that, anyway, his own little girl "was not so very pretty." I do not know that I commonly dwelt much upon my personal appearance, save as it thrust itself as an incongruity into my father's life, and in spite of unending evidence to the contrary, there were even black moments when I allowed myself to speculate as to whether he might not share the feeling. Happily, however, this specter was laid before it had time to grow into a morbid familiar by a very trifling incident. One day I met my father coming out of his bank on the main street of the neighboring city which seemed to me a veritable whirlpool of society and commerce. With a playful touch of exaggeration, he lifted his high and shining silk hat and made me an imposing bow. This distinguished public recognition, this totally unnecessary identification among a mass of "strange people" who couldn't possibly know unless he himself made the sign, suddenly filled me with a sense of the absurdity of the entire feeling. It may not even then have seemed as absurd as it really was, but at least it seemed enough so to collapse or to pass into the limbo of forgotten specters.

I made still other almost equally grotesque attempts to express this doglike affection. The house at the end of the village in which I was born, and which was my home until I moved to Hull-House, in my earliest childhood had opposite to it—only across the road and then across a little stretch of greensward—two mills belonging to my father; one flour mill, to which the various grains were brought by the neighboring farmers, and one sawmill, in which the logs of the native timber were sawed into lumber. The latter offered the great excitement of sitting on a log while it slowly approached the buzzing saw which was cutting it into slabs, and of getting off just in time to escape a sudden and gory death. But the flouring mill was much more beloved. It was full of dusky, floury places which we adored, of empty bins in which we might play house; it had a basement, with piles of bran and shorts which were almost as good as sand to play in, whenever the miller let us wet the edges of the pile with water brought in his sprinkling pot from the mill-race.



In addition to these fascinations was the association of the mill with my father's activities, for doubtless at that time I centered upon him all that careful imitation which a little girl ordinarily gives to her mother's ways and habits. My mother had died when I was a baby and my father's second marriage did not occur until my eighth year.

I had a consuming ambition to possess a miller's thumb, and would sit contentedly for a long time rubbing between my thumb and fingers the ground wheat as it fell from between the millstones, before it was taken up on an endless chain of mysterious little buckets to be bolted into flour. I believe I have never since wanted anything more desperately than I wanted my right thumb to be flattened, as my father's had become, during his earlier years of a miller's life. Somewhat discouraged by the slow process of structural modification, I also took measures to secure on the backs of my hands the tiny purple and red spots which are always found on the hands of the miller who dresses millstones. The marks on my father's hands had grown faint, but were quite visible when looked for, and seemed to me so desirable that they must be procured at all costs. Even when playing in our house or yard, I could always tell when the millstones were being dressed, because the rumbling of the mill then stopped, and there were few pleasures I would not instantly forego, rushing at once to the mill, that I might spread out my hands near the millstones in the hope that the little hard flints flying from the miller's chisel would light upon their backs and make the longed-for marks. I used hotly to accuse the German miller, my dear friend Ferdinand, "of trying not to hit my hands," but he scornfully replied that he could not hit them if he did try, and that they were too little to be of use in a mill anyway. Although I hated his teasing, I never had the courage to confess my real purpose.

"I am a Quaker."

"But that isn't enough to say," I urged.

"Very well," he added, "to people who insist upon details, as some one is doing now, I add that I am a Hicksite Quaker"; and not another word on the weighty subject could I induce him to utter.

These early recollections are set in a scene of rural beauty, unusual at least for Illinois. The prairie around the village was broken into hills, one of them crowned by pine woods, grown up from a bag full of Norway pine seeds sown by my father in 1844, the very year he came to Illinois, a testimony perhaps that the most vigorous pioneers gave at least an occasional thought to beauty. The banks of the mill stream rose into high bluffs too perpendicular to be climbed without skill, and containing caves of which one at least was so black that it could not be explored without the aid of a candle; and there was a deserted limekiln which became associated in my mind with the unpardonable sin of Hawthorne's "Lime-Burner." My stepbrother and I carried on games and crusades which lasted week after week, and even summer after summer, as only free-ranging country children can do. It may be in contrast to this that one of the most piteous aspects in the life of city children, as I have seen it in the neighborhood of Hull-House, is the constant interruption to their play which is inevitable on the streets, so that it can never have any continuity--the most elaborate "plan or chart" or "fragment from their dream of human life" is sure to be rudely destroyed by the passing traffic. Although they start over and over again, even the most vivacious become worn out at last and take to that passive "standing 'round" varied by rude horseplay, which in time becomes so characteristic of city children.

We had of course our favorite places and trees and birds and flowers. It is hard to reproduce the companionship which children establish with nature, but certainly it is much too unconscious and intimate to come under the head of aesthetic appreciation or anything of the sort. When we said that the purple wind-flowers--the anemone patens--"looked as if the winds had made them," we thought much more of the fact that they were wind-born than that they were beautiful: we clapped our hands in sudden joy over the soft radiance of the rainbow, but its enchantment lay in our half belief that a pot of gold was to be found at its farther end; we yielded to a soft melancholy when we heard the whippoorwill in the early twilight, but while he aroused in us vague longings of which we spoke solemnly, we felt no beauty in his call.

We erected an altar beside the stream, to which for several years we brought all the snakes we killed during our excursions, no matter how long the toil--some journey which we had to make with a limp snake dangling between two sticks. I remember rather vaguely the ceremonial performed upon this altar one autumn day, when we brought as further tribute one out of every hundred of the black walnuts which we had gathered, and then poured over the whole a pitcher full of cider, fresh from the cider mill on the barn floor. I think we had also burned a favorite book or two upon this pyre of stones. The entire affair carried on with such solemnity was probably the result of one of those imperative impulses under whose compulsion children seek a ceremonial which shall express their sense of identification with man's primitive life and their familiar kinship with the remotest past.

Long before we had begun the study of Latin at the village school, my brother and I had learned the Lord's Prayer in Latin out of an old copy of the Vulgate, and gravely repeated it every night in an execrable pronunciation because it seemed to us more religious than "plain English."

When, however, I really prayed, what I saw before my eyes was a most outrageous picture which adorned a song-book used in Sunday School, portraying the Lord upon his throne, surrounded by tiers and tiers of saints and angels all in a blur of yellow. I am ashamed to tell how old I was when that picture ceased to appear before my eyes, especially when moments of terror compelled me to ask protection from the heavenly powers.

I recall with great distinctness my first direct contact with death when I was fifteen years old: Polly was an old nurse who had taken care of my mother and had followed her to frontier Illinois to help rear a second generation of children. She had always lived in our house, but made annual visits to her cousins on a farm a few miles north of the village. During one of those visits, word came to us one Sunday evening that Polly was dying, and for a number of reasons I was the only person able to go to her. I left the lamp-lit, warm house to be driven four miles through a blinding storm which every minute added more snow to the already high drifts, with a sense of starting upon a fateful errand. An hour after my arrival all of the cousin's family went downstairs to supper, and I was left alone to watch with Polly. The square, old-fashioned chamber in the lonely farmhouse was very cold and still, with nothing to be heard but the storm outside. Suddenly the great change came. I heard a feeble call of "Sarah," my mother's