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# From Body Language to Verbal Language: Making Sense of Sensations in May Sinclair's *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919)

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A renowned novelist in her time, a friend and collaborator of many avant-garde artists such as H.D., Ford Madox Ford, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, May Sinclair (1863-1946) is now largely forgotten. This neglect might partly be caused by the influence, on her fiction, of her theoretical studies<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Sinclair was not just a novelist: she was also a scholar of psychology and philosophy. Among her philosophical publications, two major essays stand out: *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (1922)<sup>2</sup>. They detail her neo-idealist reflections, which rely on her idiosyncratic combination of idealist philosophy and on her interest in psychology and psychoanalysis, and are central foundations to her fiction from the inter-war period.

If, in the fictional autobiography or *Künstlerroman* *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), Sinclair's neo-idealism steers Mary Olivier's quest for absolute beauty as well as her journey through life, the text is also fraught with both direct and implicit precise references to her research in psychology, which focused on cognition and on the developmental processes of children and adults<sup>3</sup>. Unlike most modernists, Sinclair started reading about psychology as early as in the 1890s and got involved with pioneering psychological research throughout her life. In 1913, she helped Dr. Jessie Murray (whom she met through their involvement with the Suffragettes) found the Medico-Psychological Clinic and remained an active member for about a decade. The Clinic was the first center to use psychoanalytical cure in Britain and exerted crucial influence on the history of British psychotherapy and on child psychoanalysis. Sinclair's colleagues included Ella Sharpe, whose

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<sup>1</sup> This is, for instance, William Lyon Phelps' argument in his review of *Far End* (1926), "May Sinclair", 671.

<sup>2</sup> Both received encouraging appraisals, from notable reviewers such as Bertrand Russell.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair's articles and fiction anticipate John Bowlby's research on maternal attachment in the 1950s.

seminal research on art and child language, influenced the works of Jacques Lacan<sup>4</sup>, and Joan Riviere, who worked in similar directions as Melanie Klein<sup>5</sup>. The Clinic was also distinguished for its joint research on language, literature and psychoanalysis, thanks to the works of Riviere on Ibsen or on contemporary English Literature, and of Sharpe on *Hamlet* and on psychoanalytical literary criticism.

In *Mary Olivier*, language acquisition is represented within this diverse theoretical framework and it is given particular weight since Mary is to become a translator and a visionary poet. Quite unlike other canonical *Bildungsromane*, the representation of Mary's *Bildung* actually starts during her infancy and relies on the transformation of her enjoyable sensations into verbal expressions of pleasure. Later in the novel, it will revolve around her gradual understanding and appropriation, as well as her personal and sensual experience of the polysemy of the words that structure her daily life, with signifiers such as God, Mary, love, light, or babies. As a matter of fact, mastering language plays a central part in the heroine's struggle for physical, psychological and intellectual independence from her mother and from the lexical norms induced by society. As an adolescent, Mary will even teach herself German and Greek to escape her mother's monolingual censorship and read philosophy, showing the importance of language as a means of emancipation and empowerment in the novel.

This Chapter will thus argue that Mary's first discoveries of words point at her sensory acuity, at her peculiar sensual imagination, as well as at her lucidity and general intuition about the world of adults. In order to address the way sense and sensation processing shape the representation of language acquisition in Sinclair's novel, we will first analyze how the child's discovery of verbal language appears as an important stage in the little girl's psychological development. Anticipating some of the seminal texts of developmental psychology and child psychoanalysis, the novels depict the heroine's linguistic development as a difficult, yet necessary, separation from the mother. As we shall also see, through a confrontation

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan devoted five sessions of his *Séminaire* to the interpretation of the fifth chapter of Sharpe's *Dream Analysis*.

<sup>5</sup> Riviere's "On the Genesis of Psychical Conflict in Early Infancy" is greatly indebted to Kleinian theories and Mary Jacobus analyzes the Kleinian subtext in Sharpe's research publications (Jacobus 30). Riviere and Sharpe attended, along with Melanie Klein, the Symposium on Child Analysis, held before the British Psycho-Analytical Society on May 4 and 18, 1927.

with Sinclair's various (and sometimes outdated) bibliographical references, Mary's voyage towards words implies an actual shift from body language to verbal language that occurs out of physical pleasure, intense sensations, sensual affection and manifestations of the unconscious. Our study of the focus on the heroine's body as a tool for linguistic independence will lead us to detail the chain of events that compose the two main language acquisition processes that are represented in the novel. The first one is a social operation that involves conversations, mistakes and eventually unconscious processing, while the second one heavily relies on a dialogue between intense sensory experiences and intellectual reasoning.

### **Language acquisition as a symbolic stage: towards Mary Olivier's independence?**

#### *Regression*

Scenes of linguistic regression are useful to help us understand the role of sensations in Mary's language acquisition and psycho-affective development. In the following extract, Mary, who will be able to perfectly pronounce utterances, such as "what if God dropped the sun" (Sinclair 1919, 12) in the next few pages, surprisingly uses infantile pronunciation (that is to say makes non standard productions at the phonological and morphosyntactic level):

Mamma (...) called to Mary to come and look at the snow man. Mary was tired of the snow man. She was making a tower with Roddy's bricks (...)

'Look –look, Mamma! M-m-mary's m-m-made a tar. And it's *not* falled down! (...) Come and look, Mamma –' But Mamma wouldn't even turn her head.

(...) Something swelled up, hot and tight, in Mary's body and in her face. She had a big bursting face and a big bursting body. She struck the tower, and it fell down. Her violence made her feel light and small again and happy.

'Where's the tower, Mary?' said Mamma.

'There isn't any tar. I've knocked it down. It was a nashty tar.' (Sinclair 1919, 9)

Mary mispronounces two words here: “tower/tar” and “nasty/nashty”. Added to that is Mary’s stuttering on the first syllable of her own name. (“M-m-mary...”) and the regularization of the past tense on the verb to fall (falled down). In this short scene, Mary wishes to show her mother the (possibly phallic) tower, which she had built with her brother’s toys, in order to gain her attention. But if throughout the novel, Mrs. Olivier displays affection to her three sons, she never publicly does so to her daughter Mary. This is in line with the way Sinclair’s colleague, Ella Sharpe, in “Psycho-Physical Problems Revealed in Language” (Sharpe 1940, 201), explains that phonological deviations from the norm reveal hidden psychological issues and that they often betray intense, unprocessed sensations or emotion. Mary’s difficulty to utter her own name might also be read under that light. Similarly, it is no coincidence that the syllable that causes Mary’s stuttering, “ma”, is also contained in “Mamma”. Mary’s sensations here, her non standard pronunciation and grammar thus point at the difficult relation between the heroine and her mother.

*From body language to verbal language*

Another particular aspect of the novel is the continuation between Mary’s body language and her verbal language. Ella Sharpe theorized such links as a part of the child’s developmental process:

At the same time as sphincter control over anus and urethra is being established, the child is acquiring the power of speech, and so an avenue of 'outer-ance' present from birth becomes of immense importance. (...) The activity of speaking is substituted for the physical activity (...), while words themselves become the very substitutes for the bodily substances. (...) Under the term onomatopoeia are grouped all words based upon imitation of natural sounds, such as hiss, scream, chuckle, blast, suck, cuckoo. These words imply sense-perception, not thought (...) The words and phrases of this type are a psychical discharge which in infancy and early childhood would have been accompanied by a bodily one. (Sharpe 1940, 202-3)

Even though linguistics, biology and psychology would today consider language as a physical activity, in Sharpe's psychoanalytical theories, language comes in as a substitute for bodily expression, such as urination, and appears as a secondary means of expression for infants and small children, who are used to paying attention to their sensations. This prospect is actually crucial in Mary Olivier's learning process: language comes first and foremost from the body and Mary first resorts to action to express her anger and frustration (she destroys her tower), which are then transcribed into imperfect speech ("it was a nasty tar"). The link between body language and language is here established through destructions and non standard productions. Interestingly, we see how Mary's language comes as a mildly convincing attempt to justify and rationalize her aggressiveness (she destroys it, she says, because it was nasty). This is in line with Sharpe's idea that a child's early language works as a metaphor for the intensity of his bodily activity<sup>6</sup>. Sharpe means that language is, by definition, not the infant's first means of expression, but gradually becomes so because of the pleasure and effectiveness that the infant finds in words and verbal expressions. Pleasure and effectiveness are, in Sharpe and Sinclair's texts, the two main factors that induce linguistic awakenings.

Pleasure is indeed at stake in one of the first scenes of the novel in which Mary sings a nursery rhyme of her composition:

Mary ran round and round. She loved the padding of her feet on the floor and the sound of her sing-song:  
'The pussies are blue, the beds are blue, the matches are blue and the mousetraps and all the litty mouses!' (Sinclair 1919, 8)

What filters through this short extract is Mary's enjoyment. Language appears as a continuation of the much-loved noise made by her own steps. But the rhythm and repetitions of the nursery rhyme might point at the idea that language is both the expression and the source of the little girl's physical pleasure. Here, language occurs out of a double activity: movements (running round the table) induce the self-centered pleasure of hearing one's footsteps, which is continued through Mary's

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<sup>6</sup> One can note that developmental psychology, linguistics and biology have adopted a different point of view and consider language as first and foremost a physical activity.

peculiar word production. We can also note that the nursery rhyme refers to sensations and emotions that Mary will or has already experienced (the color blue for instance is systematically associated to Mrs. Olivier's dresses, which Mary finds "very pretty", Sinclair 1919, 7). Mary's choice of verbal images shows that she has started to process important and pleasurable sensations and emotions. Language works as an efficient way to continue experiencing the pleasure of the outside world. Such a prospect is also represented in Sinclair's later novels, such as *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), which opens on Baby Harriett laughing with pleasure at her mother's cheerful nursery rhyme (Sinclair 1922, 1).

Ella Sharpe's work on rhythm and pleasure is also particularly significant for our interpretation of Sinclair's text. Sharpe explains that art and adult language strive towards the recreation of the rhythms of infancy, which embodied the fusion between mother and child (e.g. milk flows, heartbeats or maternal breathing). Because they are related to these primal rhythms, art and language can give the individual "self-preservation and all-libidinal unfoldment" (Sharpe 1935, 145). They are pleasurable because they send the individual back to his early years. Sharpe also explains that the sounds and rhythms of infancy belong to the pre-symbolic because they are the main means of expression before the Oedipal complex occurs. "Entry into the symbolic is oedipal. [As a consequence,] the difference between the sexes (...) takes shape in discourse" (Humm, 73). The importance given to sounds, rhythms and onomatopoeia in Mary Olivier sends us back to more modern psychoanalytical theories, for instance, those of Nancy Chodorow who explains that "daughters (...) carry with the rhythmic, pre-symbolic language, which sons have left behind with their mothers" (Humm, 74 and Chodorow, 112). For psychoanalysis, language acquisition is for little girls directly related to the relationship with the mother.

The reverse is also true in Sinclair's *Arnold Waterlow: A Life* (1924) – a *Bildungsroman* that Sinclair referred to as "the male Mary Olivier"<sup>7</sup>. In this novel, Arnold is being raised by his father and learns how to speak according to a very different (and yet as problematic) pattern:

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<sup>7</sup> "[it is] a male *Mary Olivier*. I have a sort of obsession for making these experiments, and watch the result eagerly", as quoted in Theophilus Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist*, 123.

He put out his finger and pointed at the man in the room and said ‘Papa.’ He said it to himself, very softly and pensively, exactly as he said ‘Lion’ or ‘Tiger’, when he put his finger on the animals in his Child’s Natural History Book. (...) Baby smiled his smile of adorable wisdom and said it again ‘papa’, to show how right he was.

‘Did you hear me tell you to go away, sir?’ (Sinclair 1924, 5)

Such a scene makes an interesting contrast with *Mary Olivier*. Through the reference to the image book, we can see how Arnold associates language to the rational act of labelling, contrary to Mary Olivier whose linguistic awareness relies on her senses, her sensations and her body language. Arnold’s world offers little room for the pre-symbolic: his linguistic pleasure is of a scientific nature. Besides, spoken words do not arouse any particular pleasure; they do, however, function as a social connector.

*From sounds to articulation*

Unlike Arnold Waterlow’s rational attempt, what is also striking is that hearing sounds and listening to music appear as more significant auxiliaries and stimuli in Mary’s first articulations than any adult conversation. In the next example, Mary describes her mother playing Henri Berlioz’s *Hungarian March*:

Sometimes, when it was not Sunday, she played the Hungarian March:

Droom-Droom-Droom-era-room  
Droom-Droom-Droom-era-room  
Droom rer-room-room droom-room-room  
Droom-Droom-Droom.

It was wonderful. Mamma was wonderful. She swayed and bowed to the beat of the music, as if she shook it out of her body and not out of the piano. (...) You said ‘Oh – Mamma! Play it again,’ and she played it again. When she had finished she stooped suddenly and kissed you. And you knew. (Sinclair 1919, 69)

In Sinclair’s conception and artistic rendition of language acquisition, non-verbal sounds, such as the “droom droom” sequence, or



such as babbling, humming or onomatopoeias, work as missing links between the physical and the verbal. Since there is no quotation mark, we are led to believe that the “droom droom” sounds are here uttered by the narrative voice, which is supposed to be the adult Mary mimicking her – very impressed – younger self. Mary is here listening, and probably singing or humming along with her mother’s piano and the sounds evoke a harmonious bonding activity. Her description of how her mother “sways” and “shakes sounds” out of the instrument is interweaving her mother’s music and body language on the one hand with her own pleasurable sight, hearing and sound production on the other.

Ella Sharpe also explains that art is one of the ways to re-live:

...those experiences which are the basis of the child’s normal physical and psychical health. These experiences are pleasurable bodily states of rhythmic functioning when what was taken and incorporated was good, bodily and psychically, and what the child produced was pleasing and acceptable. (Sharpe 1935, 191)

In our extract, Mary’s language acquisition is thus accompanied by her mother’s artistic rhythm and it somehow re-enacts the scene that opens the novel, in which Mary is being breastfed by her mother. Here, both characters seem to be one and what is portrayed resembles a possibly reassuring family scene. Mary speaks, she asks for something (“play it again”) and she is listened to. However, Mary is mostly passive and the heroine’s sound production seems solely concentrated on her mother-child relationship, and not on any interaction with the outside world. Besides, the piano scene comes between two episodes of great tension between Mary and her mother. The fragment “and you knew” at the end of the paragraph is a self-reassuring statement, referring to the fact that Mary knows (or thinks she knows that) her mother loves her. Thus, the way Mary Olivier lets go and sings along with the music, does constitute a genuine release of both dramatic and psychological tension and as well as an expression of pleasure induced by music. But in this particular scene, Mary is actually being carried away by her mother’s musical interpretation: she is under the misleading impression that her mother loves her. Yet the entire book will prove her wrong and the reader will see that Mrs. Olivier does not love her daughter and shows neglect and manipulation till the last page. What surrounds and triggers Mary’s

developing language is also extremely revealing of the general scale of appreciation that is displayed in the novel. Mary's sound production works here as a reminder of her own frailty and participates in building the novel's general thesis, that the child must learn more elaborate language so as to understand herself and her sensations and thus see the world more clearly.

## Two language acquisition processes

### *Approximations and sensations*

Mary also learns new words through two different and very specific processes, which are both repeated several times in the novel. The first one involves approximations, mistakes, and eventually dreams. In the following scene, Mary confuses the term "opinion" with the word "opossum":

A remarkable conversation.

'Aunt Lavvy! Aunt Lavvy! Have you brought your Opinions?'

'No, my dear, they were not invited. So I left them at home.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Papa said. (...)

'What do you know about opinions?' Uncle Victor said.

Mary was excited and happy. She had never been allowed to talk so much. She tried to eat her roast chicken in a business-like, grown-up manner, while she talked.

'I've read about them,' she said. 'They are dear little animals with long furry tails, (...) and they climb up trees.'

(...) 'Do you think,' Uncle Victor said, still politely, 'you *quite* know what you mean?'

'I know,' Daniel said, "she means opossums.'

'Yes,' Mary said. 'Opossums. What *are* opinions?'

'Opinions,' Papa said, 'are things that people put in other people's heads. Nasty, dangerous things, opinions.'

She thought: 'That was why Mamma and Papa were frightened.' (Sinclair 1919, 34)

A political stance is already at stake in Mary's "remarkable" mistake. For a woman and even more so for a little girl, having opinions

amounts to having an opossum, i.e. a strange possession, possibly wild and exotic, and by no means adapted to the immediate late-Victorian context. By contrast, one can note the little girl's pleasure when speaking: Mary is "excited and happy", and sees language as a way to be admitted into the world of adults. But Mary's linguistic world is different. She is learning through trial and errors and relates everything to her own vision of the world. Her confusion between the two new words is prolonged by a dream episode, three pages later, in which her unprocessed misunderstanding is given a new meaning and shows that the voyage towards language is also an unconscious process: "In the dream, when you opened the stair cupboard door to catch the opossum, you found a white china doll lying in it, no bigger than your finger. That was Aunt Charlotte." (Sinclair 1919, 37) The dream reworks many elements that Mary has not been able to understand but had intuitions about. More precisely, Mary's dream links two taboos together: ideas and babies (or more precisely sexuality). In this dream, Mary connects her aunt Charlotte, the only character of the novel who searches to live true love and free sexuality, with the daunting prospect of having opinions.

*Language acquisition as a sensual and sensory experience*

The second type of language acquisition process is more of an individual process. It is inspired by Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. At the end of Book II, "Childhood", Mary stumbles upon a complex sentence from Locke's *Essay* in her brother's schoolbooks: "the senses at first let in particular ideas and furnish the yet empty cabinet; and the mind growing by degrees familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory and names got to them" (Sinclair 1919, 83). Mary seems indeed to follow such a development: her senses give her an intuition which her mind gradually appropriates and turns into an abstract concept. Indeed, for Mary, learning a word amounts to making the experience of its complex reality in a way that announces the mystical visions she will experience as an adult. Her sensory experiences go hand in hand with the way she constructs her personal worldview, as it is the case in the following example:

White patterns on the window, sharp spikes, feathers, sprigs with furred edges, stuck flat on the glass; white webs, crinkled like the skin of boiled milk, stretched across the corner of the pane; crisp, sticky stuff that bit

your finger. Out of doors, black twig thickened with a white fur; white powder sprinkled over the garden walk. The white, ruffled grass stood out stiffly and gave under your feet with a pleasant crunching. The air smelt good; you opened your mouth and drank it in gulps. It went down like cold, tingling water. Frost. (Sinclair 1919, 12)

Isolated fragments or nominal sentences open and end the passage, giving the experience a nearly magical undertone. Many elements are noteworthy in this short extract. First, the text relies on typical images of infancy such as “boiled milk” or “drinking in gulps”. It also combines the five senses: sight (“patterns on the window”), touch (“sharp spikes”), hearing (“a pleasant crunching”), smell (“the air smelt good”) and taste (“drank”). Interestingly, the stream of perceptions and sensations is put to an end by the mention of Mary’s open mouth, which precedes the new word (“Frost”), even strongly emphasizing the close link between the physical and the verbal. As a result, the reader is under the impression that Mary had an intense experience of both word and thing. The scene also evokes the impressionist writings of Ford Madox Ford; yet the last word reads as an additional comment by the adult narrative voice who mentions the new word “frost”, as a precision for the reader. In any case, the word appears as a sum of all her bodily sensations and perceptions and, throughout the novel, will remain associated to this sensual and sensory experience. Accordingly, the later parts of *Mary Olivier* show how the intensity of Mary’s language acquisition process has shaped the way she uses language as an adult. Interestingly, this is already the case in Book I, “Infancy”, since the passage is immediately followed by:

You saw the sun for the first time, a red ball that hung by itself on the yellowish white sky. Mamma said, ‘Yes, of course it would fall if God wasn’t there to hold it up in his hands.’

Supposing God dropped the sun – (Sinclair 1919, 12)

The expression “a red ball that hung by itself” refers again to the child’s representation of the world. Looking back at the last two examples, we can uncover the following chain of events: first, an intense sensory experience gives birth to a full linguistic experience, during which the heroine creates her own meaning and sees frost or the sun “for the first

time". She is now able to conduct a personal intellectual reasoning based on her discoveries ("supposing God dropped the sun"). Indeed, Mrs. Olivier's words are much less complex than Mary's supposition. Mary has departed from her mother's norm, and is heading towards new linguistic worlds, those of philosophy and poetry. Because of the experience, she is able to see things differently and integrate her intense sensations to the construction of her own world.

*From sensation to poetic exploration*

Last, Mary's use of language, as she is nearly ten years old, seems heavily influenced by the complexity of her language learning processes. Her use of language enables her to express doubt and to question seemingly obvious things and, eventually, to create poetic associations:

'Nine. Of Original or Birth-sin. Original Sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... (...)

'Don't look like that,' her mother said, 'as if your wits were wool-gathering.'

'Wool?' She could see herself smiling at her mother, disagreeably.

Wool-gathering. Gathering wool. The room was full of wool; wool flying about; hanging in the air and choking you. Clogging your mind. Old grey wool out of pew cushions that people had sat on for centuries, full of dirt. Wool, spun out, wound round you, woven in a net. You were tangled and strangled in a net of unclean wool. They caught you in it when you were a baby a month old. (...)

The wool stopped their minds working. (Sinclair 1919, 113)

Here, Mary Olivier achieves strength through her language. Two languages are indeed contrasted. First, there's the biblical text that Mary's mother would like her to learn. Secondly, there's the poetic density of Mary's own metaphor. More precisely, her mother's reproach – that she is wool-gathering (or daydreaming) is taken literally and transformed into another metaphor. Here, Mary turns her mistake into a metaphor: she explores her mother's image, scans all the sensations it entails and makes it her own. The little girl manages to make sense of the words of adults in appropriating their own language, which works as a

preliminary step for the construction of her own poetic lexicon. Her revelation that “the wool stopped their minds working” is indeed crucial in her development, because, by contrast, Mary will try to “go on without ever having to stop thinking” (Sinclair 1919, 89). Here, the heroine goes beyond Sharpe’s theory on the unconscious knowledge revealed by the use of metaphors (“the person who speaks vitally in metaphor *knows*, but does not know in consciousness what he knows unconsciously”, Sharpe 1935, 212). Through her language, Mary has understood the stakes behind her mother’s reproach. Through her language, Mary has started exploring her own world, made of sensory, sensual and poetic experiences.

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By means of conclusion, I would like to explore how Mary comes to terms with her own name. Indeed, very early in the novel, the heroine learns about homonymy as she is confronted to several other “Maries”: in the two nursery rhymes sung by her father in Book I: “Mary had a little lamb” and, even more interestingly, “Mary, Mary quite contrary” as well as in her learning about the Virgin Mary. Her own name, which is so commonplace, becomes an object of curiosity that she needs to appropriate. As a result:

Sometimes she had queer glimpses of the persons that were called Mary Olivier. There was Mrs. Olivier's only daughter, proud of her power over the sewing-machine. (...) There was Mark Olivier's sister, who rejoiced in the movements of her body (...). And there was Mary Olivier, the little girl (...) whom her mother and Aunt Bella whispered about to each other with mysterious references to her age. Her secret happiness had nothing to do with any of these Mary Oliviers. It was not like any other happiness. It had nothing to do with Mamma. (Sinclair 1919, 51)

Mary’s metaphor, her “secret happiness”, which is how she will later on call her sensual epiphanies and mystical visions, is already present in her own language. Here, Mary still proceeds by approximations, by exclusive references to the physical, by the use of vague words and negations but she is already the author of a metaphor, as she is struggling to make sense of her own identity. In the novel, sensations contribute to the voyage towards words, but words also contribute to the understanding and

mastering of sensations. Only through her intense, childlike language can Mary make sense of her emotions, of her sensations, and of the world of adults and construct her own peculiar representations.

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