When scholars talk about “the Victorian cult of childhood,” they are referring to the idealistic portrait of the innocent, unspoiled child that dominated nineteenth-century literature – from Romantic poets like William Blake and William Wordsworth to Victorian authors and children’s writers like Charles Dickens and Frances Hodgson Burnett – as well as political calls to end child labor, to mandate elementary school for everyone, and to protect the vulnerable from physical abuse. But this “cult” also had a dark side. Alongside the image of the well-bred, upper class, white child who neatly fit the Romantic mold of childhood innocence were boys and girls who fell short of that ideal. By the century’s end, for example, words like “hooligan,” “street Arab,” and “juvenile delinquency” offered an entirely different vocabulary to categorize youth. Even depictions of children not marked as orphans or criminals challenged the earlier insistence on simplicity and goodness. This course will explore the wonder and the weirdness that comprised the Victorian cult of childhood. Literary works under consideration might include Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*, Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, Arthur Morrison’s *The Child of the Jago*, and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*. We will also read contemporary political, legal, and medical constructions of childhood, focusing on issues such as child labor, elementary education, parenting advice, child criminality, childhood sexuality, evolution, and psychoanalysis. We will interrogate how the Victorian child became central to debates about moral values, cultural fears, and the possibilities for and limitations of human subjectivity.