Redefining Childhood: Work and Play in Victorian Representations of Working Class Children

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**Redefining Childhood: Work and Play in Victorian Representations of Working Class Children**

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### INTRODUCTION

- In the Victorian era, the definitions of childhood were changing.
- Leisure, education and innocence became characteristic of childhood for upper and middle class children.  
- Working class children were still sometimes seen as little adults or economic assets and expected to work.1,2

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### THESIS

In the midst of growing awareness about child labour during the Victorian era, Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley and Frances Hodgson Burnett demonstrate in their writing the societal tension over the role of work and play in a developing understanding of childhood through complex and even contradictory representations of working class youth and solutions to child labour.

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### BACKGROUND

- 46% of the population in 1841 was less than 20 years old. The near majority meant many had to work.1,2
- Wages from working class children gave important financial support to many families.2,4
- Children worked in mines and factories or as agricultural or domestic labourers.
- The conditions were often very dangerous and unhealthy with long hours up to 15 hours per day.1,4
- Children often began working by the age of 5 but sometimes began younger.1
- Children had worked long hours in hard conditions for many years in agricultural and domestic situations before the Victorian era.1
- However, factory labour and other industrial labour brought the dangers for working children to the forefront of society.1
- Memoirs from working class children and government studies inspired authors to write about the deprivations of child labour.
- But the results are not straightforward and reflect a complicated definition of roles for the working class child.
- Tension between the role of work and play for working class children is reflected in examples of literature from the Victorian era.

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### METHODOLOGY

- In my research, I combined a grounded theory methodology with the literary theory New Historicism, which allowed me to develop my thesis out of my literary survey and to consider how the historical context informs the literature and how the literature explores the historical context.
- I surveyed many examples of literature from the Victorian era (1840-1900), focusing my readings on representations of working class children. Through theoretical sampling of this surveyed material, I chose four examples for in-depth content analysis.
- I also consulted various scholarly works on Victorian literature and history of childhood in that period.

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### THE WATER BABIES

**Conclusions:**

This novel's book condemns the moral and physical degradations that are a result of child labour. However, while Kingsley offers an escape to the child labourer he features, it is only possible through a fantasy world which is impossible and beyond reality.

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### BLEAK HOUSE

**Conclusions:**

Dickens' novel resists an effective solution to child labour by exploring the negative effects of child labour on children. The limited outcomes of philanthropy are contrasted in depictions of two working children, confirming work as an enduring reality with little to no place for play.

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### A LITTLE PRINCESS

**Conclusions:**

This children's book presents an ideal view of children as essentially innocent regardless of class and introduces the necessity of play in all children's lives. Nevertheless, the happy ending restores an upper class child to fortune while reinforcing a labour role for a working class child.

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### THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF MICHAEL ARMSTRONG: A FACTORY BOY

**Conclusions:**

Unlike Dickens', this novel offers two forms of resistance to child labour, contrasting the benefits of legislative reform and the effectiveness of philanthropy in removing children from work to play. This duality is continued in contradictory depictions of working children as either worthy or potentially dangerous.

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### SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS:

While all of the examples discussed here depict harsh labour conditions as problematic, the representations of working class children are contradictory. The authors may sympathize with the child labourers but do not necessarily release them from their labours to a life of play as their upper class counterparts have been. Concerns over the effectiveness of philanthropy continually recur, and essential class barriers and fears are often maintained. When a successful rescue from labour is depicted, it is fantasized or contradicted with other negative examples of child labour. Thus, as these examples of Victorian literature reflect, childhood was a developing concept and particularly so for working class children as the Victorians struggled with the proper roles of work and play for child labourers, solutions to child labour and the very natures of working class children.