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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.¹
- ❖ Working class children were still sometimes seen as *little adults or economic assets* and expected to work.^{1,2}

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.

BACKGROUND

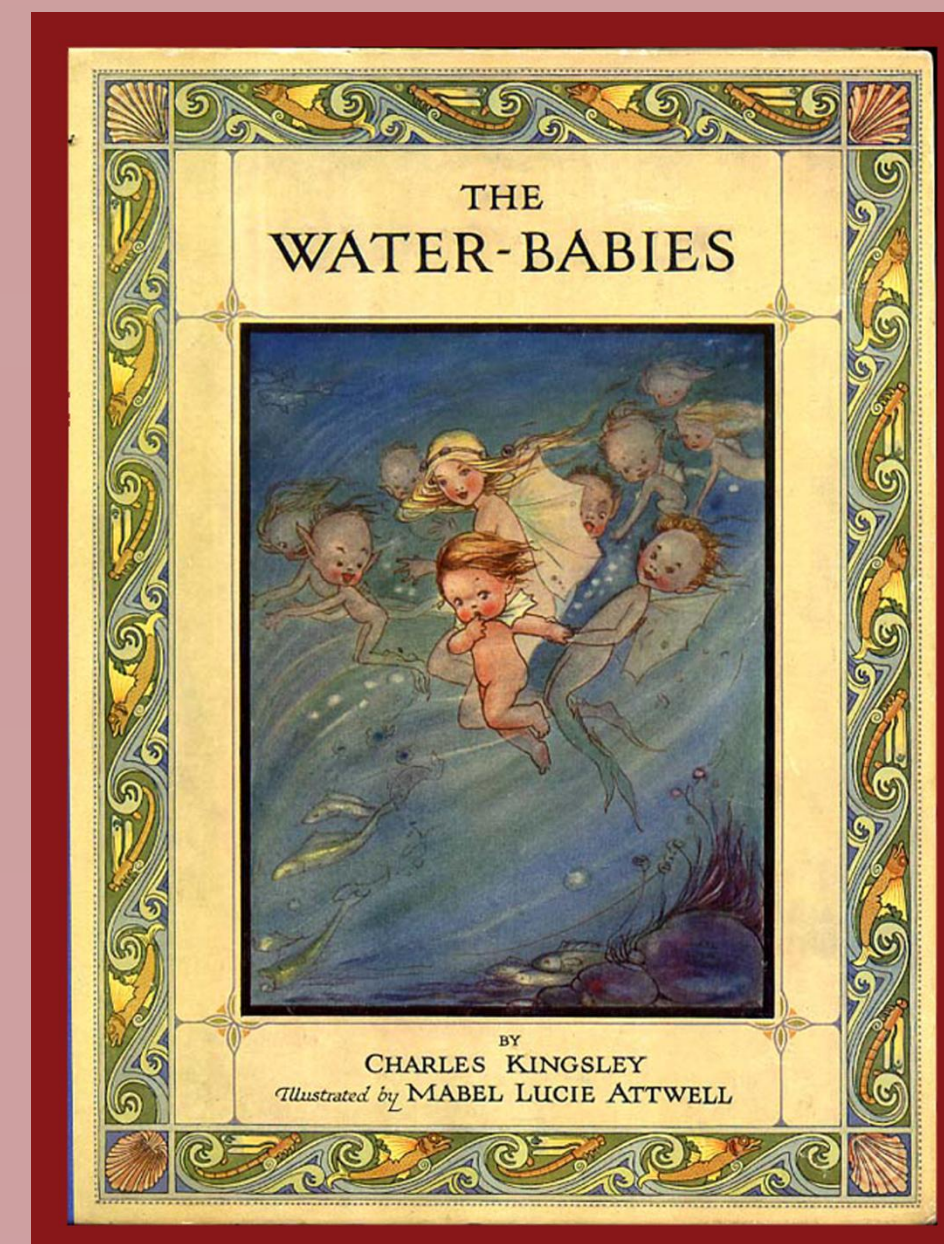
- ❖ **46%** of the population in 1841 was *less than 20 years old*. The near majority meant many had to work.³
- ❖ Wages from working class children gave important financial support to many families.^{2,4}
- ❖ Children worked in *mines and factories or as agricultural or domestic labourers*.
- ❖ The conditions were often very dangerous and unhealthy with long hours up to **15 hours per day**.^{2,4}
- ❖ Children often began working by the **age of 5** but sometimes began younger.²
- ❖ Children had worked long hours in hard conditions for many years in agricultural and domestic situations before the Victorian era.
- ❖ However, factory labour and other industrial work brought the **dangers for working children** to the forefront of society.¹
- ❖ Memoirs from working class children and government studies inspired authors to write against the depravities 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.

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 literature 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 child labour in that period.

Works Cited

1 Cunningham, Hugh. *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century*. Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1992. Print.
2 Pinchbeck, Ivy, and Margaret Hewitt. *Children in English Society*. Vol. 2. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973. Print.
3 "Age Abstract, England and Wales, 1841." *HISTPOP: Online Historical Population Reports*. University of Essex, 2007. Web. 27 Aug. 2009.
4 Kirby, Peter. *Child Labor in Britain, 1750-1870*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.
5 Kingsley, Charles. *The Water Babies*. 1846. New York: Garland Publishing, 1976. Print.
6 Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *A Little Princess: Being the Whole Story of Sara Crewe*. 1888. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938. Print.
7 Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1853. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1959. Print.
8 Trollope, Frances. *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong: The Factory Boy*. 1840. London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968. Print.



THE WATER BABIES⁵

BY CHARLES KINGSLEY

CONCLUSIONS:

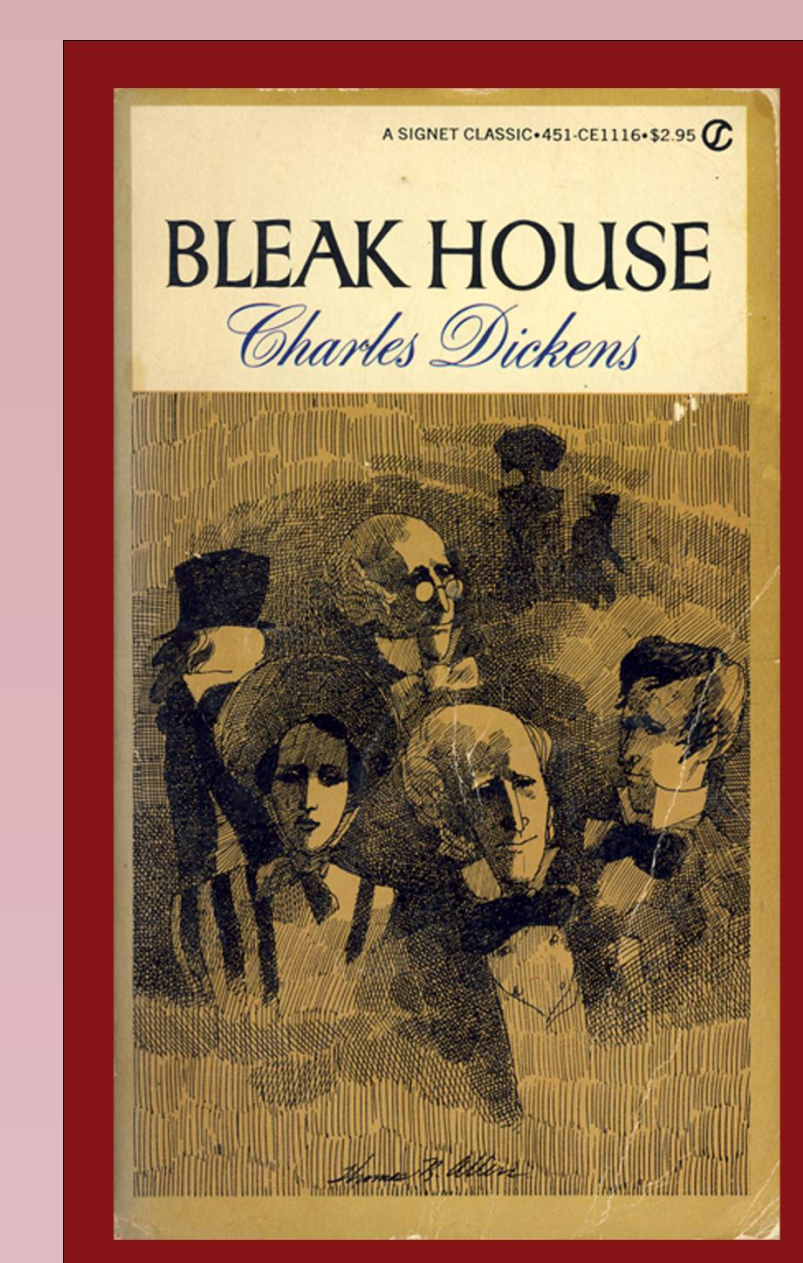
This children's book condemns the moral and physical degradations that are a result of child labour. However, while Kingsley offers an escape to the child labourer he features, it is only possible through a fantasy world which is impossible and beyond reality.

SUMMARY :

This novel begins with a depiction of one of the more commonly seen child labourers—the chimney sweep. A young boy named Tom is introduced as a morally and physically impoverished boy who is abused by his master. He accidentally stumbles into a young girl's bedroom where he is contrasted with the pure and privileged upper class young lady. Through a misunderstanding, he is accused of stealing and is pursued until he drowns himself in a river. From here, he is taken into a fantasy world under the water as a water baby. He must go through many lessons of reform to overcome the moral disadvantages of his working class roots and become a fit boy for society with other water babies. He must learn generosity, obedience and self-sacrifice mostly by his own initiative, but with some help from the magical fairies Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid. Ellie, the young girl he met as a chimney sweep, also dies through an accident and is recruited to help reform Tom. When he finally performs a self-sacrificing act for the good of his old master, Tom is allowed to join Ellie in a new, middle class life in which he becomes a successful scientist.

ANALYSIS:

- Tom is removed from his role as worker and instead given the opportunity to play.
- He also has the opportunity for a moral education if he takes responsibility for his own learning. Unlike the other authors discussed here, Kingsley places most of the responsibility for reform on Tom instead of on the upper and middle classes.
- Despite these advances, Tom only escapes labour through fantasy which is an impossible solution.
- Thus, the escape from labour in reality that is suggested by the novel is death. Real scenarios and solutions are deferred to the unreality of fantasy.
- Work is condemned while play and education are privileged, but the novel suggests that this can only be so in an impossible, dream-like world.



BLEAK HOUSE⁷

BY CHARLES DICKENS

CONCLUSIONS:

Dickens' novel resists an effective solution to child labour by exploring the negative effects of 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.

SUMMARY :

In the midst of a complicated plot of family connections, romance and legal critique, two child labourers are represented in this adult novel by Dickens. Charley is a young girl forced to work after the death of her father. At first she is mistreated as a servant, but the philanthropy of one of the main characters promotes her to a better position where she is competent, although not fully at leisure or successfully educated. She does, however, eventually marry into a higher social position. In contrast, Jo is a young street sweeper who is constantly abused even though many try to help him. Ultimately, he falls ill, infects the lead character to devastating cosmetic effects, and eventually dies ignorant, sick and poor.

ANALYSIS:

- Charley is rescued from abuse but is never granted a full release from labour as she must continue to work as a servant. She is granted some leisure but at the same time, she cannot be properly educated as several failed attempts prove.
- Jo demonstrates the ties between all levels of society through his role in spreading disease regardless of class barriers. He is depicted as a burden or responsibility of the upper and middle classes.
- Philanthropy may improve Charley's position, but it cannot fully redeem her to a leisured, educated life. Nor can it help Jo even though many try this method. It is ineffective in eradicating child labour.
- Dickens' novel presents two contradictory versions of working class children, one somewhat redeemed and the other doomed. This highlights the negative impact of child labour and suggests a lack of effective solutions.

A LITTLE PRINCESS⁶

BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

CONCLUSIONS:

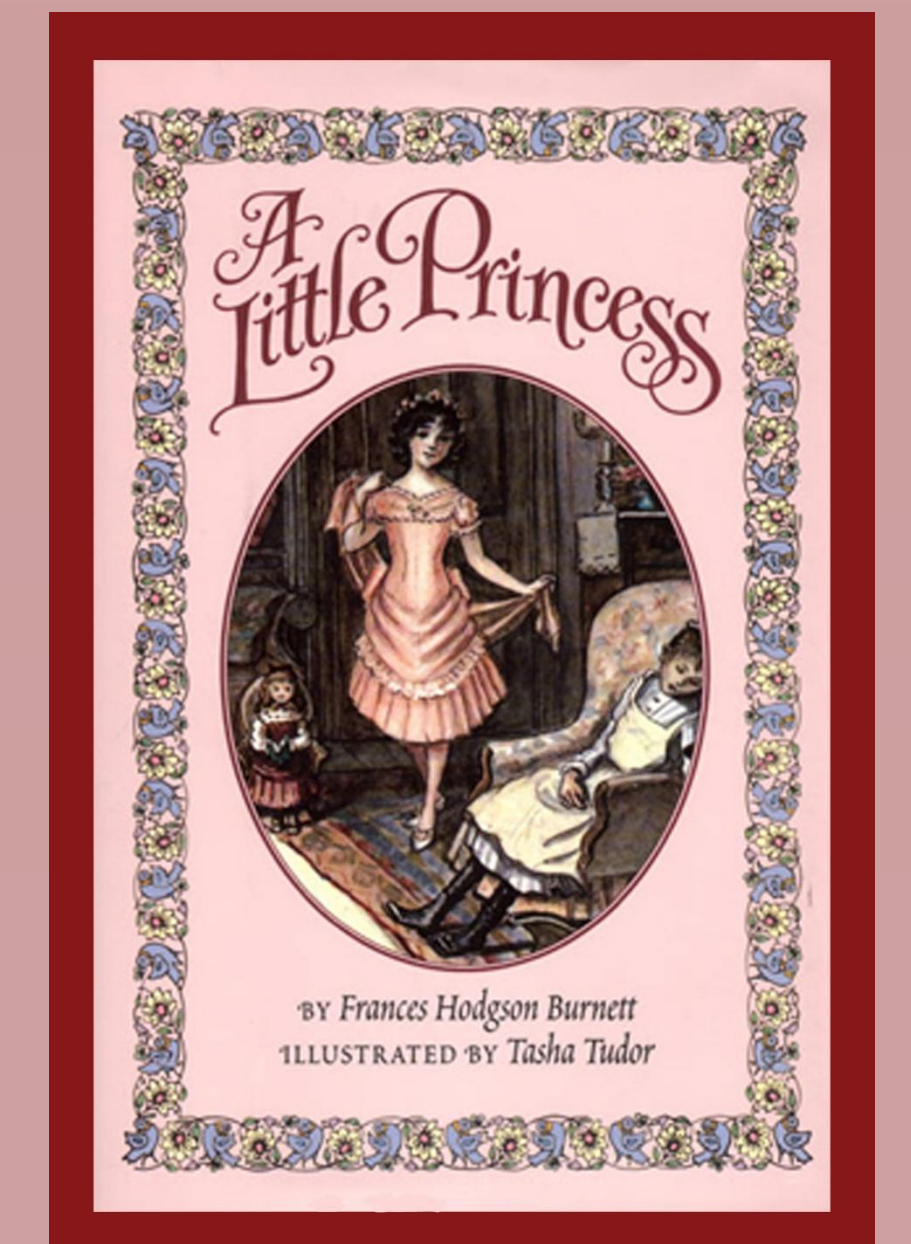
This children's book presents an ideal view of children as essentially equal regardless of class and introduces the necessity of play in all children's lives. Nevertheless, the happy ending restores an upper class child to fortune while reinforcing a labour role for a working class child.

SUMMARY :

Sara Crewe is a young English girl raised in India who is relocated to a boarding school in England for her education. She is very wealthy and privileged but also very moral and considerate. She shows kindness to the servant girl at the school, Becky, and regales everyone with imaginative stories. She continually stresses that she and Becky are not so different. When her father dies, her fortune is lost and she is kept by the cruel school mistress as a servant. She and Becky are treated very poorly, but Sara retains her imagination and kindness, which eventually bring her into contact with an old friend of her father's who restores her fortune and her class position. Her imagination and moral character are rewarded first through elaborate gifts and then through permanent rescue from labour. Becky is relieved of her labours at the school but becomes Sara's servant, a role which she is very pleased to play.

ANALYSIS:

- Child labour is clearly labeled as difficult and abusive. Play becomes a very important survival technique through Sara's imagination.
- Sara says that she is equal to Becky, but the novel privileges her by granting her the ability to imagine and by depicting her as highly moral.
- Becky, on the other hand, has no imagination and must rely on Sara for play. Unlike Tom in *The Water Babies*, an upper class character is responsible for redeeming the working class child, here through philanthropy.
- However, while Sara is rescued from labour to an existence of only leisure and education, Becky must continue working in her proper role as domestic servant. Although work conditions are improved and play is included, she must still work as well.



THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF MICHAEL ARMSTRONG: A FACTORY BOY⁸

BY FRANCES TROLLOPE

CONCLUSIONS:

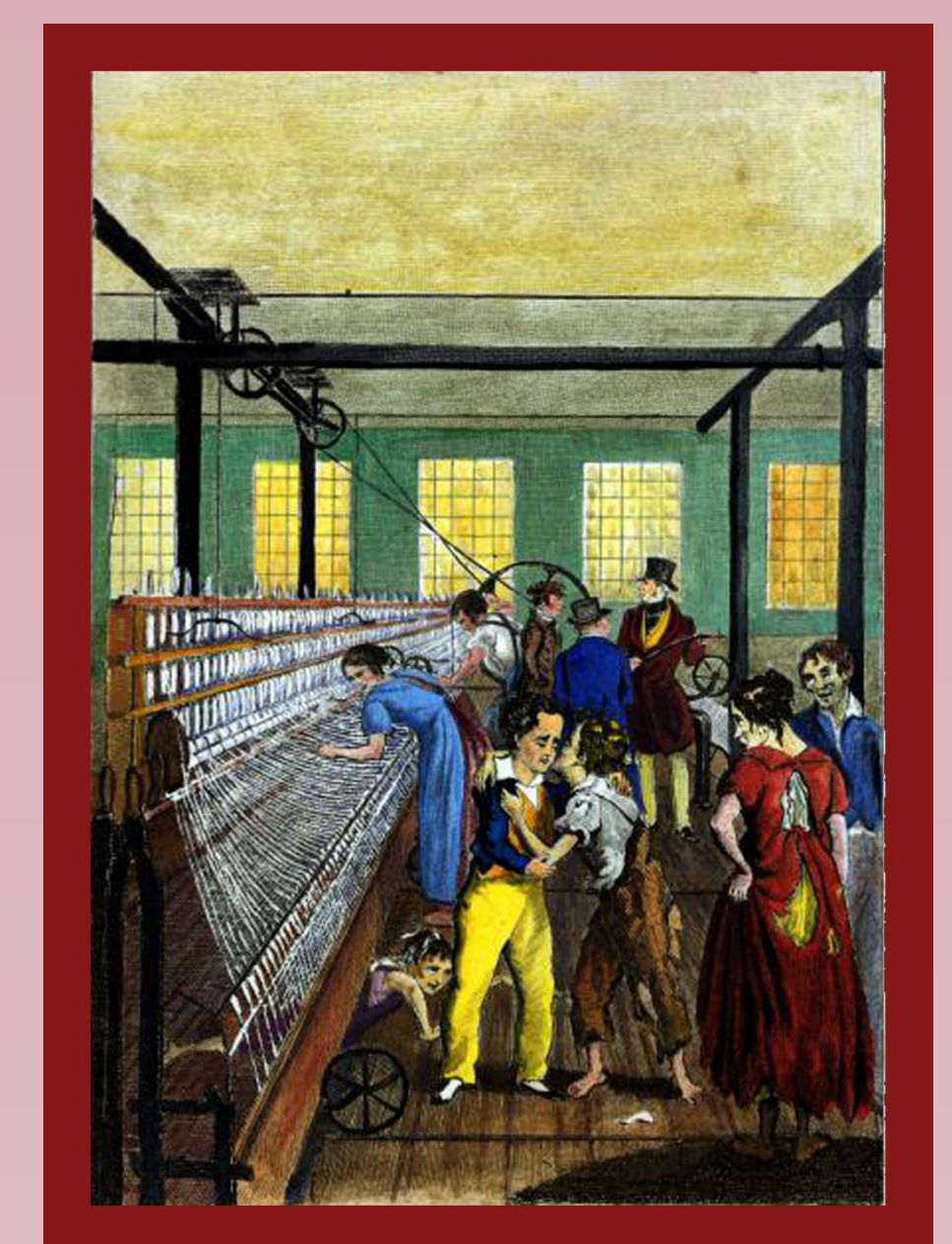
Unlike Dickens', this novel offers two forms of resistance to child labour, contrasting the benefits of legislative reform and the effectiveness of philanthropy in removing children from work to play. This duality is continued in contradictory depictions of working children as either worthy or potentially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

SUMMARY :

A more obscure adult novel, this plot follows Michael Armstrong, a virtuous factory boy inadvertently chosen for favour by the factory owner. He is forced to leave his sick mother and lame brother to apprentice at a particularly harsh factory. He eventually escapes and finds his mother has died and his brother is gone. Meanwhile, a guilt-ridden factory heiress investigates the horrors of the factory system and determines to save Michael and his family. She is mistakenly told he has died from a disease and so instead she adopts his brother and a young girl who knew Michael, taking them to live in continental Europe. They are finally joined by Michael after he hears the details of the story from a mutual acquaintance while attending a rally in support of a ten-hour work day.

ANALYSIS:

- Throughout the novel, Trollope includes verbalized support of legislative reform for a ten-hour work day as the only solution to child labour. This solution, however, still requires children to work.
- In the plot on the other hand, philanthropy frees a few children from labour and allows them play without work. Yet the majority of child labourers are left to work long hours in the factory.
- Legislation then requires continued work but with better conditions for all, while Trollope's version of philanthropy offers complete freedom and play for a few but leaves the rest in hard labour.
- In addition, the depictions of working class children range from worthy, loyal and moral to degraded, unsalvageable and even dangerous as future agitators.
- Trollope's novel thus represents the societal tensions and confusions regarding solutions to child labour and reflects the conflicting views of working class children.



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.